

BOOK REVIEW

Greek Mythologies: Antiquity and Surrealism. By DIMITRIOS YATROMANOLAKIS. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 367. Hardcover, \$65.00. ISBN 978-0-9835322-1-7.

This is a study of Greek Surrealists who between 1930 and 1946 employed ancient Greek mythology in their literature and art. Their goal was to challenge the cultural status quo of their time, which they saw as derived from mainstream Western culture as it had been passed down from antiquity through the Renaissance and Enlightenment. In particular they sought to undercut the positivistic modes of thinking that Western culture had developed over the centuries.

Yatromanolakis makes use of several key concepts in his study, including (1) *mythogenesis*, the “creation of new mythical modes and strategies of discursive experimentation often based on the mechanisms and deep structures” that Surrealists discovered in “traditional mythologies” (7); and (2) “mnemohistory,” the understanding that, rather than simply receiving the past, the present is in fact “haunted” by the past, which is typically “modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed” by the present (51–52).

The primary Surrealists that the book analyzes are Nicolas Calas, a leftist thinker who wrote both poetry and prose; Nikos Engonopoulos, painter and poet; and Andreas Embeirikos, an early Greek psychoanalyst and writer of prose and poetry. In their anti-mainstream thinking, these Surrealists tended to prefer myths on the periphery to those of central Greece, pre-Socratic philosophers to Plato and Aristotle, pre-history to history, and the Dionysian to the Apollonian. Ancient myths the Surrealists tended to favor were those of Crete (Pasiphae, the Minotaur, and Daidalos), Prometheus, the Argonauts, the Trojan War, and Oidipous.

Nicholas Calas, in a prose text of 1936, uses Prometheus as a prototype of the antagonistic and innovative avant-garde artist; Prometheus’ connection to fire is aligned with the “spark” of creativity in avant-garde art. Calas uses these connections to subvert the hegemonic edifice of European humanism (cf. e.g., Shelley’s *Frankenstein*). He also asserts that the poet should employ mythology, an emphasis on utopia, and the mystery implicit in metaphorical language to link the present

to the past and especially to look into the future. In particular, Calas uses a concept of “superheroism,” in contrast to Nietzsche’s, to undermine the authority of the father-figure and of “any patriarchal patterns of thought and power structures.” His superhero embodies an “absolute endorsement of life” as well as “promoting the cause of socioliberal revolution.” Yatromanolakis also argues that Calas’ approach reflects Otto Rank’s critique of Freud and Rank’s “emphasis on humans’ longing for return to the safety of the motherly origins of life” (60–67).

Calas also, in other works, addresses the impact of recent history (both the influx of new populations due to the Asia Minor Catastrophe and the commercialization of Athens as a travel destination) as having had a deleterious effect on Athens’ landscape and its famous past. Yatromanolakis describes this as an example of the “politics of (mnemohistorical) mourning” (77–89; 93–112). Oddly, however, Calas sees the damage to the Parthenon by the explosives that the Venetian Morosini set off in 1687 as a positive event rather than the negative thing seen by most modern aesthetists and students of classical art. For Calas, Morosini, unknowingly acting in Surrealist form, gave new mythical and aesthetic meaning to the ruin of the Parthenon (110–112).

In contrast, the response of Nikos Engonopoulos, in both his painting and his poetry, is defined in terms of a “politics of hybridity.” This artist “created a distinctive pictorial and literary discourse, an ‘ethnographic mosaic,’ ... of disparate (inter)cultural, historical, and linguistic (puristic, demotic, dialectal) categories.” In doing so, he sought to construct a new “concept and corpus of tradition” that would be both fluid and able to be negotiated. The artist’s “realization” of this “tradition” is characterized by “ambivalence, complex mechanisms of irony and humor, and transgression of notional and cultural dissimilarities.” (89–93). This “politics of hybridity” thus undermines the firm, strict lines of distinct categorization established by mainstream civilization.

Andreas Embeirikos explores the role of chance in life and humans’ animal nature from a psychological perspective. In his work, *Zemphyra or the Secret of Pasiphae* (1945), the narrator through chance encounters in Paris brings several new acquaintances to a circus where they witness the performance of Zemphyra, an attractive female lion tamer, who in a risky encounter with one of the lions, ends up making love to it. In this process, as Yatromanolakis analyzes it, the human combines with the animal in such a way that both lose their distinction from one another and achieve a commonality of animal/human. For Zemphyra, this changes from a near-death experience to one of ecstatic joy and cosmic connection. This is in accordance with Embeirikos’ worldview, which, contra Freudian

psychology, sees life as ultimately being governed by eros, which harmonizes life and undermines differences of status and provides for the continuation of the human species as well as that of the animals. The connection with Pasiphae comes in the parallelism of the two myths: whereas Zemphyra deals with a lion, Pasiphae dealt with a bull (189–223). Embeirikos also dealt with other myths and consistently worked to undermine the superstructure based on Freud's concept of the superego.

These Surrealists, while challenging the “post-Enlightenment positivism” of their time, sought to promote relativism, nature, and an “all-inclusive reinterpretation of reality in which man would be reconciled with other beings like animals and diverse elements of the world in a harmonious co-existence” (305–310). In my view, there are worse causes in this world we inhabit. This book should interest both those who teach and study classical mythology and those with an interest in early twentieth-century culture, art and philosophy. All in all, a challenging book on a provocative topic.

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