

Gender, sexuality and narration in Kostas Tachtsis: a reading of *Τα ρέστα*

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I have argued elsewhere¹ that both the label "neo-realist" often applied to Tachtsis and the generally accepted view that his sexual orientation does not have a determining effect on the form of his writing encourage an undervaluing of the complexity of his work. There is in fact a close relationship between sexuality and textuality in *Το τρίτο στεφάνι*, such that the realist layer of the novel is matched by, and indeed (particularly as regards deceptively-gendered narrative voices) part of, a more elaborate meta-textual dialogue between writer and reader about the ways in which literature concurrently forms and reflects our view of gender, notably through the "myth of motherhood". Tachtsis thus creates what I have termed a transvestite text, one which dons the mask and costume of a realist narrative to show us that in literature gender roles are not the reflection of what is conventionally considered reality but the product of a discourse. At the same time, in so doing Tachtsis paradoxically shows that it is precisely in that sense that literature *does* reflect reality, since gender roles in society are only constructions to which the literary discourse makes a significant contribution. I would contend that *Τα ρέστα* and *Το φοβερό βήμα* develop from this dialogue, also playing with the relation between sex, gender and writing, to create a critical intertext akin to the sort of *espace autobiographique* posited for Gide by Philippe Lejeune.² In this paper I want to look at the contribution of *Τα ρέστα* to this process.

If it can be argued that *Το τρίτο στεφάνι* is a self-conscious text, the same is emphatically true of *Τα ρέστα* (1972).

¹ "Social, sexual and textual transgression: Kostas Tahtsis and Michel Tremblay, a comparison", in: D. Tziouvas (ed.), *Greek Modernism and Beyond* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield 1997), pp. 205-14.

² P. Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil 1975), pp. 165-96.

Mitropoulos, in the preface to *Συγγνώμη, εσείς δεν είσθε ο κύριος Ταχτσής;*,³ has already observed that the motif of the self-conscious text in *Τα ρέστα* makes it a postmodern text:

Τα ρέστα, with their revelation of their own fictionalising texture, the deliberate *gaps* in their creative procedures, and generally their literary self-consciousness, come close to what is usually known, generically, as *metafiction* [...] with their persistent revelation of their fictional – artificial – nature belong to the category of post-modernism.

The question is: in what form are such elements present in the stories, and how do they relate to social and sexual issues?

The fact is that even before embarking on *Τα ρέστα* we have to face a problem of reading which does not apply to the earlier novel. Although about a half of the individual texts which make up the collection were previously published in separate literary periodicals during the '60s and very early '70s, we should be wary about assuming that we can read them in isolation from one another. As Kay Cicellis has observed,⁴ the texts construct a "whole", whose structure may be different from that of the conventional novel, but which does constitute, nonetheless, a structure. The point is taken, in fact, from a statement by Tachtsis himself, in the last section of *Το φοβερό βήμα*,⁵ where he refers to the desire to write what he calls "ένα μυθιστόρημα-αλυσίδα" – a series of apparently independent texts with himself as the hero, but a self "πίσω από διαφορετικά προσωπεία", stretching from his early childhood to the moment when he "becomes" a writer. Each text is therefore to be seen as both independently valid *and* as constituting a link in the "novel". Mitropoulos accepts the identification of this technique as applying to *Τα ρέστα*, but interpretatively he doesn't do much with it. Indeed, he takes dangerously literally the idea of the "self as hero", claiming (17) that it is the stability of the perspective of a single character, who merely changes in age,

³ D. Mitropoulos, *Συγγνώμη, εσείς δεν είσθε ο κύριος Ταχτσής;* (Athens: Patakis 1993), p. 18.

⁴ Quoted by D. Mitropoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁵ K. Tachtsis *Το φοβερό βήμα* (Athens: Exandas 1989), pp. 374-5.

which, over-riding the question of first, second or third person narration, guarantees unity within the "chain-novel" (Tachtsis's term μυθιστόρημα-αλυσίδα). This seems to me to beg the question of what is meant by a single character (Mitropoulos's phrase is "το ίδιο πρόσωπο", the same person). Because, just as the family details shift from story to story, so do significant features such as the central character's sexuality, or his awareness of his sexuality. Tachtsis himself says that the great problem of writing is "moral" (ηθικό)⁶ and that techniques simply develop to express the particular nature of the moral/ethical issues which the artist is exploring. If we assume that that moral/ethical dimension cannot be divorced from problems of individual identity, and that individual identity cannot be divorced from issues of gender construction and sexual identity, then there must be a link between these and the techniques of representation used in *Τα ρέστα*. What I want to look at now, therefore, is the relationship between the "masks" represented by the central characters in the individual texts and the shifting forms of narration/generic experimentalism in the work, in terms of both the social construction of gender and sexual identity and the theme of writing itself.

Working on the assumption that we are reading a chain-novel which is in some sense playing with the conventional concept of the *Bildungsroman*, I shall begin by looking at the first and last texts, to see what sort of framework they set. The social construction of gender is introduced in the first text, whose eponymity confirms the importance of its placing at the opening of the work. The mother says to her son:

Ἦ θα γίνεις άντρας και θα μάθεις να μην κλαις [...] ή θα σε σκοτώσω από τώρα μια και καλή, να σε κλάψω και να σε ξεχάσω, άναντρους σαν τον προκομμένο τον πατέρα σου δεν χρειάζεται άλλους η κοινωνία.

The text underlines the conflicting signals about gender which Greek society offers: power lies with the mother, a power arbitrarily exercised, since whether the child gets belted or not depends less on what it does than on the mother's mood, which is

⁶ The word is used in *Το φοβερό βήμα*, p. 374.

itself socially determined (money, male/female relations etc. lie mysteriously behind it). Paradox number one: the mother's mood is thus determined by patriarchal (i.e. male) forces. But (paradox number two) the mother's power is exercised in the construction of a "male" adult, a figure, that is, to whom women will at least nominally be subject. The absent father is consigned to the linguistically paradoxical category of *άναντρος* – a word whose very structure (morphologically asserting what it semantically refuses) emphasises the gap between biological and social genders, creating the concept of the non-masculine biological male. And the whole of this is presented as governed by the needs of society: the boy must avoid falling into a category, the non-masculine biological male, for which, according to the mother, society has no use. This motif of socially-constructed gender is then linked to another motif which will recur in the texts, that of *guilt* – made overt in the boy's cry of "ήμαρτον μανούλα μου [...], ήμαρτον"⁷ – and consequent punishment, both in the past (the child's sense of transgression and the mother's infliction of physical retribution) and in the present (the man's feeling of guilt for not having understood the causes of the mother's behaviour, and the punishment of the mother, in the sense that the boy failed to be socially constructed as a man).

If we look at the formal interest of the story, two things stand out: firstly, for the greater part of the text (all the past narrative) the narration addresses the child in the second person singular, i.e. the child is presented as object/other; but, secondly, at the end the narration moves into a present tense and a first-person voice, while identifying the past child with the present speaker. The reader thus experiences both the sense of alienation from an earlier self, and the degree to which this otherness/exteriority of childhood is cancelled out by one particular aspect, the "continuity in failure" between child and adult which the first-person narrator emphasises – a continuity constituted precisely by the "failure to be[come] a man".⁸

⁷ Note the reference to the language of the Christian religion, the ultimate patriarchal model.

⁸ The logical subtext of this is that "man" (in the conventional sense) and author are incompatible categories.

The opening text thus sets up a number of paradoxes about gender and identity, emphasising both the importance of social construction and the co-existence of perceptions of continuity and discontinuity within the adult. The closing text, "Η πρώτη εικόνα", is entirely a reflection on the same gender issues and their broader repercussions, reaching into the area of inter-male sexual attraction and its roots in childhood. (Note in passing that the novel starts with what is left over, τα ρέστα, and finishes at the beginning, with the "first picture" – a contradiction of structural logic which helps to emphasise that the progression of "plot" around which a traditional *Bildungsroman* is built is merely a *convention* embodying a particular concept of cause-and-effect psychological and social determinism.) Couched in the first person, the final text reflects on the paradox of woman-as-power/man-as-victim in a patriarchal society, and it too associates the narrator with a sense of guilt. But whereas the first text exemplifies the issues from a particular case, the last text generalises on every level. This includes imagery, since it links the sexual revolt of the narrator to social non-conformity by expressing it in the image of a personal Οκτωβριανή Επανάσταση and representing the clash of conventional gender characteristics within the narrator as a "Peloponnesian War". In the process of establishing the validity of these generalisations, the narration returns to childhood memory as central illustration, thus returning the book full circle to its beginning, but with the difference that the distancing second person singular of *Τα ρέστα* has been replaced by a first person singular which identifies child with adult. The framework of the book can thus be interpreted as creating the impression of a work whose focus is, or includes, issues of gender, sexuality and identity; the passage from a divided perspective (past narration, second person) – the child-object and the man-subject – to a single perspective (first-person narration from a present perspective) which contains a harmonious "first-person narration of the child" within it – helps to create the sense of a fulfilled perceptual quest, i.e. the attainment of some understanding about sexuality and gender.

So far we have identified the presence of a child-man axis in a form which relates thematically to gender construction. If we look at the story "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια", which

occupies roughly the centre of the cycle of texts (in the 1977 edition there are 84 pages of text before it and 75 after), we find one further essential voice, that of the writing self. In this story, Tachtsis, adopting the persona of the "writing I", deliberately undermines the reader's confidence in the "truth" of the texts which s/he has read so far, challenging the tendency to interpret stories as reproductions of external fact and pointing to discrepancies between a supposed autobiographical reality and the family details given in the preceding text, "Το άλλοθι" – one of the texts whose biographical relevance will be specifically invoked in *Το φοβερό βήμα* (120). However, as Mitropoulos points out, "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια" itself creates a new set of discrepancies when compared with the final text, "Η πρώτη εικόνα". From this Mitropoulos argues that the whole notion of external reality as transferable into fiction is thrown into doubt, and that in addition the reduction of the writer himself to a fictional figure contributes to a Barthesian "death of the author", leaving Tachtsis himself as "unknowable". While sharing Mitropoulos's view of the importance of the intrusion of a Tachtsis-the-writer in the middle of the text-cycle, and of the fact that the voice itself is not allowed simply to become the reality against which the other voices have to be measured, but is instead another *mask*, I want to argue against this idea of "unknowability". I would suggest that what is important is the way in which the reader is prevented from adopting conventional notions of what constitutes knowability. What we have to consider closely is the linking of the theme of writing to the gender/sex/power thematics already identified, and the ways in which the "writer-as-mask" element serves to disturb the reader's assumptions about characterisation and traditional ways of labelling identity. The fact that Tachtsis-the-writer is not a privileged voice (a vehicle for the whole, external truth) does not mean that he is not a partial vehicle for *a* truth – as are all the other masks.

The idea of an intrinsic connection of the gender/sex elements with the theme and practice of writing is articulated by Tachtsis in *Το φοβερό βήμα*, where he makes a claim about that book which could just as easily stand in the text of *Τα ρέστα*:

It will already have been understood, I hope, that what I have written thus far revolves – for the time being in a necessarily indirect and implicit way – around one axis and has a single aim, the gradual uncovering of the unknown but indivisibly linked secrets of the two authorities which monopolised my interest, devoured most of my time, and set the seal on my life: sex and writing. If I talk about my childhood years and the environment in which I grew up, it is because everything begins from there and not from some freak of nature or some personal peculiarity of mine.⁹

In other words, the narrational complexity of *Τα ρέστα* is necessitated not merely by the fact that the work discusses sex and writing, but that the two elements are interrelated within Tachtsis's personality, i.e. writing is an aspect of his sexual identity and vice versa. For the reader to unravel the "indivisibly linked secrets of the two activities" s/he has to appreciate the ways in which Tachtsis is trying to avoid the pitfalls of conventional gender stereotyping in literature as well as in life, and is obliging the reader to adopt a way of reading which emphasises *self-creation* and downgrades social construction. (The issue becomes more complex still if we add the intertextual readings with *Το τρίτο στεφάνι*, and still more with *Το φοβερό βήμα*, to which Tachtsis eventually invites us.)

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So far I have tried to identify an overall framework for *Τα ρέστα* which suggests a reading compatible with the issues in which I am interested. At first glance the connections between the other constituent texts are less obvious. If the opening text is clearly about the social construction of gender, the second is certainly less obviously so, although the motif of female power is there (the teacher), as are the motifs of failure (the boy has to resit the end-of-year exam in maths), of guilt (he is the reason that his grandmother cannot go to the seaside for the summer) and of gender difference (his fascination with the unknown interior of the girls' toilets). The most important aspects of the text are,

⁹ See p. 107: all translations from Tachtsis's works in this paper are my own.

however: (i) the final lines, in which the grandmother decrees that it is inevitable that the boy will be weak at maths because his mother and grandmother are: "είναι [...] ζήτημα υδουσγκρασίας", a judgment which appears to rob him of the right to determine his own identity and which, whilst healthily transgressing the stereotype "boys are good at maths", unhealthily capitulates to binarism (the child is to be read as "really" female); and (ii) the broader question of power, the boy being both the powerless object of other agencies, and the voiceless object (except in dialogue, the narration being omniscient), throughout the story. In fact all the boyhood texts of *Τα ρέστα* revolve around this sense of predetermined values, in both life and literature, to which hero/text conform and from which gradually they will liberate themselves. At the same time the issue of power/the boy as object is also to the fore in these texts. Thus the following one, "Ένα σύγχρονο προϊόν", portrays the complex interplay of power roles between grandmother, uncle Mimis and the boy, with the boy this time making an attempt to assert his right to self-determination. Note that the object of power is itself the question of *appearance*, the boy's right to determine how he wears his own hair. The paradox of the extent and limits of woman's power comes to a head in the final lines, where the grandmother plays the classic card of emotional blackmail: "ό,τι κι αν κάνω, δε μπορώ ποτέ να σας ευχαριστήσω" (38).

So far I have had little to say about sexual identity, because the boy-hero is an almost neuter figure at this point in the cycle. However, henceforward the theme of sexuality is gradually introduced, first in "Μια επίσκεψη" as adolescent female sexuality, in a context where the boy-role in the text is purely voyeuristic – he is an excluded observer-figure – then as adolescent male sexuality in the masturbatory rhythm with which the boy rubs the damaged toy boat up and down on the satin divan-cover as he falls asleep at the end of "Ένα πλοίο στη στεριά". So far the texts have largely an air of conforming to the conventions of "tales of childhood": they stage family events, schooldays, children's perceptions of the adult world. But the hints of sexuality in the last-mentioned two texts begin to disrupt these conventions. This disruption comes to a head in "Η μουτζούρα", whose title – the stain – refers ostensibly to the

"smudge" – μου(ν)τζούρα is the Greek word used in the text (67) – glimpsed on the boy in the bath by his grandmother and which turns out to be his first pubic hair. (This already creates an ambiguity, since the choice of the word μουτζούρα associates puberty with disgrace.) However, the title can also potentially refer to the semen which the older boy Ilias splashes on the younger boy's thighs when using him for intercrural sex in the basement of the newspaper office, and equally to the semen which the boy himself is about to spill as he takes his newly-awakened erection in his hand at the end of the story. Accordingly it also refers to the "moral stain" which would conventionally attach to sexual initiation itself and thereby to the motif of guilt – Ilias's insistence that the younger boy must not mention what has passed between them, and the boy's later anxiety to make sure that his putative masturbation will be safe from interruption. But the story itself is a subversion of childhood literary conventions, turning the theme of innocence into the theme of *ignorance* – the ignorance of the child's own physical development/puberty in which his grandmother and uncle leave him. The falsity of the literary conventions of childhood is literally stripped bare in the opening line of the text, in which the boy drops his trousers and sits on the lavatory. The "new masculinity" which emerges at the end of the story – "Ξαφνικά είδε πως το πουλί του είχε μεγαλώσει" – is not the form of growing or "becoming a man" envisaged in the earlier texts, nor is it determined by his mother or grandmother; its presence is hastened by the "antisocial" act of Ilias and its literary representation is characterised by "pornographic" insertion into a story about a pubescent child.

Significantly, the next text, "Το άλλοθι", completes what can be read as a "history" of sexual development. (Note that, in a sense, it doesn't matter whether the boys in these various texts are the same figure, because sexual development and its social context emerges as itself the unfolding "character" around which the narration centres, the boys being merely vehicles for this process.) It is of interest that this text is the first to figure significantly in an outside text (its biographical reference will be invoked in *Το φοβερό βήμα* (120), a passage which confirms the boy's age as thirteen), and will also become the basis for the mise-en-abyme of textual self-reflection in the following text. In

other words, it is the bridge-text between sex and writing. "Το άλλοθι" extends sexuality to the process of *mutual* fulfilment: hitherto, sex has been an instinct or a solitary act, or the boy has been used as a sexual object. Again the narrative begins with a "forbidden" sexual act. The 18-year-old Kleitos reads books which he hides in his shirt when he returns to the house; the result is sexual excitement, unbuttoned trousers, and an indirect indication of both masturbation (with the aid of a ripe watermelon) and probably of more intercrural sex, this time incestuous (the boy being Kleitos's cousin). Tachtsis is thus quoting the motifs of adolescent sexuality already established in the cycle, while emphasising concealment, guilt and the boy-as-object. But this is used to preface the boy's attempt to initiate *himself* heterosexually, and the failure of that attempt – a failure underlined by the concurrent failure to cross *class* borderlines as well as gender boundaries (the girl is a tobacco-worker's daughter, the boy's father is a lawyer). Furthermore the failure derives from the hypocritical moral impositions of the adult world. Thus far the text presents otherness in a divided form: conventions overthrown (inter-male sex), conventions sustained (class boundaries).

However, the text does not consist merely of this past narration; it is the first text since the opening story to acknowledge two time levels – past and present experience – and at the same time the first to give any sort of sexual identity to the narrating voice. The closing section of the text is important in this respect. In central Athens the narrator meets the man responsible for his heterosexual fiasco 25 years previously, but the fact that the narrator is accompanied by the stereotype of a classically handsome young man, "έναν απ' τους ελάχιστους αυθεντικούς Ερμήδες που κυκλοφορούν στην αθηναϊκή πιάτσα" (91), doesn't deter his old enemy from identifying him (the narrator) as a womanizer. In other words the narrator is "read" as having a stereotypical sexual identity on the basis of a failed childhood experience. The model for this misreading is in fact present in the title – the alibi – both that behind which the closeted gay male shelters his sexuality in later life and that behind which society shelters from the acknowledgement of the existence of unsanctioned sexualities. This text therefore completes a process by which we are introduced, within a

framework of female power and male guilt, to the idea of a shifting emergent sexuality over which the adolescent needs to take control. The text emphasises the blinkered concepts of socially-constructed sexual behaviour which can impede the boy's transfer from object to subject; it juxtaposes *transgressive male/male* sex with failures to bond with the "other" sexually and socially, and puts all these into the context of the stereotyping which prevents society from correctly "reading" sexuality in non-conformers. Significantly, it is only at this point that we arrive at the introduction of the theme of the writer and the problematic of narrative realism, as embodied in the (physically and metaphorically) central text of the chain, "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια".

The first function of this pivotal text is to *refuse* a conventional biographical identification between writer and written. Personal experience, the writer-narrator insists, is useful only "as kindling": the written text has an autonomous existence. Accordingly he justifies, for example, the prior death of the boy's mother, in "Το άλλοθι", as a means of "sensitising" the hero to the point where the thwarting of the boy's attempt at heterosexual initiation will traumatise him into a later attraction to his own sex. (I shall comment on the function of this argument shortly.) The text of "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια", then, appears to offer a commentary on the previous texts, to give the reader a "genuine" biography of the father, and to guarantee the significance of the father's discovery of the diary in which the writer's relationship with the 27-year-old English soldier Paul is recorded. It appears to be a "documentary" text, and as such out-of-place in a fictional cycle. But even without the discrepancies between the new version of the "facts" and the details given in the final text of the chain ("Η πρώτη εικόνα"), the reader would be unwise to take the text as having a different truth-status from those which precede it, precisely for the reasons articulated in the opening paragraph: "from the moment you begin to write, the written text acquires an autonomous existence, a 'truth' of its own." Furthermore, what if we read the text intertextually against *Το φοβερό βήμα*? In that work the boy's mother is *not* dead, therefore he has not undergone the same "sensitization", but he will also grow up attracted to his own sex (indeed the text indicates that he already is). As an

intertextual reading emphasises, the reader should mistrust not only the "biography of the father" and the explanation of it which "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια" presents as an absolute "truth"; s/he should also mistrust the causal explanation of sexuality which it promotes. We can no more trust the text's claim to explain *why* things happen in terms of external reality than we can assume that it portrays *what* happens in external reality.

So far I have read "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια" negatively, in the sense of reading it as a disruptive text, which deters the reader from falling into certain interpretative traps while luring him/her into other versions of the same traps. Does it also have a positive role to play? Well, yes, because it directs the reader to the issue of the coexistence of mythifying/demystification in Tachtsis's work. In his essay "Τα περισσότερα βιβλία είναι σκοπούδια"¹⁰ he presents himself as a demythologiser – as revealing the αλήτης inside every Hermes (in contrast to the painter Tsarouchis, whom he sees as turning every αλήτης into a Hermes, on the Cavafy pattern); but at the same time Tachtsis stresses the need for myths in the world. What "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια" does is to emphasise the double action of Tachtsis's own texts in this respect. They demystify by breaking down and refusing the myths of gender/sexuality and literary representation to which society adheres, but they attempt to replace these with a different sort of fiction – a fiction which expands perceptions of the truth, instead of imposing "false" images. The author is self-constructing in the text in a way which he sees as true to the self-construction which, because of his sexual orientation, he has undergone in life.¹¹ So the reader of *Τα ρέστα* should now be alert to the idea

¹⁰ K. Tachtsis, *Από την χαμηλή σκοπιά* (Athens: Exandas 1992), pp. 152-3

¹¹ The importance of breaking down the barriers between reality and fiction is evident in much contemporary gay writing, notably in the use of self-reflexive techniques. Such techniques tend to have different functions in different contexts, but they are always at odds with the fixity of values/perceptions usual in conventional literature. This is compatible with Tachtsis's very Proustian attitude to the idea of the label, e.g. *Τα ρέστα*, pp. 105-6: "He kept saying over and over the thing which I didn't yet know I was, the thing which perhaps I was not *yet*, which, my God, it took

of a text which is "constructing" an author/a set of values or ideas, while *refusing* conventional values and conventional literary methods of constructing/conveying such values.

What then does all this mean for our reading of the second half of the text-cycle/chain-novel? "Το κόκκινο παλτό" at first sight throws out-of-synch the progression of the *Bildungsroman*-like developmental schema, in that it reverts to a boy-hero. In fact this is misleading, as the story depends upon three elements which throw the perspective back onto the adult: an act of retrospective memory, the influence of reading and the function of writing. It concludes: "And what's the point of my sitting here now, twenty-five years later, writing about these things" (123). Characteristically, this does not mark a complete switch to a writer-focus either, since that is ellipsed in the following text, only to recur in the one after – "Τα παπούτσια κι εγώ" – which refers back to "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια". (Indeed, the title of the later text itself needs investigation because it only makes sense as an invitation to read the story intertextually in the light of the earlier text.) These three texts lead to the present-of-writing voice in the final text. At the same time, the question of sexual persona and gender-construction is presented from a number of angles which depend upon the texts with which these writing-conscious texts alternate ("Το κόκκινο παλτό", "Μια διπλωματική ιστορία" and "Λίγες πέννες για το Στρατό Σωτηρίας").

The first of these texts hints that the boy's late return from an afternoon concert is because he has met someone and gone to the Acropolis for a quickie with him (119 and 121); this interpretation, which is obvious to a gay reader in any case, is facilitated for the straight reader by the reference to the Acropolis as a sexual rendez-vous point for Paul and the narrator in the previous story (104). But this sexual emancipation is presented in a context of power-struggles (the attempted social construction of the boy by the women), of *misinterpreted* sexuality (his grandmother suggests that he has been seduced by his female piano teacher) and of guilt (the boy's guilt at the

nearly twenty years of angst and self-destruction for me to begin to realise that I am *not*." The father imposes a label which is false because it assumes a binary gender opposition.

effects of his falsehood in suggesting that he had seen his aunt Sophy, who is in mourning, wearing a red coat). This last motif at the same time, by raising the question of *appearance* again (social codes of image) and the issue of socially-constrained falsehood (lying to cover your sexuality), also inserts itself into the debate about the nature and function of fiction.

The same is true, in a more indirect form, of "Λίγες πέννες για το Στρατό Σωτηρίας", which stands apart in the second half of the cycle as a third-person narration. This text picks up and develops the motif of guilt, a guilt whose homosexual nature is hinted at in the reference to a "sinful past" (ενός αμαρτωλού παρελθόντος – 144) and the insistence on the emphatic desire to be a "natural man" (the Greek term used is "φυσιολογικός"), using the reader's instinctive social stereotyping to weight the word αμαρτωλού and to interpret the concept of naturalness in the context of such surrounding vocabulary as αθώοι, αμαρτίες, ένοχος and μολύνει. The text also repeats the motifs of otherness – "Τα παπούτσια κι εγώ" is set in London, "Λίγες πέννες για το Στρατό Σωτηρίας" in Australia – and of appearance – the boy who is anonymously offering his erection for oral sex through a glory hole in the wall of the station toilet wears a "respectable" image outside this, i.e. that of a member of the Salvation Army. The story thus focuses on significant motifs from this section of the chain, including the motif of appearance which is part of the truth/fiction theme, but there is no specific reference to the writing context.

It is the question of appearance, of social codes of image and socially-constrained falsehood, which forms the bridge between both the preceding and subsequent texts and "Μια διπλωματική ιστορία". This is the only text in which the young man at the centre of the narration is ostensibly straight (133), or certainly sees himself as such. Fiction plays various roles in this text: the narrator escapes the attentions of the professor by pretending to have a homosexual relationship with another student, while the professor's reputation both during and after his life is determined by the social fiction that he is a womaniser. With the fiction motif we can link the more general theme of appearance, either in straightforward physical terms such as the students' plot to send up the professor by all appearing in bow-ties like his, and the subversion of the plot by the

professor's appearing in an ordinary tie, or in terms of social appearances – the narrator is ashamed of the professor's provinciality when in the company of a distinguished French writer, he is then ashamed/embarrassed by the way in which the professor is publicly insulted by a couple of young sailors. In all these cases the social value given to externals is at odds with the "truth" of the person concerned, but in the first example the mask is voluntary, whereas in the latter two it is a question of the social reading of appearance which is at issue. Fiction thus becomes negative or positive depending on whether we are dealing with choosing a mask (remaining subject) or having one imposed (being reduced to object). Fiction in the form of reference to books/reading, raised en passant in "Το κόκκινο παλτό", takes on a greater significance in "Μια διπλωματική ιστορία", with the reference to the narrator's reading of Proust's *La Prisonnière* and the professor's simplistic interpretation of its "literary transvestism"(136).¹² This inevitably ties reading – and hence writing – back to motifs of sexuality. The professor's rigid interpretation of Proust as gender transference and his assumption of completely discrete categories of gender behaviour (a girl could not be interested in football) merely mirrors the arbitrary classification procedures of straight society. The reader is thereby reminded that gender *is* a problematic category and that assumptions about sexual identity can distort our perceptions of any text, including the one we are currently reading.

This leaves us with the final text, "Η πρώτη εικόνα". With its opening statement about the power of women over the first-person narrator in his childhood and its closing anecdote about female prevention of his physical bonding with his father and its psychological influence in his later life, the text seems to place itself firmly in the genre of the essay, an essay whose dual function is to analyse gender roles within Greek society generally, and his own experience of it in particular, and to use that analysis to "explain" his own experience of gender and sexuality. But, as already stated, the family details of the text

¹² I have been unable to trace the story about the milkman's daughter and the football match (136-7) in Proust. Tachtsis is surely making fun of the literalism of the sort of literary scholarship which adopts exactly this sort of attitude to gender issues in *A la recherche*.

are not identical with those offered by "Ο πατέρας μου και τα παπούτσια", a fact which should alert the reader to remember that s/he has no reason to treat *any* of the text-chain as authoritative in the sense of laying claim to a mirror-relation to external fact. "Η πρώτη εικόνα" can only be read as *a* commentary on the system of gender, power and stereotyped identity around and against which the preceding texts have been structured. Read in this way what it does is to provide a counter-model for interpreting Greek society, based on a simple inversion of values, a model which is carefully linked to a counter-mythology: the patriarchal myths of the Bible and Classical Olympian theology are rejected for the kind of magical mysticism of primeval matriarchal religion which features in the work of Margarita Lymberaki (e.g. in *Σπαραγγμός*).¹³ Ostensibly these counter-myths legitimise the final text's picture of a boy whose sense of gender has been disorientated by his overwhelming exposure to female values, causing him to identify at certain levels with women while at others feeling a deep guilt for rejecting them, and whose separation from natural inter-male physicality has left him with a need for men which becomes a determinant in his sexual direction. But the cautious reader has by now learnt not to find any single "explanation" for the shifting patterns of gender and sexuality which the novel-chain has set up. The writer as structured by the text is his present *and* his past; he has found a value for the concept of *άντρας* which defies the social construction of both gender and sexuality precisely because he *is* a writer, who can be both subject *and* object of the text.

I earlier quoted Tachtsis as saying, in *Το φοβερό βήμα*, that the function of the autobiographical act was to trace the links between sex and writing within his childhood context (107). "Becoming a man" – the motif introduced in the opening text of the chain under the aspect of social construction, conforming to a pattern of what society, in the person of the grandmother, says a man should be – is *four* things in *Τα ρέστα*, all of them essential to such an autobiographical process. First, it is a physical process: the acquisition of the external trappings and the

¹³ It is interesting in this context to remember that "Η μουτζούρα" is possibly dedicated to Lymberaki.

physical capacities of puberty which open up the world of sexuality – this gives a man the technical power of sexual creation/recreation; second, it is the acquisition of the ability to create metaphorically, i.e. to write, which is closely tied to the experience of reading and to awareness of the representation of sex and gender in the existing literary tradition; third, it is the acquisition of the power of self-determination, the freeing of the self from taboos and external pressures which he attaches to his personal definition of the word άντρας in "Δεν θεωρώ τον εαυτό μου ερωτικό συγγραφέα",¹⁴ a liberation which will turn him from object to subject in a social context; and, consequently, fourth, it is the freeing of the self from the social constraints embedded in literary representation – including, for example, those of generic expectation to which his "novel" declines to conform. The boy-figures chart the emergence of these anti-social powers – justifying the reference in "Τα περισσότερα βιβλία είναι σκουπίδια" to the "antisocial presence of the writer behind every hero".¹⁵ Thus, by the end of "Το άλλοθι" the text-chain has confirmed the multiple-hero's determination to acquire the freedom to do what he likes with his penis, and the texts themselves, in their departure from the conventions of "literature of childhood" have demonstrated his freedom to do what he likes with his pen. The second part of the chain problematises the experience of this freedom for both the adult and the writer. What this method of literary composition does is to prevent the reader from reading in a conventional way on a number of essential issues. Notably, (i) the book *constructs* identity (or at least "identity as multiplicity"), it does not record it: there is no sense of stable sexual identity, a fact underlined by the failure of society's attempts to fix such identity, which are represented both thematically and in the "psychological explanations" which the text (particularly when read intertextually with *Το φοβερό βήμα*) parodies by showing their arbitrariness; (ii) the book *refuses* a conventional generic identity, not only in using a text-chain to mimic the development of a *Bildungsroman* without accepting the positivist determinism of such a narrative, but also by subverting

¹⁴ Κ. Tachtsis, *Από την χαμηλή σκοπιά*, p. 163.

¹⁵ *Από την χαμηλή σκοπιά*, p. 151.

the boundaries between fiction and documentary. What it establishes is the psychological biography of non-conformity, but in such a way as to keep it grounded in a particular Greek social reality. While *To τρίτο στεφάνι* reminds its reader of the pitfalls of the "discourse of gender", *Τα ρέστα* (while acknowledging the same pitfalls) does the same for the "discourse of identity".

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