

BOOK REVIEW

*Retelling the Past in
Contemporary Greek Literature,
Film, and Popular Culture*

edited by Trine Stauning Willert & Gerasimus
Katsan
Lexington Books: Lanham, 2019

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The publication of *Retelling the Past in Contemporary Greek Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* finds its own space among a series of books, published in the past two decades, that focus on the ways Greek literature and culture at large engage with the historical past. Their main focus, however, has been on the reception of the classical past, which dominated cultural discourse in Greece since its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830. The urge felt by the Greeks to detach themselves from oriental influences and take their place among the Western nations led to a collective effort to demonstrate the close relationship between modern Greece and its Antiquity, in order to present themselves to the eyes of the West as the rightful heirs of such a highly-valued past.

Works such as David Ricks' *The Shade of Homer* (1989) and the essays edited by Peter Mackridge in *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry* (1996) are early indicators of the academic interest in how poets, specifically, recovered themes and models from Antiquity creating a direct link with contemporary Greece. In the last decades, scholars have expanded the scope of research on the topic, tracing the uses of the nation's past in political discourses, education, and even architecture. This is the case of *The Usable Past* (2003), edited by Keith S. Brown and Yannis Hamilakis,

in which historians, archaeologists, and anthropologists show how the Greek past has been used as an archive of fragments to be 'used' and adapted to different contexts. Informed by the developments in Reception Studies, the contributions in *Re-Imagining the Past* (2014), edited by Dimitris Tziouvas, return to the fascination with Antiquity, questioning and problematizing the relationship between past and present in Greek culture. Finally, Johanna Hanink's *The Classical Debt* (2017) sheds new light on this much-debated issue, putting it in the context of the economic crisis that hit Greece after 2010 and going back to re-examine not only the role of antiquity in the Greek present, but also the bond that links the Philhellenic West to a crisis-stricken Greece.

It is in this Antiquity-oriented context that Willert and Katsan's volume offers a wide and varied collection of essays presenting a different mode of research on two levels: firstly, on the kind of histories investigated and, secondly, on the genres considered. On the one hand, in fact, the editors are interested in "under-explored or little-known themes, events and epochs in modern Greek history" (2019: 3), starting from the Ottoman period through the Greek Civil War until the more contemporary 'Greek Crisis'. The choice to focus on neglected moments of Greek history is a very welcome move to counterbalance scholars' attention predominantly given to the classical past of Greece. On the other hand, this book differentiates itself from other works on the reception of the past because it gives the most space to literary genres other than poetry. In fact, as the title *Retelling the Past in Contemporary Greek Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* suggests, the volume incorporates also other forms of cultural production which are gaining recognition in academia, such as films, graphic novels, and TV shows. Beyond the editors' introduction to the volume, this book is divided into two parts: the first part comprises eleven essays, organized in four thematic sections, and the second part is further divided into three sections, including five contributions overall, that illustrate the practice of incorporating history in the storytelling process.

In their introduction, Willert and Katsan outline the editorial lines that oriented the compilation of the volume. The main assumption that underpinned the editors' work is the close link between history and storytelling, which is reflected in the selection of essays collected in this book. This focus allows indeed for the broader spectrum of genres and art forms that makes *Retelling the Past* unique in the academic panorama thus far. The editors rightly acknowledge the tension between the glorious classical past and the more problematic present that has resulted in the Greek "strained tradition of historical consciousness" (2019: 1) and stress that their interest lies in cultural products generated after 1989, when the end of the Cold War brought about radical changes in Greek society. One of the strengths of this volume

is the great emphasis given to 21st-century works, as well as an interest in moving beyond the exclusionary lens of the contemporary crisis – which seemed to have monopolized public discourse over the past decade – in order to provide a more comprehensive picture of how these works engage with Greek history and its effects on society.

As mentioned above, the first part consists of eleven chapters organized in four thematic sections. The first section – ‘Popularizing Neglected Past’ – centers on the engagement of literature and popular culture with moments of Greek history generally excluded or underestimated in the dominant Greek national narrative, such as the Ottoman period (Willert, ch. 1) and the presence of a thriving Jewish community in Thessaloniki before the Second World War (Kornetis, ch. 2). In her well-balanced contribution, Willert traces the presence of the Ottoman past in Greek fiction produced in the past two decades, recording the growing number of instances in which stories are narrated through Muslim and/or Turkish-speaking characters’ perspectives. Despite some duly-acknowledged shortcomings, such as the lack of female voices, the author provides an interesting and comprehensive overview of “Ottomanizing” (2019: 25) literature, which challenges the traditional construction of Greekness. On a par with Willert, Kornetis explores the ways in which recent cultural products recalled the presence of another minority, that of the Sephardic Jewry in Thessaloniki. Through a variety of case studies, encompassing documentaries, films, novels, a play, and a graphic novel, the author records the current cultural process that aims to revive the memory of the Jewish community in the city, almost obliterated in the preceding decades. Kornetis’ contribution is particularly rich in examples and rightly signals a need for further research into ‘alternative’ histories of Thessaloniki.

The second section of the first part, titled ‘Constructing Past, Present, and Future in Migrant Fiction’, is comprised of two essays that focus on the migrant subject from Greece (Anagnostou, ch. 3) or in Greece (Emmerich, ch. 4). Both chapters are thoroughly researched and portray an original modality of approaching migration in literature. However, of all contributions, Anagnostou’s essay appears to be disconnected from the rest of the volume and its general theme. The third chapter, in fact, is included in this book for its focus on the figure of the Greek immigrant Louis Tikas, one of the protagonists of the 1914 massacre of mine workers in Ludlow (Colorado), recalled in David Mason’s poem *Ludlow* (2007). Anagnostou explores the multiple identities of a Greek émigré who strives to adapt to a new reality, in this case the United States at the beginning of the 20th century. In doing so, he explores the productive interaction of poetical imagination with historiography, in which one can inform the other. Although the paper could have benefitted from a

clearer argumentation, Anagnostou explores new perspectives of Modern Greek Studies, tracing the shifting of Greek identity in a poem written in English. On the other hand, Emmerich's contribution provides a comprehensive analysis of the novels by Gazmend Kapllani, an Albanian migrant to Greece, who chose to use the Greek language in order to articulate the experience of migration, not just by fictionalizing it but also by including first-hand testimonials. This essay is particularly well-structured and has an extensive body of footnotes and references on the various social, legal, and political issues addressed in Kapllani's work, thus providing a great historical insight into the experiences of Albanian immigrants during the 1990s.

The three contributions in the next section – 'Trauma, Sentimentality, and Crisis in Literature' – put Greek literature on centre-stage and, according to the editors, "investigat[e] how symbolic historical periods [...] are revisited in fiction, where the life and history of the nation is challenged and renegotiated" (2019: 6). The link that connects the essays of this section may at times feel feeble; nevertheless, their analyses provide the reader with important insights into the connection between historical events and the present time. The first of these chapters, by Kaisidou (ch. 5), traces how contemporary novels recover and retell children's experiences in the *paidopoleis*/childtowns, created by Queen Frederica during the Greek Civil War, thus demonstrating the role these novels played in popularizing this aspect of the Civil War and adding to the multifaceted dimension of the conflict. On a completely different note, Akritidou's essay (ch. 6) analyses different meanings of the idea of 'companionship' in Nikos Themelis' novel *Gia mia Syntrophia Anamesa mas/For Some Companionship* (2005), making a contribution to the debate surrounding the origins of 'New Hellenism'. Themelis, in Akritidou's view, challenges the genealogical discourse of continuity, identifying the Enlightenment and the European ties of that period as the moment that shaped New Hellenism. Akritidou convincingly demonstrates how literature interacts with historiography and even intervenes in historiographical debates. The last contribution of this section (Katsan, ch. 7) addresses the contemporary state of Greek literature, the so-called 'crisis literature'. Katsan provides a considerable overview of the modalities in which last decade's socio-economic crisis has entered the literary realm, highlighting the use of "postmodernist metafictional techniques" (2019: 129). According to Katsan, these novels revisit the past and put it in conversation with the present in order to contextualize contemporary struggles. This essay is clear and engaging and could easily become fundamental reading on the state of present-day Greek literature.

The last section of this first part of *Retelling the Past* offers some of the highlights of this collection. Entitled 'Satire and Nostalgia in Popular Culture,' the focus moves

from literature to other art forms that are generally overlooked in local academia, such as TV shows (Aitaki, ch. 9) and animated series (Kourniakti, ch. 10), together with theatre (Georgiadi, ch. 8) and film (Chalkou, ch. 11). Georgiadi's study of a 2012 theatrical representation of Athanasios Diakos, a famous hero of the Greek Revolution, explores the use of history as a tool to analyse and subvert the language surrounding the crisis. The paper reveals the modern Greek man that emerges from the subversion of the collective – national – image of the hero. Aitaki's contribution also delves into the representation of the modern Greek individual through a close analysis of the early 1990s TV show *Oi Afthairetoi/The Arbitrariness* (1989-1991, MEGA). Through a clearly structured argument, the author demonstrates the ability of television productions to represent specific historical moments and negotiate Greek identities – the 'Neohellene' of the 1990s comes to life in the TV show, allowing the audience to identify with the characters. The figure of the Neohellene is more specifically analysed in the following essay by Kourniakti, which focuses on the use of the classical past in an animated series broadcast in the early 2010s. Although this is the only contribution in the volume to explore the role of Antiquity in contemporary discourse on the crisis, together with Aitaki's essay, it expands the scope of academic research, including popular genres, such as cartoons. To conclude this section, Chalkou's chapter investigates contemporary Greek films through two lenses: on the one hand, she finds a prevalence of child perspectives, which allow for a more detached approach to the past. On the other hand, contemporary cinema revisits the decade of the 1960s, showing a certain degree of nostalgia. Chalkou, therefore, does not provide a succession of close readings of a number of films, but rather uses them as fitting examples in her thematic analysis of Greek cinema.

The second part of the volume is particularly innovative for this kind of collective volume and makes *Retelling the Past* a prime example to be followed in future publications. In fact, along with the remarkable series of academic studies on the topic, the editors include a number of examples of how Greek artists and authors engaged with the past in their works. The first section of this second part, 'A Visual Journey Through the Lens', offers an insight in the work of Greek film director Sonia Liza Kenterman, firstly through her personal selection of three movies by other Greek directors who made their appearance during the 2010s (ch. 12) and, secondly, through Charles Lock's discussion on two of Kenterman's most recent movies (ch. 13). Kenterman offers a number of stills taken off the set of three different films and frames them as representations of a specific social situation, which could challenge the national narrative of the Greek past. Moreover, these stills play an archival role, for future generations to reconstruct (what will be) their past – the archival value of this work is certainly interesting to explore, while also raising

questions about selection and subjectivity that are not addressed here. The selection of certain stills determines what specific perception of the present moment is promoted, and this is necessarily linked to one's personal reading of the present moment. Lock's chapter is in dialogue with the previous one, as it presents stills from two movies by Kenterman herself on the social burden of historical events (the Greek Civil War and crisis-stricken contemporary Greece). The focus, however, is on the kinetic element and on the power of words rather than on the representation of the past, putting into question its contribution to the volume.

The next section 'A Literary Echo of the Refugee Crisis' marks a change of focus from cinema back to literature. Indeed, chapter 14, introduced by Patricia Felisa Barbeito and Vangelis Calotycho, offers a new English translation of Elias Venezis' short story *The Isle of Lios*, whose 're-examination' at the current cultural moment reveals its potential relation to the present-day refugee crisis. Venezis' account of the traumas of the refugees from Asia Minor highly resonates with the present time and, moreover, the way translation is presented as a very practical instance of 'retelling the past' is commendable. The focus on literature continues in the last section of the volume, titled 'History from the Storyteller's Viewpoint', in which two more translations of contemporary Greek writers are offered. Both translated by Karen Emmerich, Amanda Michalopoulou's short story *Four Hundred Pleats* (ch. 15) and the extracts from Sophia Nikolaidou's *The Scapegoat* (ch. 16), provide first-hand instances of contemporary literature that incorporates and negotiates history through allegories. These stories are also discussed in detail in chapters 1 and 7 respectively, and thus serve dual goals: supporting the analyses provided in the earlier chapters and giving the reader the opportunity to read the texts for themselves, while being informed by the essays from the first part of the volume.

Overall, *Retelling the Past in Contemporary Greek Literature, Film, and Popular Culture* contributes to the debates surrounding the use of the past in Greek culture through a large number of studies and primary sources that cover a broad spectrum of themes and genres. This collected volume is the result of a workshop held at the University of Copenhagen in 2016, which explains the somehow heterogeneous character of the essays. However, the structure of the volume is laudable and I believe that a clearer division between the two (untitled) parts would help the reader to navigate the volume more efficiently. The division in sections, on the other hand, seems at times a stretch to fit disconnected essays within the overarching structure. As it is apparently inevitable in a volume on Greek culture, literature is clearly dominant, albeit giving prominence to prose fiction rather than poetry. The most innovative studies on popular culture are all collected in a section of their own, covering theatre, television, and cinema (and graphic novels and documentaries in

Kornetis' chapter). The volume thus paves the way for a further expansion of modern Greek (cultural) studies, so as to include a more diverse range of art forms, including, for example, music. The same could be said for the second part, in which prose fiction is given more space, where other popular genres could have been included. These observations, however, do not question the quality of the contributions and the impact they have in their field. Indeed, the overviews and the bibliographies provided on specific themes or genres (see chapters 3, 7, and 11 for example) will prove incredibly relevant for the student and the researcher, especially when it comes to the three main threads that hold together the volume. Firstly, the presence of the Other, neglected or repressed in the process of the nation building, be it for instance the Turkish-speaking Muslims (ch. 1) or Jews (ch. 2), the present-day migrants (ch. 4) or the *paidopolites*/childdtown evacuees (ch. 5). Secondly, the negotiation of contemporary culture during the Greek Crisis of the 2010s, revisited and analysed through the lens of the past of the country. Lastly, the first two threads lead to the final and all-encompassing issue of Greek identity, of its construction through history and its self-realization through cultural products, as chapters 10 and 11 bring to light. In their introduction, the editors of this volume present this collection of essays, underlining how they “excellently highlight the rich pluralism of Greece cultural production with works that exhibit exactly this heterogeneity of the Greeks and their past” (2019: 7). It truly was about time for such heterogeneity to be brought to the surface and given the attention it deserves.

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