

Abstract Figures: Symbols of Revolution and Decline

Farah Abdul Gawad¹

Abstract

In an attempt to properly comprehend the Mediterranean as more than a Goliath that churns its constituents into uniform replicas of one another, historians have advocated for the demystification of the region by studying its parts individually. This essay argues that inhabitants of the region have undergone similar processes of mystification at the hands of admirers and critics alike. The Greek protagonists of Vassilis Vassilikos' *Z* and Jules Dassin's *Never on Sunday*, *Z* and Ilya, respectively, provide the main objects of study for this essay as they are both abstracted into ideals of freedom, degeneracy and hope by others. In order to reverse the process of abstraction and regain autonomy, *Z* and Ilya must exercise agency and reinforce their identities as humans of flesh and blood, independent of the opinions and ideas of others. The efficacy of the reversal hinges on the willingness of the abstracted individual and on his level of complicity in his own mystification.

Keywords

Abstraction; Agency; Greece; Comparative Literature.

In his magnum opus *La Méditerranée*, a two-volume historical treatise on the 'vast, complex expanse' of the Mediterranean, Fernand Braudel defied the voluntarist assumption of modern historiography that humans will alone determines social and political realities. Instead, he averred that though man possesses agency he is still subject to the limitations of physical space and forces of tradition. Applying this vision to the Mediterranean, Braudel called for an examination of the great sea beyond its traditional role as a mere "picturesque background" (20). This approach sought to revitalize the sea, according it "a history and destiny of its own", and combat stereotypes that relegate it to the realm of stasis and uniformity (Braudel 20). This essay examines two inhabitants of the Mediterranean region, who experience similar processes of abstraction at the hands of Western rationalist agents, and analyzes their efforts to demystify themselves. *Z*, the eponymous hero of Vassilis Vassilikos' novel, and Ilya, the heroine of Jules Dassin's film *Never on Sunday*, are transmogrified into metaphors that serve wider socio-political narratives. While *Z* acquiesces to his transformation from a man of flesh and blood into an idea to bolster his political agenda in 1960s Greece, and even contributes to this process himself, Ilya resists the abstracting efforts of an American philosopher and philhellene, aptly named Homer, who envisions her as Greece incarnate. The reversal of abstraction is realized through the exercise of agency, which Ilya achieves by reclaiming her identity as her own woman and which *Z* is unable, and perhaps unwilling, to accomplish due to his political entanglements.

In *Z* and *Never on Sunday*, the protagonists are depicted as larger-than-life personas that occupy the public imagination. A cacophony of opinions constructs their identities and the audience engages in a sleuth-like investigation to discern who these characters truly are. The difference between *Z* and Ilya, however, is that *Z* is complicit in his own abstraction. By engaging in politics, a realm that is quintessentially rhetorical and ideal in form, *Z* relinquishes his autonomy. He allows the reconstruction of his identity and accepts it as an inevitable product of entering the public sphere. To the General, *Z*'s ideological nemesis, and other right-wing state agents, he represents both the transgression against the state's sovereignty and the infiltration of communism.

¹ Farah Abdul Gawad, Undergraduate Student, English and Comparative Literature Department, The American University in Cairo. The author wishes to thank Dr May Hawas for her invaluable support and guidance.

The General describes Z and his comrades as “infectious fungi” that must be fought off to preserve Greece’s purity (Vassilikos 16). To members of the left-wing, Z symbolizes the dogged pursuit of freedom. The protection leftists, both party officials and students, offer him extends beyond his person and encompasses the movement; to protect Z is to protect freedom, justice, and hope. The extension of Z’s influence emphasizes his transcendence beyond corporeal form. His immortality, exemplified in the chant “he lives” which spread among his supporters following his death, is a product of his association with an idea that cannot be extinguished.

Z contributes to his own abstraction into a political spectre through the employment of rhetorical tools and the almost dream-like elucidation of his thoughts. He situates himself at the core of collective action by utilizing the plural first person; he proclaims that “it is we who must speak in [the] name” of the dead, thus grouping himself with the belligerent masses who mourn those killed in protests (Vassilikos 45). He also simultaneously places himself amongst the victims of state injustice and propounds the Communist ideal by asserting that support for the leftist party is imperative as it “aims to deliver us from hunger, poverty, misery” (Vassilikos 44). Ironically, Z admits to running for deputy of the left-wing party not out of “missionary impulse”, as he was neither a Communist nor a “Marxist theoretician”, but because he had “known poverty and illness first-hand” (Vassilikos 45). That he allows his supporters to hail him as the Communist figure par excellence is testament to his complicity in his abstraction.

The sense of solidarity Z fosters with his audience blurs his *sui generis* identity as his needs, dreams and fears are identical to those of the plurality. Still, he notes that over-suggestiveness in political discourse has resulted in an unfortunate outcome: “people nowadays distrust words” (Vassilikos 86). To overcome this, he must “[disguise himself] as a photograph [and] insinuate [himself] into their houses” (Vassilikos 87). Although it is unclear how he will perform such an undertaking, the process implies a level of dissociation and deception that he holds no qualms over. Finally, Z believes that if he is killed by the authorities, he would be like “Stephen [who was] stoned by the unbelievers” or a “disembodied face seeking its justification upon a stranger’s retina” (Vassilikos 42, 87). That he is fated to become either a celebrated warrior of the past or an anonymous martyr seems to bring Z comfort as it allows him to rise beyond the mundanity of his real self.

The lyricism and duality of meaning in Z’s stream of consciousness further confounds the lines between his personal thoughts and those of a generic political figure. In the moments before he is to deliver a divisive speech, Z’s internal dialogue is directed towards a feminine figure who might either be a woman in his life or “peace” personified. Z is eager to speak to “peace”, to engage in the physical act of love with her (Vassilikos 87). However, both mistress and salvation elude him. Z’s yearning for this nameless, faceless figure aligns him with the scores of politicians who devoted themselves to their ideological goals at the detriment of their private lives. By joining this mass, Z ensures the endurance of his romance with “peace”, though it is an ill-fated one.

Throughout the narrative, Z’s abstraction unfolds in a two-fold process conducted in part by himself and part by others, both supporters and detractors. As a man Z is simply a politician, a deputy of the left-wing; however, as a symbol, he is simultaneously the fight for freedom and the threat of foreign ideologies. The General is not motivated to simply obstruct the leftist party’s meeting, but to end their very driving force: Z. He envisions Z as the fungal growth that must be exterminated to preserve the health of “the sacred tree of Greek freedom” and enable the ascension of “a Hellenic-Christian world hegemony” (Vassilikos 6, 51). Conversely, members of the left-wing are determined that Z’s speech reach the masses and they endanger their lives to ensure that this end is accomplished. It is also possible to view Z’s abstraction as a process that transpires in

two temporal stages: before and after Z's death. When Z dies, his supporters draw inspiration from his martyrdom. The progression of their movement is equated with his immortality as they proclaim that "he lives" (Vassilikos 186). Others who had previously existed in a grey area, like the prosecutor who investigates the assassination, are forced to pick sides and to reassess their morality.

A point of commonality between *Z* and *Never on Sunday* is that both works' protagonists are perceived as threats to the Hellenic identity by purists and nationalists who wish to preserve the old ways. As a free-spirited prostitute who answers to neither law nor man, Ilya is a threat to propriety. When Homer first meets her, he pronounces her the embodiment of a decadent Greece, one that has lost all semblance of morality. He questions her satisfaction with a lifestyle that favors the pleasures of the body over those of the mind – as she is an avid football fan, a frequenter of Dionysian bars and parties, and a notorious mis-interpreter of Greek tragedies – and looks down on her profession. He cannot envision a future in which she continues to indulge in carnal desires and achieve happiness. The process of Ilya's abstraction begins with Homer's insistent and repeated undermining of her current identity and her eventual submission to his demands.

Homer's recurrent attacks and his certainty of the erroneousness of Ilya's ways, which he transfers to her by reiterating his expertise regarding the truths of life, drive her to accept his proposition to restore her, and Greece by extension, to former glory. He constructs a curriculum of modern art, opera music and philosophy to educate her, and forbids her from seeing her lovers. Before Homer's interference, Ilya prided herself on her independence; she was beholden neither to her clients nor to a souteneur nor to society's moral stipulations. As Ilya, she was the master of her own fate. However, as the living manifestation of Greece, she takes on more responsibilities. It becomes incumbent upon her to perform the role of a refined, cerebral woman. No longer her own person, Ilya transforms into the hope for the reformation of Greece and the answer to a centuries old question: where does true happiness lie? Homer promises to fashion her into someone worthy of love and to elevate her mind so that she may achieve intellectual happiness and abandon the base, sensual variation that she had long indulged in. Thus, while Z was secure in his identity of choice – the abstracted identity – and in his state of being in relation to the world, Ilya was forced to acknowledge the depravity of her lifestyle and to assent to her abstraction into a loftier form, a process that weighed heavily on her.

Satisfaction is achieved upon the exercise of agency. While Z exercises agency in the beginning by voluntarily entering into politics, Ilya exercises agency at the end by deserting the man who reduced her to an idea and reuniting with those who accepted her as a real woman. Her process of reversal is facilitated by a fellow prostitute who informs her of Homer's duplicity. Homer's acceptance of bribes reveals to Ilya the hypocrisy of his allegedly moral, truth-seeking endeavour. Once Homer's ideal is shattered, Ilya's follows suit. She reaffirms her identity by destroying the moral, educative setting he had set up in her home and by rushing to the aid of her "amoral" friends. In the closing scene of the film, Ilya's identity is restored through her lover's proclamation: she is a woman! It is important to note that although Ilya succeeds in reversing Homer's abstraction, she does not revert into the exact woman she was. Her final stance of going to Italy with her lover Tonio is testament to monogamy and fidelity, values that Homer attempted to press upon her. She assumes a different abstraction of Greek womanhood, that of the wife. While she willingly embraces this role, it is to some extent influenced by Homer's teachings. Ilya demonstrates that the reversal of abstraction is possible but only to a certain degree.

The efficacy of the reversal hinges on both the willingness of the abstracted individual and on his level of complicity in his own mystification. Ilya's case represents the involuntary imposition

of meaning onto one's identity. Z partakes in politics and so becomes a public servant, a position that comes with the understanding that one is no longer in possession of himself. Ilya, on the other hand, is a private individual who lives on the margins of society and who shows no interest in meddling in the affairs of others. Her abstraction into an ideal is an invasive process perpetrated by a foreigner with a romantic vision of Greece and a low opinion of unconventional lifestyles, Z's is a self-triggered process that is eventually co-opted by political agents. Z and Ilya, with their antithetical situations, represent the full spectrum of abstraction in the Mediterranean and the processes by which this state could be reversed.

References

Braudel, Fernand, and Sian Reynolds. *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II: Vol. 2.*, 1972. Print.

Never on Sunday. Dir. Jules Dassin. Perf. Melina Mercouri. Lopert Pictures, 1960.

Vassilikos, Vassilis. Z. Translated by Marilyn Calmann. 50th Anniversary Ed, Seven Stories Press, 2017.