

# Yorgos Ioannou: fragmentation in life and art

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The prose writings of Yorgos Ioannou have attracted relatively little critical attention, largely, I suspect, because critics feel uneasy in the face of their resistance to easy classification. Roderick Beaton, having characterised the early works as "elusive and atmospheric", and whilst claiming that by Ioannou's third collection *Η μόνη κληρονομιά* (1974) the fragments grow into "fully-fledged short stories", observes: "Taken together, Ioannou's stories provide a rueful commentary on the waywardness of human nature, and employ a method of ironic juxtaposition for comic effect, which seems to draw on the example of Cavafy."<sup>1</sup> There are two interesting implications in this for the matter in hand: the notion that the fragments add up to something when viewed as a whole, and the potential ramifications of the parallel with Cavafy. The latter is significant not just because of the importance of the ironic juxtaposition of fragments in the two writers, or even for their handling of time and memory, but because they share a very similar position on the question of sexuality. It highlights a potentially under-explored issue. Critics now take for granted the importance of sexuality to Cavafy.<sup>2</sup> But how do sex and text interrelate in Ioannou's work? What I want to do in this paper, therefore, is to suggest ways in which Ioannou's approach to homosexuality and

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<sup>1</sup> R. Beaton, *An introduction to Modern Greek literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994), pp. 250-1.

<sup>2</sup> True though this may be, with the exception of a useful but basic essay by Mark Lilly in his *Gay Men's Literature in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan 1993), there is strangely little recent critical work specifically on Cavafian homosexuality. In making the parallel with Ioannou I am thinking of the emphasis on the outsider, fascination with male beauty and the importance of the gaze, the sense of guilt and the transcending of it, and the privileging of the sensual moment over any kind of linear identity.

his use of the prose fragment as a form of writing, can be interpreted as significantly interdependent.<sup>3</sup>

For Ioannou, fragmentation in life derives, in large part, from the problem of how to construct for himself a workable identity in a world where his sexuality is socially condemned. At one level he shares common ground with the French thinker Roland Barthes, for whom the self is an imaginary construct and any representation of the self must therefore be marked by a sense of its instability and multiplicity. But Ioannou's response to this is closer to that explored in the essay "Identity and identities" by the British philosopher Bernard Williams.<sup>4</sup> Rather than denying the significance of selfhood, Ioannou seems to be looking for ways of establishing a workable sense of identity which is not simply imposed from outside, although it involves his relationship to the world around him. The absence of institutions such as marriage which impose a linear structure on one's private life, and the presence of an alternative pattern of fleeting desires and brief encounters which privilege the moment over the continuum, reinforce the importance of his sense of fragmentation.

There is more than one mode of response, of course, to this situation. Ioannou is not a writer who, in the manner of Kostas Tachtsis, attacks issues of gender and sexuality head-on, in life or in writing. His position on both issues is very different from those of Tachtsis, a fact which reminds us of the dangers of swallowing the simple binary masculine/feminine, straight/gay oppositions around which conventional western thought has traditionally structured our social and cultural perceptions. For

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<sup>3</sup>The two main studies on Ioannou, Anna Di Benedetto Zimbone, *Ghiorgos Ioannu: saggio critico* (Università di Catania 1994) and A. Droukopoulos, *Γιώργος Ιωάννου: ένας οδηγός για την ανάγνωση του έργου του* (Athens 1992), both give attention to what might be called the poetics of his writing, and Droukopoulos also looks at the issue of erotics, but neither seeks to link the two.

<sup>4</sup>In H. Harris (ed.), *Identity* (Oxford 1995). Williams observes that: "The difference between an identity which is mine and which I eagerly recognise as mine, and an identity as what someone else simply assumes me to be, is in one sense all the difference in the world." He recognises in particular the importance for minority groups of being able to choose a personal and group identity within which to work.

Ioannou, homosexuality is about the cult of the hypermasculine: that is to say, he admires and desires a certain sort of body and a certain type of behaviour which are heavily coded as masculine within the Greek environment. Although his precise "ideal man" might be rather different from the Cavafian ephebe, he shares with Cavafy a relative lack of interest in the conventionally feminine. Tachtsis on the contrary deals in transgression of the socially constructed gender boundaries, and consequently revels in the complexities of feminine and masculine stereotyping and crossing-over. When approaching Ioannou's work, therefore, it is essential to remember that there is no monolithic homosexuality, there are only *homosexualities*, although different authors can and do share significant features. Consequently, Ioannou's assumption of his homosexuality has none of the flamboyance of Tachtsis, just as it does not engage with issues of gender boundaries, and we have no reason to expect him to embody his desires in game-playing, self-conscious texts of the Tachtsis variety. Nonetheless, Ioannou places great emphasis on the importance of what he variously refers to as η ερωτική ροή, το ερωτικό θέμα, or η ερωτική κατάσταση, and welcomes the label of ερωτικός συγγραφέας. It is a much less *overtly* physical view of sexual identity than that of Tachtsis, or even of Cavafy, in that Ioannou distinguishes between the ερωτικό and the σεξουαλικό, but it is no less important to his work, nor can the physical input be underestimated. As he puts it in an early poem:

Όλα μπορείς να τα σπαράσεις,  
όμως ποτέ τον έρωτα.<sup>5</sup>

A key text which develops the point is "Ιερά ανακραυγάσματα" in *Καταπακτή*,<sup>6</sup> where the sounds emitted during sexual pleasure, particularly the sounds of the receiving partner, are equated with the language at its most powerful. To speak effectively, powerfully, is in Ioannou's terms to speak the flesh, an act which negates the binary distinction passive receptor/active expressor,

<sup>5</sup> "Τα βήματα σου", quoted by Zimbone, op. cit., p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> Y. Ioannou, *Καταπακτή* (Athens: Gnosi 1982).

since it is the passive reception which generates the power of the expression.

In the case of Ioannou, it is the sense of difference, of otherness, which predominates in his early sexual self-perceptions, and this is paralleled in other perceptions of difference which from a young age played a large part in his life: his family's refugee roots; the different class-origins of his parents and the relatively deprived nature of his family's economic condition; and the growing unease of belonging to the working class and yet in a deeper sense not being fully of it, which is paralleled by his growing unease *within* the family. The same elements of difference play a role in his wider social isolation. Nowhere is the marking of class/cultural isolation greater than when he writes about the way in which his accent and his grasp of educated syntax made him an object of derision to his school-mates in *Η πρωτεύουσα των προσφύγων*.<sup>7</sup> The overriding sense of oppression and need for escape that they produce is reflected in the diary which he kept in late adolescence.<sup>8</sup> At the same time there is from his earliest writing the sense of a strong need to *belong*. So here we have three classic impulses of the Romantic and post-Romantic pariah-figure: a sense of doubt about the defining parameters of one's identity, a sense of exclusion, and a need to belong, all traits easily assimilable to homosexual experience in a homophobic environment.

In what precise ways does all this relate to sexuality in the thematics of Ioannou's writings? In the text "Έτσι θα 'ναι και τότε", in *Καταπακτή*, Ioannou describes how this experience leads him to acquire his sexual sensibilities in a silence and isolation which privilege *sight* over the other senses as a form of potential communication. Significantly, in "Έτσι θα 'ναι και τότε", as if to dramatise this sense of the self-as-voyeur for the reader of the text, Ioannou addresses the self in the second person.<sup>9</sup> For Ioannou, as for the French Surrealists, sight generates two distinct actions: looking and seeing. *Looking* is by definition an exterior action, marking a process of separation. *Seeing*, on the

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<sup>7</sup> Idem, *Η πρωτεύουσα των προσφύγων* (Athens: Kedros 1984), pp. 120-1.

<sup>8</sup> See Droukopoulos, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> This technique is used increasingly in his 1980s writing, as Droukopoulos points out, op. cit., pp. 145-7.

other hand, can offer a model of connection. The point is made in another text in *Καταπακτή*, “Το κέλυφος”:

Μέσα σ' αυτό το κέλυφος κρύβεται πεισματικά η αληθινή χαρά και η έκσταση. Γι' αυτό και όταν κυκλοφορείς στους δρόμους είσαι, συνήθως, σαν αδιάφορος ερωτικά, σαν ξεχωρισμένος από τις ερωτικές ώρες σου – δεν είσαι περιχυμένος από ερωτικούς χυμούς ανά πάσα στιγμή. Αυτό γίνεται μόνο όταν αντικριστείς με το πρόσωπο που θαρρείς ότι έχει την ικανότητα να σου σπάσει το κέλυφος [...] Όχι μόνο ερωτικές επαφές δεν είναι απαραίτητες, μα δεν χρειάζεται ούτε καλημέρα καμιά φορά, για να πάρει να ραγίζει το κέλυφος. Μια ματιά είναι αρκετή, ακόμα και μόνο δική σου, μη διασταυρωμένη ματιά, για να νιώσεις πως κάτι το ιδιαίτερο συμβαίνει μέσα σου.<sup>10</sup>

This defence of the power and validity of indirect contact matches Ioannou's evident acceptance that homosexual desire can best be expressed indirectly within the Greek society for which he writes. Such desire is at its most overt in the presentation of the male body; it is at its most pervasive in a generalised model of desire which, in the interview-article “Θεωρούμαι ερωτικός συγγραφέας”, he calls “a fetishism of things and of course a fetishism of language”.<sup>11</sup> It is easy to categorise this as escapism, as a way of evading the issue. But you will find the same model promoted by the extremely up-front gay French writer Renaud Camus in his novel *L'Épuisant désir de ces choses*,<sup>12</sup> where it is part of the argument that sexual identity is an illusion and that what counts is the shifting forms of desire

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<sup>10</sup> “True joy and ecstasy obstinately hide inside this shell. That is why when you are out in the streets, you are usually more or less indifferent in erotic terms, as if separated from your erotic moments – erotic sap isn't flowing through you at every moment. That only happens when you come face to face with the individual who has the power to break the shell. [...] Not only are erotic contact and acts not indispensable but it doesn't even take so much as a good-morning sometimes to shatter the shell. A glance is sufficient, even a glance of your own which is not met, for you to feel the same thing happening inside you” (pp. 88-9).

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Droukopoulos, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Renaud Camus, *L'Épuisant désir de ces choses* (Paris: P.O.L. 1995).

itself. In this respect Ioannou's position is in fact comparable with the view of love expounded by Barthes, particularly in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*,<sup>13</sup> and subsequently developed by French radical Queer Theory. The Ioannou who evokes his sense of fascinated unease in a working-class bath-house ("Λιμενικά λουτρό"<sup>14</sup>), constructs a climactic invocation to the muscular body of the contemporary αλήτης ("Περί του κάλλους και πού βρισκόμαστε σήμερα"<sup>15</sup>), or discusses the problem of his instant physical excitement when faced with naked bodies in a Turkish bath or at the sea ("Νέες εξηγήσεις για το κολύμπημα"<sup>16</sup>), *hides* nothing. Indeed, in the last-quoted example, he ridicules the absurdity of trying to hide desire. He is merely refusing the limitations of the binary labelling by which heterosexual society, even at its most tolerant, seeks to create a *cordon sanitaire* between itself and other forms of desire.

How is all this embodied in Ioannou's writing at a level beyond that of overt discussion? I have twice mentioned parallels between Ioannou and Barthes. I think that there is a workable third parallel, though it is less close. Barthes makes much of the opposition between *Œuvre* and *Texte* (*Work* and *Text*). As Michael Moriarty explains:

The Work is a material object, a book, processed through institutions, not only the market-place, but the educational apparatus in which literature is taught. Through these institutions it is classified as novel, poem, and so forth, and also interpreted, provided with a signified, according to various scholarly or critical techniques. It is tied to an author, in the usual sense, or to some cause outside itself [e.g. literary or intellectual influence]; all these approaches provide it with a father, an authority over meaning.<sup>17</sup>

A *Text* by contrast refuses generic boundaries and what Barthes calls *doxa* (= public opinion, including scholarly tradition). Now

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<sup>13</sup> Roland Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (Paris: Editions du Seuil 1977).

<sup>14</sup> In *Η Σαρκοφάγος* (Athens: Kedros 1971), pp. 65-71.

<sup>15</sup> In *Καταπακτή*, pp. 177-81.

<sup>16</sup> In *Καταπακτή*, pp. 165-7.

<sup>17</sup> M. Moriarty, *Roland Barthes* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1991), p. 143.

Ioannou, unlike Barthes or even Tachtsis,<sup>18</sup> has no interest in the so-called death of the author, i.e. the notion that the writing individual is not present in and controlling the text he writes. On the contrary, Ioannou is constructing, out of his fragments, a work which embodies his sense of self. But the key point is that it is *Ioannou* who is constructing it. It is imperative that the literary identity of this *Work* be determined by him and not by the *doxa*. And one of the best ways to do this is to explore the power of fragmentation, creating a direct link between the form and the experience and discouraging the reader from assimilating the text to customary patterns of reading. Nowhere is this determination to subvert traditional expectations about literary writing more evident than in his celebration of Omonoia Square in Athens, *Ομόνοια 1980*.<sup>19</sup> Since it is a text in which homosexuality is very much at issue thematically, it affords an excellent starting point for any attempt to match sexuality and textuality.

This is physically a tripartite text; it consists of three elements/layers of text: an italicised "rubric" of personal generalised reflections runs along the tops of the pages, above a main text which is focussed on the physical and human geography of the square, and a set of photographs which deal principally with representations of the male, in that they are shots of individuals and groups of men within the square. It is a text which dramatises both *masculinity*, in various forms, and *otherness*, in this sense: the voice of the rubric and the eye behind the photographs both mark distance from the figures within the verbal (and in the former case also the visual) main text. Initially there seems to be a clear gap between a typically Greek male-centred café-society, with its erotically charged idling macho protagonists, and a homosexual outsider, who makes his sexual response very clear in the rubric:

Τι άλλο μπορείς να κάνεις παρά να περπατάς και ολοένα  
να μουρμουρίζεις φράσεις, προτάσεις, στίχους και άλλα

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<sup>18</sup> Tachtsis specifically plays with the concept in the foreword to *Το φοβερό βήμα*.

<sup>19</sup> Y. Ioannou, *Ομόνοια 1980* (Athens: Odysseas 1980). Page references are to the third edition, 1987.

τέτοια κομματιάσματα, καθώς το βλέμμα σου καρφώνεται εδώ και εκεί σε πρόσωπα, κινήσεις, μέλη και κορμοστάσεις κι αναπηδούν αυθόρμητα από την καρδιά προς το μυαλό οι λέξεις που άλλοι χυδαίες τις λένε και άλλοι του κρεβατιού και που εσένα πάντως σε τινάζουν και σου δίνουν δύναμη.<sup>20</sup>

But as the text progresses, it becomes clearer that homoeroticism is part of what binds the observer to the scene, and not a separating factor. Thus the phrase "Omonoia is frequented by suspect bodies" (26) widens out into:

Βέβαια, το φαινόμενο που είναι περισσότερο συνδεδεμένο στη συνείδηση του κόσμου, με την Ομόνοια, είναι η ερωτική αναζήτηση. Όπου συχνάζουν φαντάροι, επαρχιάτες νέοι και υποψιασμένα κορμιά, είναι φυσικό να μαζεύονται και ομοφυλόφιλοι, εννοώ δηλαδή άνθρωποι πιο συνειδητοί σ' αυτού του είδους τον έρωτα.<sup>21</sup>

– a definition which not only homosexualises Omonoia but, by the phrase "more consciously", discreetly refuses a simple binary division of masculine sexuality.

It is only when we add in the photographs to the equation, however, that the text takes on its full meaning. The photographs do four things: (i) They represent the stereotypically macho, e.g. soldiers; (ii) they parody the stereotypically macho, e.g. child with gun; (iii) they represent the "feminine" through the choice of non-macho bodies or through pose: just as in one

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<sup>20</sup> "What else can you do but walk and keep murmuring phrases, sentences, verses and other snatches of things, as your gaze fastens here and there on faces, movements, limbs, body postures, and words leap up from the heart to the brain, words which some call crude, others call bed-words, but which, be that as it may, both shake and strengthen you..." (pp. 10-14). Note both the use of the word κομματιάσματα and the fragmented representation of people in terms of faces, movements and postures.

<sup>21</sup> "Of course, the phenomenon which is most clearly connected in the world's consciousness with Omonoia is erotic pursuit, particularly homosexual erotic pursuit. Where there are crowds of soldiers, young men from the provinces and dubious characters, it's natural for homosexuals to collect, I mean, that is, men who more consciously pursue sexual love of that sort" (p. 28).



tradition of gay photography, e.g. the work of the American Tom Bianchi,<sup>22</sup> which consciously refers to late antique statuary, the hypermasculinity of developed muscular legs, buttocks, arms and chests is offset by the way in which the weight of the body is distributed, or by the adoption of a curving posture, so in the Omonoia photographs the "weight thrown on to one leg" position is used to emphasise other "non-macho" signs, e.g. in flamboyantly patterned or cut clothing. But it is the fourth element, the gazer's ability to choose a sexual angle on his male subjects, which is the most important element in this respect – the photographs show a marked preference for backsides, often emphasised by pose.<sup>23</sup>

Now, if we took this last element on its own, it would constitute an exercise of power – the power of the gaze to reduce the male to object status. But once we add the photographic eroticisation/objectification of the male to the motifs of desire in the written text, we see that the text as a whole *refuses* difference of sexual subject/sexual object: sexuality is precisely what binds the viewer to the viewed. The importance of this goes beyond the subject of sex itself, because this is a text about *power*.<sup>24</sup> It is a social text, lamenting the destruction of this environment, i.e. the destruction of a group which, however superficially heterogeneous, was in fact a united group of those rejecting conventional divisions of class and gender. The tripartite text, a protest about the exercise of power, itself subverts power divisions both thematically and aesthetically: it overrides divisions, such

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Kenneth Dutton, *The Perfectible Body* (London 1995), p. 225.

<sup>23</sup> Whilst it could be argued that photographing a *mangas* from the back is the best way of avoiding being punched on the nose, there is no doubt that this is also an angle favoured by photographers interested in the erotics of the male body. See for example Dutton, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-9 and 262-3. Note also that posture is one of the elements picked on by the secret voice of the rubric in the list of things which excite his gaze.

<sup>24</sup> In this respect again there is a clear distinction between Ioannou and Barthes. Whilst Ioannou shares Barthes's view that love can be a force for social disruption or transgression, he quite clearly rejects his assertion in *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* that love finds no place in a social language of power or contestation.

that no conventional concepts of masculinity can be shown to prevail, any more than conventional concepts of genre, narrative structure or even artistic medium are applicable to it. A “femininity” inherent in the *mangas* (revealed in terms of clothes, posture), coupled with his willingness to serve as an object for homosexual desire, balances his macho image and reputation; the outsider status of the observer, both in the rubric and the photographs, is overridden by the links thus established between him and the male subjects of the text. At a significant level he *joins* them, despite the physical/social distance separating them. In the same way, the “personal” commentary, the documentary text and the photographs are dependent on each other for their meaning. Where there is a potential sense of thematic “inferiority” (the voice of the rubric as outsider), it is balanced by opposing images (the rubric runs *above* the main text; the rubric *shares* sexualised perception with the photographs). Observer and observed are thus as interdependent as rubric, text and image. Equality prevails. This in turn affects our perception of the speaker/seer, who is diffused between three discourses: the private space of the rubric, the public space of the socio-geographical disquisition and the representation of what and how he sees in the photographs. We “know” him both through the self and through the *other*. The knowledge is inevitably indirect and unstable but the multiplicity of viewpoints ensures that the self represented is more complete than that of a simple first-person account.

Much of what I have just said about *Ομόνοια 1980* might seem at odds with my earlier quote from “Το κέλυφος” to the effect that when you are out in the streets, you are usually more or less indifferent in erotic terms. Given that identity in general, and sexual identity in particular, is not to be read as a static or monolithic concept, oppositions and divergences in Ioannou’s work are not simply to be read as contradictions. But in this case what we have is not even a divergence. We must remember the social dimension of the *Omonoia* text, and that the square’s inhabitants are not just “Greeks in the street” but a special group, marginalised like Ioannou himself. His relationship to those in the square is eroticised because they have the “power to break the shell” of which he speaks in “Το κέλυφος”, even if the glance is not returned.

*Ομόνοια 1980* represents a number of key points in Ioannou's textualisation of his sexuality. His self is projected into three fragmentary (in the sense that they are discrete) discourses which are left to comment on one another. The issue of the relation between private and public space in the thematics of the text is thus reflected in its different linguistic spaces, the construction of the commentary requiring active participation by the reader. At the same time the whole piece constitutes a protest against disempowerment and a defence of subcultures which is as dismissive of consensus values in society as the generic instability of the text is disruptive of the *doxa*. For these reasons the *Omonoia* text provides a convenient entrée into interpreting the world of Ioannou's writings. I shall now look at some short texts to consider: (i) how the motifs of private and public space, of difference, marginalisation and looking embodied in *Ομόνοια 1980* manifest themselves in Ioannou's characteristic short texts; and (ii) how that relates to the *forms* of writing as opposed to its content.

The collection on which I want to focus is *Η Σαρκοφάγος* (1971). The work is defined as *πεζογραφήματα* and the title is the same as that of one of the texts which it contains, but it is a *precise* title, not (for example) *Η Σαρκοφάγος και άλλα πεζογραφήματα*. Now, the individual text of that name is not the first or the last; it is seventeenth out of 29, coming a little over halfway through. So I shall begin by looking at two issues: what is the significance of that text in itself, and what is the implication of using its title to define the collection? It is a very brief text, seven paragraphs in all. It has a first-person narrator who provides the "eye" of the narration, and a central object of perception, the sarcophagus. The I/eye defines himself (i) in terms of isolation and separation, in the first paragraph: "Moreover, I find all empty, dark streets restful"; and (ii) as a literal outsider-figure who leaves the city only to find it changed on his return in the final paragraph. The *object* of perception, the sarcophagus, is also isolated and displaced – in the opening sentence it is described as lying discarded for years in a very narrow side-street, and it is treated with disdain, e.g. urinated on. But the sarcophagus is also associated with *love and desire*. Its sides are described as decorated with cupids and it has a naked couple on the lid apparently continuing their love-making: "συνέχιζαν

θαρρείς τους θαυμάσιους έρωτές τους". This object is for the narrator an object of adoration: as the closing sentence of the first paragraph puts it, "Η σαρκοφάγος εκείνη ήταν ολόκληρη η λατρευτή ειδωλολατρεία για μένα." Here then we have the key elements of Ioannou's eroticism as defined by Droukopoulos<sup>25</sup> and the markers of a homosexual "sense of difference" which I talked about earlier: an interlinked pattern of isolation, difference and erotic attraction. Ioannou develops this in the next five paragraphs in terms of the element so important in *Ομόνοια 1980*, the gaze which generates erotic fantasy. The observer-narrator finds that in the sarcophagus a pair of young lovers have made their love-nest. He imagines them embracing inside it, naked. Any potential prurience in this is removed by his insistence on their right to privacy, defined in terms of *aural* space rather than visual: he does not eavesdrop on them ("μισώ τα κρυφακούσματα όσο τίποτε άλλο στον κόσμο"). Nonetheless the narrator does associate himself with their experience by *caressing* the sarcophagus as he passes (a consciously sexual verb of touch).

The significance of *secret* love-making is brought out in the fourth paragraph. The narrator reflects, unanswered, on the question of why the lovers should choose such an out-of-the-way and uncomfortable spot: "Who was hindering them or hounding them?" He makes much of the narrowness of the sarcophagus, and the implicit paradox of finding freedom in constriction. It is almost as if he were answering Donne's "The grave's a fine and private place / but none I think do there embrace", by showing that, for the pariah, the taboo places are the surest ones. He may also be playing with traditional straight associations between homosexuality and non-procreativity (though in the age of AIDS the image of the sarcophagus takes on a new resonance). The narrator firmly makes the point that these cannot be ordinary lovers, because society connives at *their* relationships. An obvious answer is that they are gay. Why doesn't Ioannou state this directly? One reason is presumably that by refusing to specify the specific form of unacceptability of their sexuality Ioannou is stressing the arbitrary division between "the normal" and all other forms of desire. At the same time, the more doubt there is, the more firmly the narrator is prevented from having

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<sup>25</sup> See n. 3.

the comforting sense of "collusion with his own kind" which knowledge would bring. So we now have two roles for the narrator, and two sets of relationships: society/exclusion/neglect *versus* the narrator + the lovers (joined by his eroticised perception of the sarcophagus); and narrator (excluded observer) *versus* the lovers (protected by the sarcophagus). In the first of these relationships, the narrator's imagination has created a bridge between himself and the lovers, but in the second he is doubly excluded – by those who are not like him (society) *and* by those that are (the lovers). This makes most sense if we assume that he *is* fantasising the lovers as gay, and wants to join them. The only role in which he can insert himself into the lovers' successful relationship is by fantasising about himself as a jealous third party. Hence the narrator projects himself into a mythical role – the unattractive Hephaestus catching Ares and Aphrodite (conventional masculinity/femininity and sex) together.<sup>26</sup> The literary dimensions of this are stressed by the reference to the narrator's re-reading of *Odyssey* IX, where the myth is recounted.

So what we now have is: a "real" world (two gay/hunted lovers protecting themselves from the outside in the sarcophagus) whose significance for the isolated desiring I/eye of the narrator is translated into terms of *art* – the erotic carving on the sarcophagus/the story told in *Odyssey* IX. Before the narrator can cross this barrier between "reality" and "art" – he wants to integrate himself into the lovers' world by shutting the lid and temporarily trapping them inside – a "real" pervert/"real" myth, that of the δράκος, a serial killer, frightens both him and the lovers away. When he sees the sarcophagus again, years later, it has lost its sexual charge and with it its sense of life; the neighbourhood has been lit and integrated into society, the sarcophagus has been moved into the museum gardens.

The story reflects both the experience of otherness/distance/separation in an erotic context which characterises Ioannou's homosexuality, and the ambiguous belonging/not belonging which the charge of the erotic gaze gives to him in a homosexual

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<sup>26</sup> For Ioannou's choice of the bodily disadvantaged Hephaestus as a self-image cf. his dismissal of his own body, in the text "Λιμενικά λουτρά", in contrast with those of the working-class young men he desires.

context. It is only through the imagination that he can be linked to the couple, who even in their successful pursuit of sexual satisfaction are separating themselves from Ioannou. The only force overriding the separation is art/literature: the text which provides the connection between narrator and lovers (the myth as told in *Odyssey* IX) and the sarcophagus constituted by Ioannou's story itself, in which narrator and lovers are permanently enclosed. The story, like the sarcophagus, risks losing its erotic charge when "brought to light" just as the sarcophagus has become a dead thing in the museum garden, unless we imaginatively re-integrate it into its context (the rest of the collection) and re-envisage its secret (erotic fulfilment in the narrow space it provides). Read like this it is obvious that the individual text "Η σαρκοφάγος", with its correlation of isolation, the gaze, the erotic and the reality/art dichotomy, ought to function as a key to the collection as a whole, and that its displacement into an unnoticed corner of the collection is in fact merely emblematic. So the next question is: if the collection is a sarcophagus which contains and protects Ioannou's erotic sensibility (including his ambiguous relationship with his fellow homosexuals), and which transfers that experience into art, how is this reflected in the contents and form of the collection?

The thematics of negative difference are easy to find in the childhood pieces, notably in the text "Τα παρατσούκλια", where naming is the classic method of distancing – the child is literally *labelled* as other by his peers, and the difference is used by the school-teacher as a way of bridging her own distance, i.e. as a way of ingratiating herself with the class. (Contrast the refusal of the narrator of "Η σαρκοφάγος" to label the lovers' sexual difference, even in the cause of associating himself with them.) The thematics of positive difference are rarer but no less important – integration into a working-class group and worship of the developed male body in "Λιμενικά λουτρά". The full implications of difference are perhaps best developed in "Το κρεβάτι", and as this text also beautifully echoes a number of other aspects of "Η σαρκοφάγος" I shall focus on it for the rest of my interpretation.

The factual content of the text is, again, slight. The narrator remembers a Jewish friend, whose family were taken away (and presumably killed) by the Germans. The bed was his, and when

the flat was plundered by the other inhabitants of the block, the narrator had made his family take it so that he could sleep in it himself. Izos, the Jewish lad, provides a fundamental symbol of the evils of arbitrary social labelling of a sort more chilling than the psychologically destructive naming in "Τα παρατσούκλια". But through the motif of the bed itself Ioannou also eroticises this difference. First, the bed is associated with Izos's body and with the narrator's own first awareness of puberty: he had shared a bed with Izos. The resulting awareness is expressed both in an image of the gaze: "Τότε πρωτοείδα το νεανικό τριχωτό στεφάνι της ήβης", and in a more frankly sensual image: "μας είχαν κοιμίσει αγκαλιά στο κρεβάτι αυτό" (39). Second, the bed-bugs which survive to bite the narrator after Izos's departure are offered as a symbol of continuing union – the transfer of Izos's blood to the narrator makes them, as blood-brothers, two of a kind, brothers in difference. The bed is in fact another version of the sarcophagus: it is associated with death (Izos's deportation), narrow (it's a single bed), and private, and it becomes a rejected object (towards the end of the text even the rag-and-bone men don't want it). Above all, at the close of the text the narrator is wondering whether he would not be better off returning to that bed. He rejects the literal sexual implications of the double bed in which he now sleeps (implicitly alone) and yearns for the narrow bed as a generator of imagination/visions: "Ας ξαναβρώ τουλάχιστο τις φαντασίες μου και τα παλιά οράματά μου" (49).

I have so far looked at the transference of thematic motifs. What do we have at a *formal* level to recall the sarcophagus? There are not, as there are in *Ομόνοια 1980*, obvious markers of difference like the physical division of the prose into two, or the presence of photographs. The two key elements in *Η Σαρκοφάγος* are: (i) the text as fragment, and (ii) the refusal of a clear *generic* function/label, the two things being interrelated. In both the texts "Η σαρκοφάγος" and "Το κρεβάτι" narrowness/closedness is associated with the generative power of the imagination. The fragment is the formal equivalent of this narrowness – constricting but providing a space whose content is not predetermined by cultural conventions. It too is presumably therefore a vehicle for release of the imagination. Now, as the text "Η εγγραφή" states in its conclusion, imagination cannot change

reality. Its power is limited to its own sphere. The converse of this is that exposure of art to conventional reality *will* change/destroy art – hence the death of the sarcophagus in the museum garden. Art can however do what life cannot, or at least, what conventional heterosexual society does not: it can refuse arbitrary binary classifications, notably the division between the real and the imaginary. Just as the sarcophagus (a place associated with death) is turned into a place for sex/love, so the prose fragment is turned into an embodiment of both the real (autobiographical) and the imaginary (the fictional), which acknowledges that the self constructed by one's own perceptions is in the strictest sense imaginary. The "real" self (the documentary self as perceived in society and the psychological self reflecting on that experience) is presented as a series of unlabelled fragments "preserved" inside the body of the text, just as the "real" sexual identity of the lovers is constructed within the sarcophagus, or indeed within the narrow bed, in a form which is both protected and unlabelled.

It is interesting to see conventional criticism trying to come to terms with this form of writing. The back cover of *Η μόνη κληρονομιά* comments uneasily on the fact that that collection of texts is called *διηγήματα*: "The texts of *Η μόνη κληρονομιά* incline more towards the story than to the *πεζογράφημα* as Yorgos Ioannou, who is considered to have introduced it into our literature, understands it and writes it." Ostensibly one might suppose this to be a judgment based on the relative importance of the documentary elements in the two collections. But that will not hold as an argument. The title story of *Η μόνη κληρονομιά* in particular is exactly akin in its autobiographical reminiscence to "Τα παρατσούκλια" from the earlier collection. In fact, the only notable difference between the texts of the two collections is that those characterised as "stories" are slightly longer, and many are couched in the third person singular. Like the photographs in *Ομόνοια 1980*, these texts tend to represent constructions of the "other" around the writer, ways of looking at what is outside him which at the same time reflect the nature of his own perception: the *eye* is substituted for the *I*. The political context of the close of the dictatorship in which these pieces were composed may play a part in this variation of focus. There are nonetheless also texts in the first person, and at least one,



“Ομίχλη”, is fragmentary in the manner of “Η σαρκοφάγος”: it functions like a prose-poem, with a central image that identifies the self with the mist in which it loves to envelop itself. Whether the change of generic definition is Ioannou’s or his editor’s I do not know. In practice the labels on the books mean little in themselves; between them they draw attention to the reader’s need for labels (and relative disconcertment at an unfamiliar label such as *πεζογράφημα*) and the misleading nature of the familiar: the texts of *Η μόνη κληρονομιά* may narrate (as the etymology of *διηγήματα* suggests they should), but they cannot be read simply as conventional fictions. *De facto* the issue of labels is a red herring. All the texts are fragments, whether their form suggests the conventional short story, “autofiction”, the *πεζογράφημα* or even the *χρονογράφημα*. At one level such fragments may consciously relate to the cultural heritage, e.g. the reference to *Odyssey* IX in “Η σαρκοφάγος” or the invoking of Poe in “Στις παρυφές”,<sup>27</sup> while declining to integrate themselves clearly with it. At another, the unpredictable status of the narrating voice, the shifts between anecdote, moral reflection, description, the choice of unexplained tense sequence (particularly the future) or pronouns (as in undefined second-person address) all defy the pigeon-holing process of conventional reading.<sup>28</sup> What is essential is that the fragment in Ioannou’s case is not a device *à la Barthes* for the prevention of ultimate meaning<sup>29</sup> (just as he does not believe in the death of the author), but is a way of preventing ultimate meaning coming from outside, i.e. of pre-

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<sup>27</sup> See *Το δικό μας αίμα* (Athens: Ermis 1978), p. 201.

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to contrast Ioannou’s disruption of the reading process with that of Tachtsis in *Τα ρέστα*. Tachtsis plays with the reader’s natural tendency to assume that a series of first-person voices represent the same persona in order to disorientate the reader. This he does as part of a strategy to establish the centrality of the self-as-writer. Ioannou shows no signs of wishing to mystify or confuse the reader. It is merely the case that for him the lived self only makes sense as a series of fragments, and that the reader must be kept constantly aware of that fact.

<sup>29</sup> For Barthes, as Moriarty puts it (op. cit., p. 101): “The fragmentary structure keeps the signifier on top, where it belongs, prevents an ultimate meaning from arriving to close down its operations.” Ioannou wants to direct the possibilities of meaning, not to suppress them.

venting the application of the *doxa*. As such it exactly mirrors on an aesthetic plane Ioannou's struggle to prevent socially defined otherness from engulfing him.

I hope that my analysis has demonstrated that there is a significant link between fragmentation as a mode of self-perception and as a mode of expression in Ioannou's work. This raises the further question: is the above reading compatible with the idea of change/development? *Ομόνοια 1980* suggests a coming-to-terms with or overcoming of the obsession with rejection and difference which marks the childhood narratives. In it, sexuality, which had risked seeming the confirmation of childhood otherness, becomes the key factor which links Ioannou both to the objects of his desire and to the socially disempowered on a broader scale. This degree of development must be recognised. On the other hand *Καταπακτή*, which includes texts, notably "Το κέλυφος", that still embody images of isolation and difference, was published two years after *Ομόνοια 1980*. This is only to be expected, given that Ioannou's work as a whole embodies a refusal to be fixed, a rejection of linearity, the adoption of a plurivocality in which the definable contours of identity, personal and literary, become those which the author chooses, rather than those which society or the *doxa* seek to impose.

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