Review


On the first floor of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, at the left side, there is a separate section with eight paintings, entitled ‘Imagining the Past’. These artworks by different artists of the nineteenth century depict myths and scenes, which mainly derive their themes from Greek and Roman antiquity, while there is also a painting inspired by the ancient Egyptian history. The most interesting one, regarding the Greek past is set in the middle. This is an oversize painting by Sir William Blake Richmond, created in 1884. What makes this painting special is its theme: the setting is an ancient theatre during the performance of the play Agamemnon, the first out of the three plays of the only surviving trilogy of the classical repertory the Oresteia (Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and Eumenides) by Aeschylus, set in Athens (Acropolis in the background leaves no doubt). This is a memorable example, because a modern painter makes the audience of a tragic performance, men and women, his main subject. The originality therefore is that the audience of Aeschylus’ Agamemnon turns to the modern viewer en face. What does this particular audience really watch? Is it just a drama performance or more than that? In fact, could the modern world be considered as a stage for the past?

The volume Re-imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture is a selection of papers from the conference held in 2011 by the University of Birmingham, where the ancient, medieval and modern Greece has always been studied within an interdisciplinary approach for almost a century now. The eighteen chapters of the book are structured in five parts and they are enriched by thirty-two illustrations which come to add to the context or to sustain the content. The extended introduction written by the editor set the chronological boundaries of the collection (from the twelfth century to the present day), raising also the research questions and clarifying the general goal of this high-standard edition. The Greek past is re-imagined under a dual scheme, on the one hand is continuity and on the other hand is hybridity, while the aim is to search deeper, even transcending the predominant ‘continuity syndrome’, searching for new approaches, with which the modern reader perceives the common
past as well as what the role of antiquity is in the present, its functions and multifarious aspects.

Part One, ‘Antiquity, Greece, and Europe’, comprises three chapters, all exploring how antiquity remains at stake during the medieval and modern Greece.

More specifically, Anastasia Stouraiti reveals the active engagement of indigenous antiquaries from the Venetian empire in the making of the archaeological past of Crete. Roderick Beaton discusses the new national Greek identity, as proposed by Shelley in his lyrical drama *Hellas* (1821-1822), a “new Hellas” embedding all its memories and potentials. Finally, Alexandra Lianeri studies the European translations and performances of *Antigone* during the nineteenth century and the modern translation of *Antigone* by Alexandros Rizos Rangavis (1857).

Part Two, “Hellenisms, Institutions, and Politics”, comprises four chapters, focusing on the political aspect of Greekness and its connotations during the medieval period, the period of Greek Enlightenment as well as the twentieth century.

Tassos Kaplanis defines the Greek identity via self-naming (*Hellenes, Graikoi, Romaioi*) and self-identification to conclude that the pre-national term *Romaioi/ Romioi*, used to describe the identity of the Greek-speaking Orthodox Balkan people, was gradually transformed to the national term Hellenes after the formation of the modern Greek state. Since language is a category interwoven with national identity, Peter Mackridge sheds light on the classicist approach of Neofytos Doukas towards the Greek language, making the astonishing parallelism between Greek and Hebrew: vernacular Greek resembles Yiddish and Ancient Attic Greek resembles the revived Hebrew. The Greek revivalists, such as Doukas, ignored the spoken Greek of their era, as Mackridge concludes, in contrast to what the Jewish revivalists of Hebrew did, thus modernizing their hieratic language. Taking into consideration the theme of the painting by David Roberts *The Departure of the Israelites* (1829), from the relevant section of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, this revival was definitely a good start for Hebrew, a *début* which never happened for the Greek case. Vangelis Karamanolakis examines next the role of the University of Athens in the emphasis given to Greek antiquity in modern Greece. The University of Athens – since its inauguration in 1837 – has created within its curriculum, also depicted via the statues, paintings and of course architecture, a specific traditional image of Greek antiquity; this idealized construction has been carried through until nowadays. Last but not least, Alexander Kazamias underlines the national discourse of *ethnikofrosyni*, emerging
during the cold war period, a term which (ab)used the classical Greek past in order to serve the political right-wing propaganda.

Part Three, ‘Material Culture and Performances of the Past’, comprises four chapters, too. The epicentre has moved to the material aspect of the Greek past and how this is performed on the axis of literature, film, photography and theatre.

Dimitris Plantzos brings together the notion of xenomania, with the weakness of the particular aspects of Greek identity, based on Andreas Karkavitsas’ The Archaeologist and Theo Angelopoulos’ filmography, especially Ulysses’ Gaze, Days of ’36, The Hunters, and The Travelling Players. In the following chapter, Eleana Yalouri provides a philosophical account of antiquity. Her aim is to reconnect the past with the Greek present. Using modern examples, she tries to answer the rather rhetorical, but always opportune question, that is who possesses the spirit of antiquity. Katerina Zacharia discusses the (ab)use of photography by Metaxas’ regime to promote an ideal image of the Greek past for touristic purposes. The national discourse, as expressed then, for instance in Le Voyage en Grèce (1936), constitutes an ekphrasis of the notorious continuity syndrome, which is expressed via the eternality of the Greek landscape, forming the New Greek Age. Eleni Papazoglou then discusses the revival of ancient tragedies, such as Oresteia and Antigone in Europe and in modern Greece. The revival of ancient drama, often being an adaptation, however emphasizes the Orthodoxy continuity of these ‘preserved’ texts.

Part Four, “Literary Receptions of Antiquity”, focuses on the ways in which classical literature, poetry and prose, is perceived by the medieval and Modern Greek scholarship and comprises six chapters.

Gonda van Steen examines ‘The Lament of Athens’, a 69-verse poem of the fifteen century (resembling Byzantine hymnography, according to David Holton): Athens as a woman and a mother laments for the fall of the city to Ottoman Turks in 1456; the poem serves as a historical platform to the real events, combining the dimension of culture and the political significance of the historical events. David Ricks traces the common patterns between Lucretius and three Modern Greek artists: Kostis Palamas, Konstantinos Theotokis, and Kostas Karyotakis – those fruitful “Lucretian Moments” reveal the impact of De Rerum Natura until today. Marinos Pourgouris examines the art of Yannis Ritsos, under the prism of Marxist discourse, focusing on The Fourth Dimension (1972); Ritsos’ re-imagines the past in transition towards a future, even though an uncertain one. Dimitris Tziovas gives a
chronological account of Philoctetes’ ‘travelling’ across Europe, expressing the view that the use of Philoctetes by Yannis Ritsos stands as a landmark in cultural and periodical setting. Rowena Fowler, finally, reads George Seferis’ *On Aspalathoi* through its influences from Plato and Heaney; this fact makes his poetry as redress with an emphasis on place and time, use of classical sources and faith to poetic speech, reaching the conclusion that this poem is an example when antiquity dresses its authority to inform the present.

Part Five, ‘Greek Culture and Classical Reception’, consists of one chapter by Lorna Hardwick. Actually, this chapter, as the conclusion of the book, remarks the crossings of classical reception research and Modern Greek Studies, also posing new research questions. Hardwick selects four main arguments about continuity and disruption between now and then, opting to focus her interest on the latest two: genealogy, diaspora, language, and place. Nonetheless, the ingeniously-made term ‘classitude’ signals indeed the interactive history of cultural poetics and its impact on modernity. However, one of her basic achievements is the introduction of the parameter of *trauma*, a substantial category of historical analysis, inherited by the classics to Hellenic/Modern Greek Studies with regard to the past.

This collection expands the discussion of classical reception further in the Modern Greek world, not narrowing the argument to literature, but enriching the research fields, including history, arts, and humanities in general. It has been almost fifteen years, when as a second-year student at the University of Crete, I had the chance to attend the international conference *The Reception of Antiquity in the Byzantine and Modern Greek Novel*, organized by the Department of Philology in November 2001 at Rethymno. The present volume definitely moves many steps ahead, embedding cultural studies in the contemporary discourse.

In fact, it is always surprising to realize how the Greek past, sometimes even as parody, uncovers layers of the Greek identities. Recently, the new left-wing Prime Minister of Greece has been the issue of the press at an international level, which shows a certain fancy for blurring the boundaries between current identification and Greek mythology and folklore. The magazine *The Week* had on its cover, Alexis Tsipras, half-dressed with the Greek flag, and re-imagined as the rebellious semi-god Prometheus, bound to the rock of Eurozone, while trying to break the chains of the imposed Euro-restrictions (US edition: 6 February 2015). Two weeks later, after a cycle of crucial negotiations held by the Eurogroup, Alexis Tsipras, and Angela
Merkel, in the advertising poster of the radio *La Première* in Bruxelles, are depicted dancing together *syrτακι* and wearing the traditional Greek costume, the *foustanella* – the annotation just states the impossible: “Si ça se passé, c’est la première qui vous le dira” (if that ever happens, it is the radio *La Première* that will inform you).¹

In conclusion, it is interesting to underline the persistent (ab)use of leitmotifs deriving from the Greek past, either ancient or recent, not only for re-imagining the national past, but mainly for analyzing the present. As in the case of the drama audience during the performance of *Agamemnon*, from the painting of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, in front of their eyes are mirrored aspects of an actual tragic reality. Perhaps, it is not only a matter of perspective or changing lenses towards the political performance and current approach to the commitments in the family of Eurozone. Beyond that, the imperative for Modern Greece from now on absolutely lies on the visualization of its common European future, certainly using the past as an analytical and methodological tool.

**Georgia Tsatsani**

*MRes Student in Modern Greek Studies*

*Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies*

*University of Birmingham*