

Aspects of modern and postmodern Greek fictional biography in the 20th century*

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My current project aims to study the relations between biography and the novel in 20th-century Greece and, more specifically, novels with historical persons as protagonists, particularly artists. What follows is a summary sketch of the main European trends and their impact on Modern Greek literature.

In the years following World War I, there was a flourishing of biographical writing in Europe. It first appeared in England with Lytton Strachey and his iconoclastic portraits in his *Eminent Victorians* (1918), and spread to France with the work of André Maurois, to Germany and Austria with the writings of Emil Ludwig and Stefan Zweig respectively, to limit myself to some of the most famous practitioners. It is known as Modern Biography (in contradistinction to the Modern Novel), New Biography (the term coined by Virginia Woolf),¹ Contemporary Biography, or rather pejoratively *vie/biographie romancée* (to describe Maurois's *Ariel ou la vie de Shelley*)² and *Historische Belletristik*

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¹ Virginia Woolf, "The New Biography" (1927), in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press 1981), pp. 149-56.

² The publishers of *Ariel* characterized him as the "founder of a new school of romantic biography"; quoted by Mark Longaker, *Contemporary biography* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press

about men who were deeply involved in great historical moments, began with the concept of character, but he then searched in the archives for what he took at bottom to be the corroboration of his intuition, intuition being something of an innate gift.⁹ Strachey also used his sources in such a way as to uncover the internal world of his biographees.

Virginia Woolf in her criticism claimed that the “real life” is essentially internal and therefore beyond the reach of non-fiction. Consequently New Biography’s tendency to render the character from within blurred the line between “the truth of fact and the truth of fiction”.¹⁰ If the real life cannot be seen from the outside (as in biography) it can at least be *understood* from within.

3) Understanding became a central concept of New Biography and received various configurations from its practitioners: it became interpretation in Strachey (“uninterpreted truth is as useless as buried gold; and art is the great interpreter”),¹¹ means of expression in Maurois (“it does seem possible [...] that the biographer may be able to express some of his own feelings without misrepresenting those of his hero [...]. In every psychological truth there is, and there must be, an element of divination”),¹² empathy in Ludwig: his primary concern is the “human heart” (preferably of great men) because “he feels that in the lives of the great he could feel more acutely the vibrations of his own nature and of mankind”.¹³

4) All of them considered biography an art, especially as regards its modes of presentation. “Allusion, judicious selection, good

See André Maurois, *Aspects of biography*, trans. Sydney Castle Roberts (New York: D. Appleton and Co. 1930), pp. 201-2.

⁹ Longaker, *Contemporary biography*, pp. 133-4.

¹⁰ Woolf, “The New Biography”, p.155.

¹¹ The quote is from Charles Richard Sanders, “Lytton Strachey’s conception of biography”, *PMLA* 66.4 (Jun. 1951) 313.

¹² Maurois, *Aspects of biography*, p. 132-3.

¹³ Longaker, *Contemporary biography*, pp. 130-1.

structure and good style”¹⁴ are some of the prerequisites of a good biography. They mostly focused on point of view (since it is difficult to match “the truth of fact with the truth of fiction” it is better “to hang up looking glasses at odd corners” according to Virginia Woolf),¹⁵ or on the patterning of life according to major rhythmic motives. Strachey insisted that he used a clearly defined, dispassionate point of view but he is considered to have used his wit and vigour to make his characters “re-enact their lives on a stage of his own devising turning them to caricatures”.¹⁶ Ludwig separated the external activities, which are historically defined, from the internal world (“the human heart”, which is eternal) and shaped the inner life as a three- or five-act drama, underlining the “symbolic scenes”. By being sensitively impressionist his prose conveys a direct sense of immediacy that provides the reader with clear visualizations of settings, persons and actions. Maurois insists on refraining from imposing the biographer’s retrospective knowledge on to the subjects’ life, the selection of detail, the pattern that appeals to our aesthetic sense and the rhythm that is “established by the recurrence, at more or less distant intervals, of the essential motifs of the work. A human life is always made up of a number of such motifs”,¹⁷ which provide it with the unity of the poetic truth.

Who read these biographies? We know that English biographers were limited to an English-speaking public (only Strachey’s *Queen Victoria* has been translated into Greek).¹⁸ On the other hand, Maurois, Ludwig and Zweig were translated into

¹⁴ Sanders, art. cit., p. 304.

¹⁵ Virginia Woolf, “The Art of Biography”, in: *The Death of the Moth and other essays* (London: The Hogarth Press 1981), p. 125.

¹⁶ Sanders, “Lytton Strachey’s conception of biography”, p. 306.

¹⁷ Maurois, *Aspects of biography*, p. 71.

¹⁸ Lytton Strachey, *Η βασίλισσα Βικτωρία*. Μετάφραση Νάτας Κοκκόλη (Athens: Ikaros 1952).

many foreign languages (Zweig into thirty)¹⁹ and were widely read in Europe and America until after the Second World War.

The same happened in Greece: all their biographies were translated, mostly between 1935 and 1955 and often by more than one translator. Some of the translators were themselves well-known authors, like Yannis Beratis and Nikiphoros Vrettakos (who translated for financial reasons),²⁰ while some of the translations were introduced by the authors themselves or by men of letters with whom the New Biographers had some connection. This is the case with Kostas Ouranis and Ludwig (Ouranis wrote Ludwig's sketch),²¹ Pratsikas and Maurois (Maurois wrote the preface to Pratsikas's translation of *Disraeli*),²² Meranaios and Zweig (Meranaios has written introductory texts and articles on Zweig).²³ Besides, all three had visited Greece; Ludwig actually

¹⁹ Randolph J. Klawiter, *Stefan Zweig, An international bibliography* (Studies in Austrian Literature, Culture and Thought ²1991) and *Addendum I*, 1999.

²⁰ Beratis translated, apparently from French, Zweig's *Έρασμος* (Athens: Govostis 1949), *Μπαλζάκ* (Athens: Govostis: 1950?), *Μέσμερ* (Athens: Govostis 1950), *Φεοντόρ Ντοστογιέβσκη* (Athens: Govostis 1950?) and Ludwig's *Βίσμαρκ* (Athens: Govostis 1958). Vrettakos translated Zweig's *Ρωμαίν Πολλάν: Ο άνθρωπος και το έργο του* (Athens: Vivlioekdotiki 1955)

²¹ Kostas Ouranis, "Πορτραίτο του Έμιλ Λούντβιχ", in Emil Ludwig, *Μπετόβεν. Μετάφραση Γεωργίου Ν. Δρόσσου* (Athens: Omega 1965), pp. 11-14, and Dimitris Kallonas, "Λίγα λόγια για τον συγγραφέα", in his translation of *Beethoven* (Athens: Chryssos 1959).

²² André Maurois, *Άριελ. Η ζωή του Σέλλεν (Μοθιστόρημα)*, trans. and introduction Yorgos Pratsikas (Athens: Govostis 1950) pp. 5-12, André Maurois, *Ντισραέλι*, trans. and introduction Giorgos Pratsikas. *With a letter from the author for the Greek edition* (Athens: Govostis 1947).

²³ Stefan Zweig, *Ιωσήφ Φουσέ*, trans. and introduction K. L. Meranaios (Athens: Petros K. Ranos 1945), pp. 5-7. The Introduction is presented as an excerpt from his study "Ο Στέφαν Τσβάιχ και η αγωνία της ευρωπαϊκής πνευματικής συνείδησης". Stefan Zweig, *Εμίλ Βεράρεν. Ο ποιητής της Νέας Εποχής*, trans. and preface by Mina Zographou and Kostis Meranaios (Athens: Kedros/Rodaki 1955). K. L. Meranaios, "Ο Στέφαν Τσβάιχ και η κρίση της ευρωπαϊκής συνείδησης", *Ο αιώνας μας*, 2 (April 1948), pp. 39-40.

composed a concise portrait of Eleftherios Venizelos, “Venizelos, The Greek Odysseus”, which is included in his book *Führer Europas* (Amsterdam 1934).²⁴

Another important question is why they were so widely read and what the Greek (and other European) readers discovered in these international best-sellers, which started with the ambition to imitate the modern novel and turned into popular literature. Let me suggest a few reasons:

1) The genre of New Biography often served as a means to enhance the reader's knowledge and satisfy his curiosity. Ludwig said that in America he had found “his ideal public [...] the man in the streets who wants to find something useful to himself in a book, some bit of practical wisdom for the conduct of life, an example, or a model”.²⁵ Alternatively, from the viewpoint of the modernist novelists Gertrude Stein “observed that ‘biographies have been more successful than novels’ in the 20th century precisely because they have taken over the role that used to be fulfilled by the ‘novels of the 19th century’ in their depiction of ‘characters’ which ‘were more real to the average human being than the people they knew’”.²⁶

2) These biographies, according to Kracauer, were addressed to a bourgeois readership, whose members were disoriented after the Great War. As the literary form of the new bourgeoisie, biography was an evasion of the current problems. The portrayal of great figures and the seeming objectivity of their subject matter aimed to show the triumph of the individual even in catastrophe. Thus “history which had gotten the people into a mess emerged

²⁴ Translated into English under the title *Nine etched from life* (New York 1934). Venizelos: pp. 253-310.

²⁵ Longaker, *Contemporary biography*, p. 127.

²⁶ The quote is from Elena Gualtieri, “The impossible art. Virginia Woolf on modern biography”, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 29.4 (2000) 358, n. 11.

ironically as solid land [...] condensed in the lives of its highly visible heroes.”²⁷

3) The depiction of the inner self was praised as a means of gaining a better understanding of a subject’s personality; nonetheless in the way it was conducted it often reduced the biographees to stereotypes.

4) They presented the reader with an historically singular individual with whom he could identify, but at the same time they showed this individual as nothing but a variation of the reader and his way of life. Instead of gaining a view of differences the reader was given a justification for his continued parochial and passive stance.²⁸

5) It has also been suggested that Maurois, Ludwig and Zweig, being Jews, chose to play what they regarded as a special Jewish role as mediators or translators among the different European national cultures. So they encouraged their readers to transcend their national characteristics and to aspire to a European identity.

6) Of particular interest is the selection of artists as protagonists of certain literary biographies so that the biographers could incorporate some of their beliefs and pass them on to the reader. Maurois, Ludwig and Zweig promoted the ideal of an intellectual and spiritual aristocracy as the safest answer to the political and social dilemmas of their times. Ludwig’s *Goethe* (1921) with the subtitle “History of a man” becomes a “functional alternative to that of the kings and generals who had constituted the dominant models of social and political education”. He is brought out as a *Kämpfer* (in the sense of an individual struggling for self-realization) and as a *Führer* (in the sense of one “whose spiritual

²⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, “The Biography as an art form of the New Bourgeoisie”, in: *The Mass Ornament: Weimar essays* trans. and edited with an Introduction by Thomas Levin (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press 1995), pp. 101-5.

²⁸ Helmut Scheuer, *Biographie: Studien zur Funktion und zum Wandel einer literarischen Gattung vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler 1979), pp. 208-17.

and political accomplishments were suited to serve as the guide to others”).²⁹ In 1934 Zweig published *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam* (after the biographies of his contemporaries *Verharen* and *Rolland*) in order to project his pacifist ideology on to the life of the humanist intellectual. He attempted, as he confessed in his *Autobiography*, to give “a spiritual portrait of a humanist who, though he understood the madness of his time more clearly than the professional world-reformers, for all his sound reason he was, tragically enough, unable to oppose unreason”.³⁰ Needless to say, it has been criticized by the Left as an example of defeatism in the crucial mid-war years.

7) It is worth mentioning that in Greece Zweig was perceived as a liberal humanist who had very good relations with the Soviet Union. He had been officially invited to visit the country, and his friendship with Gorky led his admirers, for apparently no other reason, to consider him among the intellectuals sympathetic to the Left.³¹

8) Finally, a statement that Zweig made in an interview in the USA as late as 1939:

I have not been particularly interested in biography as such. Only what was tragic actually appealed to me in connection with outstanding characters. I have always avoided writing of successful persons. I do not like the victors, the triumphant, but the defeated, and I believe that it is the task of the artist to picture those characters who resisted the trend of their time and who fell victim to their convictions instead of making millions

²⁹ Franklin C. West, “Success without influence. Emil Ludwig during the Weimar years”, *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* 30 (1985) 169-89, esp. 176-7 and 182n.

³⁰ Stefan Zweig, *The world of yesterday. An autobiography* (London: Cassell and Co. 1953), p. 288.

³¹ Nikos Marangos, *Ο θρόνος ενός ανθρώπου και η αγωνία μιας εποχής* (Athens: Patsilinakos 1956).

of other people the victims of their own convictions as is done by despots³²

may have affected both the Right and especially the Left in Greece shortly after the Civil War. Zweig had in the meantime committed suicide.³³

The genre of the New Biography influenced Greek biographical writing. Between 1930 and 1960 (and less frequently nowadays) many texts followed the techniques to which I have referred. Today, these texts are classified as “μυθιστορηματικές/μυθοποιημένες/ρομαντικές βιογραφίες” and follow – at least in their titles – the tendencies of *vie romancée*.³⁴ Nonetheless, some of the subtitles, such as “novelistic biography historically and bibliographically documented” (Kostas Sardelis, Dimitris Stamelos),³⁵ or “lyrical chronicle” or “novelistic representation”

³² Lionel B. Steiman, “The Worm in the Rose: Historical destiny and individual action in Stefan Zweig’s vision of history”, in: Marion Sonnenfeld (ed.), *Stefan Zweig: The world of yesterday. Humanist today. Proceedings of the Stefan Zweig Symposium* (New York: Albany State University Press 1983), p. 151.

³³ Leopold Stern, *Στέφαν Τσβάιχ, Ο άνθρωπος – ο συγγραφέας: Η τραγική αυτοκτονία*, trans. Ag. Vasilikou (Athens: Keramefs n.d.).

³⁴ Olmos Peranthis, *Ο τσέλιγκας, Μυθιστορηματική βιογραφία* (Athens: Saliveros 1943), Michalis Peranthis, *Ο κοσμοκαλόγερος, Μυθιστόρημα από τη ζωή του Αλέξανδρου Παπαδιαμάντη* (Athens: P. Dialismas 1948), Michalis Peranthis, *Ο αμαρτωλός (Κωνσταντίνος Καβάφης). Μυθιστορηματική Βιογραφία* (Athens: Mavridis 1953).

³⁵ Kostas Sardelis, *Κοσμάς ο Αιτωλός. Βιογραφικό μυθιστόρημα* (Athens: Ekdotiko Typografeio 1958); 2nd ed. subtitled *Μυθιστορηματική βιογραφία* (Athens: Estia 1970). Dimitris Stamelos, *Μακρυγιάννης: Το χρονικό μιας εποποιίας* (Athens: To elliniko vivlio 1964); 2nd ed. subtitled *Μυθιστορηματική βιογραφία, ιστορικά και βιβλιογραφικά τεκμηριωμένη* (Athens: Estia). It is worth mentioning the alterations in the generic subtitles of Dimitris Siatopoulos’s book, *Γκρέκο. Ο ζωγράφος του θεού. Τεκμηριωμένο ιστορικό μυθιστόρημα* (Athens: Paradosi 1977); 2nd ed. *Τεκμηριωμένη μυθιστορηματική βιογραφία* (Athens: Chryssaphis-Pandelis 1987); 3rd ed. after Smaragdis’s film, *Ελ Γκρέκο, ο ζωγράφος του θεού. Η ζωή του σαν μυθιστόρημα* (Athens: Kastaniotis 2007).

(Tassos Athanassiadis),³⁶ or “biographical romances” (Mitsos Alexandropoulos),³⁷ either bespeak an industrious search for historical sources or direct us to various (generic) compilations of facts. As a rule, historical facts are assimilated into the conventions of a literary plot. Protagonists conform to the typology of the novel, romance or tragedy, or to character-stereotypes such as the *God's pauper* (for St Francis) or *The sinner* (for Cavafy). In other words these texts do not forge reality and become fictions through the process of their emplotment. This is achieved by merging discrete facts of a real life into a plot structure so that the parts form a new whole identified as story, to quote Hayden White. The protagonists are usually known figures of the Greek historical and cultural past.

The first popular novelistic biography, Spyros Melas's *Ο γέρος του Μωριά, Βιογραφία* (Athens: Saliveros, 2 vols. 1931) was written at the time of the centenary of the Greek War of Independence; it was praised by Palamas as a “historical biography” that performed the national and institutional function of transmitting to new generations the achievements of historical individuals.³⁸ The dramatic structure of Melas's later biographies (focusing on the love-story) explains their popularity, mainly through their easy adaptation to the stage and screen.

It could be argued that the Greek version of “novelistic biography” is greatly indebted to Plutarch and not directly to the New

³⁶ Tassos Athanassiadis, *Ταξίδι στη μοναξιά (Λυρικό χρονικό από τη ζωή του Καποδίστρια)* (Athens: Aetos 1944), *Ο Ντοστογιέβσκη από το κάτεργο στο πάθος (Μυθιστορηματική αναπαράσταση)* (Athens: Estia 1955). Compare the title *Ο Ντοστογιέβσκη στο κάτεργο*, trans. N. Andrikopoulos (Athens: N. Geronikolas 1943), part of Henri Troyat's biography of Dostoevsky, which was published independently.

³⁷ Cf. his explanation of the term in the introduction of his *Ο μεγάλος αμαρτωλός. Ο Ντοστογιέβσκη και τα ιερά του τέρατα. Βιογραφική μυθιστορία* (Athens: Kedros 1984).

³⁸ See Evgenia Kefallinaïou, “Ο ‘Γέρος του Μωριά’ του Σπ. Μελά. Οι πηγές του έργου”, *Επετηρίς του Ιδρύματος Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών* 5 (1987-8) 487-500.

Biography. I would nonetheless suggest that Plutarch's influence on Modern Greek Biography was mediated by Europe, which received his work from the 17th century onwards in different cultural contexts: in the tradition of anecdotes in the 18th century, as an ethical model in the 19th and, in the 20th, as a painter of souls who devotes himself "rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these [he] portrays the life of each, leaving to others the description of their great contests" (from Plutarch's, *Alexander*, opening paragraph).³⁹

The most innovative Greek example, *Αυτοτιμωρούμενος, Ο Κάρολος Μπωντλαίρ ως τα τριάντα* (1935), was written by Beratis when he was at the same age.⁴⁰ Here, instead of a biography from cradle to deathbed we have a biography which stops short, without justification, at the age of thirty. The time span of thirty years is condensed into the duration of one day (as happens in certain novels of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce), from morning to twilight, and is arranged in four chapters. Instead of the presentation of the protagonist's public activity and random speculations on his private life, here we find an insistent description of his inner life. Instead of the narration of Baudelaire's life the way it unfolded, we have the description of the way Baudelaire experienced it. What is more, the biographer and the biographee seem to share the same level of speech. The extended use of substituted direct discourse (a kind of free indirect discourse) implicates the biographer, the biographee and the reader in the French poet's life.

³⁹ Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, fact and form* (London: Macmillan 1984), pp. 15-21.

⁴⁰ *Αυτοτιμωρούμενος, Ο Κάρολος Μπωντλαίρ ως τα τριάντα*. Preface by K. Th. Dimaras (Athens: Kastalia 1935); 2nd ed. without the preface: Govostis 1945. See my "Ο Αυτοτιμωρούμενος του Μπεράτη: ένα νεωτερικό δείγμα της Μοντέρνας Βιογραφίας" (forthcoming in the Proceedings of the 12th Meeting of the Department of Medieval and Modern Greek Studies, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, dedicated to Sophia Scopetea).

The picture I have drawn is far from complete. If I had the time I would mention the heated opposition to the trend and, what is more interesting, the parodies that appeared when New Biography became codified, and opened up a new road to the biographical experiments of the last decades. Vladimir Nabokov with his *Real life of Sebastian Knight*, *Pale fire* and *The gift* imitates (with fictitious characters) the practices of New Biography in order to criticize them, and Virginia Woolf in her dialogized hybrids *Flush* and *Orlando* subverted the basic assumptions of biography with respect to person, chronology and the mode of narration. It is not surprising that her work has been widely discussed only recently, in a period of controversy over the issues of subject, totality, synthesis and binary oppositions.

Biography might be expected to vanish in our postmodern era with the death of the subject and, particularly, the death of the author. Nonetheless, it is hale and hearty⁴¹ and, under the names of fictional biography, biographical metafiction, fiction as biography, metabiography and biofiction, it is developing new relations with the novel; the boundaries between them are not always clear, while mixed forms can be observed.⁴²

⁴¹ For examples in England, Germany and France see e.g. Ina Scabert, "Fictional biography, factual biography and their contaminations", *Biography* 5.1 (Winter 1982) 2-3, and Dominique Viart, "Fictions biographiques", in: Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier (eds.), *La Littérature française au présent. Héritage, modernité, mutations* (Paris: Bordas 2005) pp. 99-124.

⁴² Smaller or larger variations of meaning can be traced. *Fictional biography* is "a separate literary genre. Its authors proclaim their narratives to be novels. As novels on historical individuals, however, they have a more complex relationship with factual reality than the novel in general"; Ina Scabert, "Fictional biography", p. 2. *Biographical metafiction* is similar to Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction": "Those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages"; see Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge 1988), p. 5. The interchangeable (*Fictional*) *metabiography* focuses on the (usually failing) attempts of fictive biographers to

While New Biography drifted towards the novel, postmodern fictional biography has questioned the assumptions on which the realistic novel has been based. While in New Biography the novelistic pattern took over the specificity of human reality, postmodern fictional biography renounces narrative pattern for the sake of the self, a self that is, however, not unified but multi-faced and contradictory. While the characters in New Biography conformed to stereotypes or novel types, the characters in postmodern fictional biography are presented as a conglomeration of all the varying conceptions of themselves: their memory images, their anticipated selves, their ideal selves, the selves they dream of. While New Biography focused on great men even in their inner, all too human conflicts, postmodern fictional biography deals either with individuals who have liminal identities, or with great men, albeit in revisionary ways. While New Biography was oriented towards the past, postmodern fictional biography has a double temporality (the past of the biographee and mainly the

coherently reconstruct someone else's life, thus raising issues of reconstruction and representation; see Ansgar Nünning, "Von fiktionalen Biographie zur biographischen Metafiktion", in: Christian von Zimmermann (ed.), *Fakten und Fiktionen: Strategien fiktional-biographischer Dichterdarstellungen in Roman, Drama und Film seit 1970* (Tübingen: Gunter Narr 2000), p. 19. *Fiction as biography* is a novel which applies fictional discourse to bring a historical figure to life or, in reverse, it applies historical discourse to bring a fictional figure to life; see Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1999), p. 29. *Biofiction* was coined by Alain Buisine, "Biofictions", *Revue des sciences humaines: Le Biographique* 4, no. 224 (1991) 7-13, in the sense of fictional biography. It is used by Martin Middeke and Werner Huber (eds.), *Biofictions: The re-writing of romantic lives in contemporary fiction and drama* (Suffolk: Camden House 1999), p. 3, as a generic term "for the re-writing of the lives of British Romantic writers [...] Contemporary biofictions [...] either comment self-reflexively on the process of writing, or meta-biographically centre on the epistemological problem of recounting a life." Nowadays the French use the inclusive term "le biographique" for biography, autobiography, autofiction, etc., roughly equivalent to the English term "life-writing".

present of the biographer). While New Biography presented greatness as an inherent human feature and incited the reader to identify with the illustrious subject, postmodern fictional biography operates in a double way: it presents the biographee (who is a historical figure for whom we usually have little verifiable knowledge) alongside considerations on cultural construction or epistemological uncertainties, at the same time urging the reader to perceive and reflect on the biographee as a constructed object. While New Biographers were mostly second-hand compilers of facts, postmodern fictional biographers are indefatigable researchers of (forgotten) persons and facts, and, at the same time, they reflect on contemporary ideas and theories (on subjectivity, identity, gender, culture, narrative etc.).

Greece assimilated the new trend rather quickly; one could mention quite a number of examples.⁴³ I shall limit myself to three novels representative of some of the above-mentioned categories.

My first example is *Γλαύκος Θρασάκης* by Vassilis Vassilikos, a novel in parts which was started in 1972 and took its definitive form in 2008, after many additions, alterations and revisions (in its various editions by different publishers).⁴⁴ The

⁴³ Alexis Panselinos, *Η Ζαΐδα ή η καμήλα στα χιόνια* (1997), Aris Marangopoulos, *Οι ωραίες ημέρες του Βενιαμίν Σανιδόπουλου* (1998), Diamantis Axiotis, *Το ελάχιστον της ζωής του* (1999), Foteini Tsalikoglou, *Εγώ, η Μάρθα Φρόντι* (2000), Yorgos Xenarios, *Σμιλεύοντας το φως* (2001), Kostis Gimosoulis, *Βρέχει φως* (2002), Philippos Philippou, *Οι τελευταίες ημέρες του Κωνσταντίνου Καβάφη* (2003), Philippos Philippou, *Ο θάνατος του Ζορμπά* (2007), Thanassis Valtinos, *Άνθη της αβύσσου* (2008).

⁴⁴ *Γλαύκος Θρασάκης* (Athens: Ellinika Grammata 2008). Abridged versions of the novel have been translated into French (*Un poète est mort*, trans. G. Jeanperine, 1978) and English (*The few things I know about Glafkos Thrassakis*, trans. by Karen Emmerich, 2002). Interestingly, on the book-jacket Vassilikos characterizes his book as “bio-fiction, autofiction, antibiography”.

biographic quest is this novel's manifest theme.⁴⁵ The book is not about the reconstruction of a previous life but rather about meta-biographical reflections on whether truth about a life can possibly be known, as well as the difference between life (a historical fact) and its *graphie* (the biographical reconstruction/ fiction). *Γλαύκος Θρασάκης* dramatizes the quest of a biographer-researcher who on the one hand seeks to investigate the odd circumstances of the death of the famous author Glafkos Thrassakis (a persona of Vassilis Vassilikos), and on the other studies Thrassakis's manuscripts kept in the Archives of an American University. In this way the biographer tries to reconstruct his subject's life through the reading of his own texts, obviously committing what is generally dismissed as the biographical fallacy. To the extent that the biographer refers so often to his quest we can consider both the biographer and the biographee as, at once, subjects and objects of the narrative. The text begins as a biography and develops into an autobiography since the researcher is identified with the dead author. This may have happened either during the process of writing or because the biographer deliberately tried, through the biography, to become part of the biographee's life.

Or the other way round: since Thrassakis is identified with his biographer and even his death turns out to be ambiguous, we could consider the present text as one more of Thrassakis's texts, namely an autobiography in the third person. Be that as it may, the biographer's dramatization at once brings biography close to the detective novel on the one hand and to autobiography on the other. The novel's double temporality, its multiplication of narrative levels (*mise en abyme* technique) and the manipulation of the distinction between fiction and reality (Thrassakis's writings vs. his biographer's quest) call into question: (a) the possibility of

⁴⁵ Allen Hibbard, "Biographer and subject: a tale of two narratives", *South Central Review* 23.3 (Fall 2006) 19-36, esp. p. 31. See also G. Farinou-Malamatari, "Β. Βασιλικού, *Γλαύκος Θρασάκης*: Ο εαυτός ως άλλος στη βιογραφία", *Πόρφυρας* 104 (July-Sept. 2002) 211-18.

arriving at the truth, (b) the existence of one unified self, and (c) the capacity of biographical discourse to represent the world at large. In any case, this biographical mode turns into an apt instrument for Vassilikos, and later for Marangopoulos (*Οι ωραίες ημέρες του Βενιαμίν Σανιδόπουλου*) and others, to collect and rescue parts of unfinished works and unpublished materials, which could not have appeared in any other mode.

My second example is Fais's novel *Το μέλι και η στάχτη του θεού* (2002),⁴⁶ a "biography" of the Italian-Jewish painter and man of letters Julio Caimi, a marginal person with a liminal identity. Let me add that Fais, a Greek Jew himself, is the editor of several books by and on Caimi as well as the Exhibition Catalogue of Caimi's paintings.⁴⁷

The book's strange title (honey and ashes standing for life and death respectively) has a striking similarity to Levi-Strauss's book *From honey to ashes*. According to Levi-Strauss, ashes usually stand as a metonymy for tobacco (Caimi being a fanatical smoker) but both words – honey and ashes – have several, even contradictory, meanings. The novel is a conglomeration of fragments in various typographical fonts and forms. Oral narratives of relatives, friends and neighbours, some of them repeated, others contradictory to one another, coexist with extracts from Caimi's underground work, articles on his paintings, newspaper clippings like the ones Caimi amassed during his life and passages from Caimi's fictional diary.

Caimi's life is an impressive collage of evidence, authentic documents and imitations or forgeries some of which are real and

⁴⁶ *Το μέλι και η στάχτη του θεού* is the first novel in Fais's biographical trilogy. The second, *Ελληνική αἰπνία* (2004), is a revisionary presentation of Vizyenos as a version of "minor literature" in the Greek literary canon of the 19th century; see my "Ένας μεταμοντέρνος Βιζυηνός," in: *Ο λόγος της παρουσίας. Τιμητικός τόμος για τον Παναγιώτη Μουλλά* (Athens: Sokolis 2005) pp. 167-80. The third, on Nikos Zachariadis under the provisional title "Πορφυρά γέλια", is still awaited.

⁴⁷ More on Fais at his [webpage www.fais.gr](http://www.fais.gr)

perspectival and therefore contradictory conceptions of Eleni's life together with Eleni's subjective experience of herself, while the first person sketches the same events in an interior monologue at turns addressed to the Dead or to her own self in order to criticize the images of herself produced in her former husband's autobiography and in a biographical article by the feminist journalist and writer Kallirhoe Parren.

One can conclude that Galanaki's novel fosters the idea that biography can never meet the challenge of rendering a person's multiple selves, something that can be achieved only by autobiography. However, this idea is undermined by the text itself, first because Eleni starts her monologues when she lives "the after-life of women" (an ingenious metaphor for designating madness); secondly, because what comes up as a remembered version of herself is in fact the negative and positive comments Eleni makes on the two already textualized versions of her life. Whereas in her former husband's autobiography she figures as an out-of-the-ordinary person, in Parren's portrait she appears as an enigma.

Such multiperspectivity suggests that no "life" can ever be definite, because it is subject to its writing and consequently to its reading. Eleni emerges from our reading of Galanaki's text, which is based on Eleni's reading of Kallirhoe Parren's reading of Eleni's life. In turn, we as readers treat this textualized life either realistically or allegorically. Eleni's silencing as a painter and her confinement in Spetses can be read as a sign of maternal caring. It can also be read as an allegory: the impasse of the woman artist who is confined to the male, canonical models of painting. Accordingly, the burning of her paintings can be considered as the act of a desperate mother gone mad. It can also be considered as the symbolic act of a female artist who, by daring to compete with men, oversteps the boundaries of her female propriety and so becomes a kind of monster. As a result, she must be punished. Her paintings are the fruits of her audacity and may have indirectly caused the death of her real children. She therefore punishes

herself by burning her artistic children after the death of her real ones.

To conclude, I have tried to give a somewhat schematic outline of the two main trends in the relations between biography and the novel in 20th-century Europe. I have also tried to indicate the breadth of their appeal in Greece as attested both by the numerous Greek translations of European works and by the publication of original novelistic as well as postmodern fictional biographies.

A more systematic study might possibly reveal the particular characteristics of these Greek works. My impression is that during the first half of the 20th century Greek literary production faithfully followed European models (in their light versions) adapting them to its own historical contexts and avoiding the tensions generated by some of them in Europe. In contrast, from the 1970 onwards Greek literary production, at least in the cases of some of the better biographies, seems to follow no particular model – which after all might not exist. Rather, it falls in with the experiments in postmodern life-writing, addresses the current cluster of theoretical problems on self, politics, culture, knowledge, gender and art, and combines them with a scrupulous examination of primary sources.