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Nikos Bakolas: Chronicler of the Macedonian Hinterland

Translated by Yannis Goumas

Already in 1966, with the publication of *Kípos ton Pringípon*, (Princes' Garden), Nikos Bakolas had correlated the destiny of his literary heroes with the imprints of history in what we can call the collective conscience of recent years, in particular from the insurgence of national movements in the Balkan area towards the end of the 19th century. His characters, most of them stigmatized by a twofold quest for identity, individual and collective, tortured to the point of insanity by indelible and "vital" memories of bloodshed and traumas, paved the way for a poetic prose narrative which established itself in our postwar prose writings.

The shaping of Bakolas' personality as an author went along many a crooked path before the parts were pieced together in the '50s and '60s. But if we have now come to acknowledge the significance of his oeuvre, this in part is interrelated to the lonely position he occupies in the neoethnographic domain which has constricted the outlook of so many of our prose writers. He combined in a masterly way techniques which only in certain traditional or modern forms of writing do we encounter. For example, he made good use of the stream of conscience, a narrative style first practiced between the two Wars by Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and André Malraux, and which, here in Greece, was introduced (not uncontroversially) mainly by Thessalonian authors, as Xefloudas and Pentzikis. But he also employed a poetically-prone realism which, even before it was propagated by South American literature, was familiar to us thanks to the Russian masters and our own Alexandros Papadiamandis.

Ergo, Bakolas combines said narrative techniques, having in the meantime probed into and benefited from the work of that great American novelist, William Faulkner, with its multilevel direct or indirect language. Thanks to Faulkner, he is initiated into the saga, from the aspect that this narrative composition records and embodies the traditional history of families, which, in the ensuing years, constituted the fabric of his novels. For all intents and purposes, Bakolas renegotiates, through the saga medium, the engagement of an ancient dramatic tradition, considering that Faulkner's novels also have recourse to the myth of the Atrides in order to elaborate on aspects of abuse, theodicy, fate, and inevitable deterioration –moral as well as bodily.

Be that as it may, the saga's composition does not debilitate these prose pieces. And, in any case, this marks a differential process vis-à-vis the prototype, a divergence already hatched in the book criticized (uncritically, to my mind) for adhering to the Faulknerian mythology and technique: *Princes' Garden*. The latter was published in 1963, three years after Bakolas' translation of Faulkner's novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. When it comes to layout and permutations, Bakolas' indebtedness to Faulkner goes without saying. But intrinsically? If we disregard the obvious stylistic convergences, the book transposes the saga to a narrative landscape within the historical confines of Macedonia, and in particular Thessaloniki as the Balkan metropolis. Typical, indeed, of his literary strategy are his prefatory remarks in *Princes' Garden*, a preamble which I think applies to all his sequential literary undertakings: "This book is neither reminiscence nor

escape. It is remorse. What I mean to say is that the book has no past, nor is it concerned about the future. What counts is today; not in the sense that incidents take place in the present, but because writing about it –that is, the present moment, the moment of its creation, the fact that it is being recorded– is what has value and significance. It is for this very reason that *Princes' Garden* has the courage to overlook the possible danger of being regarded as imitative, derivative and unoriginal."

Thus, if in *Princes' Garden* and *Emvatiria* (Military Marches), 1972, the newfangled style blends with introspection and the broader function of time's continuum, following the in-between publication of *Hypnos-Thanatos* (Sleep-Death) in 1974, a novel with highly developed meandering and retrogressive rhythm of direct and indirect language, the author opens a new parenthesis, or a new cycle, with *Mythologia* (Mythology), 1977, an articulated narrative where, for the first time, history blends with fiction.

It wasn't by chance, it seems, that Bakolas chose to place *Mythology* in indeterminate time. The saga's sources are historical, the mythology that will shadow the destiny of his characters in his succeeding novels, the establishment, of a corporate nature, of at least a section of society that will inhabit the city of Thessaloniki at the dawn of the 20th century. This is a period of dramatic shifts in population in the Balkans, all too often misinterpreted if not misrepresented thanks to political legerdemain. Legends, myths and traditions of a region suppressed within the allotted geopolitical confines, link the individual with the collective past together; but on the level of mythopoeia, they achieve even greater significance, since they leave open the doors of association, thus expanding the realm of literary imagination. Finally, as ancestral elements in Bakolas' series of novels, they disembogue into recent years and throw light on odd happenings, illogical behaviour and sinister characters.

One of Bakolas' favourite tactics in his more mature work is to develop, along parallel lines, stories narrated by different characters, but who belong in the same anthropological cradle. As this mass of concurrent narratives evolves, the reader discerns at a certain point that it is impossible to divorce one narrative from the other. The author has caught him in a make-believe net, a cobweb, where the phenomena's causal nexus takes root in the same *communal subsoil.* Consequently, they are interdefined, individuality having a share in collectivity, and vice versa. This mesh, which appears to contain everything and everyone, comes under various aliases: destiny, fate, history or indecipherable primordial cosmic power, as in the *novel E Atélioti Graphí tou Aématos* (The Endless Writing of Blood), 1996, the most poetic and idealistic of Bakolas' books.

Not only is the feeling of this primordial power inexplicable for the characters – they sense it without understanding it, and so go completely to pieces in their spasmodic attempt to fathom it – but also for the author who is, in the book, an active or an alternating character by turns, using a persona as a medium. Regardless of what we want to call this power, it certainly maintains an axial position in his mythical genre. It acts as a catalyst and, if we duly note, as a warner. In other words, its presence is connotational, discernible or less discernible, and its admonitory function is what determines the tragic fate of the characters. The human element clashes with the cosmic, the primordial, and the ritualistic process of this clash (i.e., in the pages where is described in a language scored with digressions the first death in *The Endless Writing of Blood*, as well as the unjustifiable death of Lazaros) is presented by the author parabolically, engagingly, enabling us to come to terms with this indivisible situation: "Whenever I attempt to write stories based on ... facts, let us say, there looms before me, unwittingly, a childish longing to see everything as a fairy tale."

Even so, the facts do exist, not only as testi-

monials of a lifetime augmented with literary imagination, but also as evidence of an untiring attempt at autobiographical retrospection. This is clearly manifest in the prefatory note to the cycle of novels beginning with *Princes' Garden*.

The author "stoops" to this inner landscape of personal and collective memories, wherein he retrieves (typical of the quality of his vision) the traumatic effect that destiny's touch has on human life. The frequent reference thereto, and the reader feeling the impact, creates a perfection of its kind. Thus life goes on, unsuspecting of what fate has in store for it, and eventually deteriorates unto annihilation. "... Most of the characters in my novels were actual people. Naturally, they are not presented true to life, they are fictionalized. They undergo a literary process and form, but the characters exist in life. I know their life history ... I am not apt to turn aside from the main subject of attention, empirical or memorial, or from what I want to express by describing one of the heroes ... the characters in my novels ascend... reach a climax... and without warning come tumbling down... I don't do it intentionally... And gradually I become convinced that there is actual development."

Bakolas' affinity with the spirit of modernism was not perhaps apparent from the start. The obstinacy of many reviewers, especially in Thessalonian magazines, to harp on the stylistic influences of Faulkner, to my mind deprived the reading public of the possibility to appreciate earlier the virtues of a technician passionately in love with the art of writing. The eventual appraisal of the contribution to the character of the modern novel between the two Wars of authors rallying round the magazine *Makedonikes Meres* (Macedonian Days), inevitably led to all those who in the postwar period pursued this renovating and radical style: especially Bakolas, Telemachos Alaveras and, later on, Kostas Lahas.

However, if one of the basic features of modernism is the search for new forms of expression, then Bakolas' writing has not strayed one iota from its position of patrolling its metes and bounds. In other words, it concerns a technician earnestly toiling with the fundamental and incidental forms of narration, with the articulation of different languages, with movements in time, with the fusion of oftentimes variform narrative techniques: "... for me, the layout of a novel is of paramount importance. And I always like to experiment, and this is apparent in all my books. In effect all my books, even the last one, experiment with layout, as in *The Large Square* (E Megali Plateia)... textual structure always preoccupies me."

The experimentation referred to by the author of *Military Marches* doesn't only concern ancillary factors. One of the principal resultants of his oeuvre – as is the mythical method– does not adhere to the same process, vis-à-vis its shaping, in every book. And this has to do to a large extent, at least in this instance, with the relationship of creative imagination with the empirical material, living experiences and, of course, history. Thus, the transference of the myth of the Atrides is effected in one way in *Princes' Garden* and in another in *The Endless Writing of Blood*, although in the former the original tragedy is more conspicuous. This same tragedy is to be found in the latter book as well, considering that death – murder, that is – marks the family's degeneration, the collapse of everything from the material and especially the moral aspect. Their convergence in fact has historical meaning. In this sense, Bakolas' literary universe is formed of cycles of family tragedies, the ending of one being the beginning of another. Even though the ongoing process of events in time does not inscribe its precepts in those tragic cycles, where firsthand experience is chronologically distant and, consequently, more mythicized. The inscription is repeated every time, albeit under different circumstances or based on different facts, and this becomes immediately apparent to the reader by the formation of the characters' life curve in almost all his books: ascent, culmination, impact, downfall.