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Stathis Gourgouris. *Does Literature Think? Literature as Theory for an Antimythical Era*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003. ISBN: 0-8047-3213-2.

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Does Literature Think? is a difficult book, but it is also a rewarding and exciting book. Each of the ten chapters is researched meticulously and written authoritatively. One has the impression that the author has spent a lot of time thinking about this material. Thus future authors working on the same topics will have to contend with *Does Literature Think?* In addition, the essays offer unexpected insights delivered in a personal style that is not unconcerned with imparting the pleasures of reading. This would come as no surprise to those who know Gourgouris as an important Greek poet. Nor would the high quality of this volume surprise anyone familiar with his previous book in English, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece* (1996). While the two books do share similar concerns and a common theoretical outlook, the breadth and scope of *Does Literature Think?* is broader and more ambitious. Where the constant referent of *Dream Nation* is specifically Greek literature and culture, *Does Literature Think?* is genuinely comparative, dealing not only with texts from the Greek, but equally with those from the German, the French, and the American canons.

The challenge the book poses in no way lies in its execution –as indicated earlier, Gourgouris is an accomplished writer. Rather, its difficulty resides in a question that accompanies the reader from the very beginning: is it a collection of essays, or is it a monograph? The thematic continuity points to the latter, yet Gourgouris himself adumbrates the book's "essayistic character" (xv). This should not be taken as merely a problem of categorization or designation of the book's genre. Instead, precisely because of its content, this aporia becomes a crucial issue for the argument presented in the book itself.

A clue to this argument already lies in the subtitle, and more specifically in the word 'antimythical.' As it is defined in the preface, this term refers to "whatever element cultivates the allure of a transcendental signifier … Though the most obvious antimythical element … would be the theological … [it also] encompasses the sort of transcendentalist obsession associated with the most typical Enlightenment tendencies: the 'rational-secular' instrumentalist abstraction" (xviii). In general terms, then, the antimythical refers to any endeavour that seeks closure, any occlusion of thought. Gourgouris relentlessly describes the various manifestations of the "transcendental signifiers," but always in terms of close readings. Thus, the antimythical is shown to don numerous disguises. However at bottom, it is always the carrier of a political agenda, or, more accurately, the "post-political" (91), the attempted derailment of the function of the polis. The final word of the book identifies this tendency as "barbarism," but it is its designated opposite, "socialism" (342), that provides the decisive clue: the *bête noir* of the book, on the political level, is the egocentricity that capitalism is responsible for producing. Further, if art and politics are assumed to be engaged in reciprocal relations, the antimythical gesture strives to either completely disengage them, or to collapse the one into the other.

Conversely, the mythical is the poetic power, always in flux, resisting confinement in an otherworldly or technocratic mode, never privileging the abstract but always augmenting with particularity. Despite, or more correctly because of, the impossibility of defining myth, insofar as it resides outside the disjunction 'true or false,' it remains superior to the static logic of the antimythical. "The fact that myth eludes definition is arguably the most palpable evidence of its performative relation to the social-historical, which can never be subsumed in whatever identificatory processes myth might mobilize in a given social-historical moment" (33). Myth works by mediating the concretely historical and its conceptualisation. Its work is, as Gourgouris calls it, "mythistorical" – a creative narrative that responds to the historical situation while remaining limitless in scope. However, no triumphal sublation is thereby produced. The resistance to closure is palpable in Gourgouris's 'materialist' dialectic, and this is the reason why the book cannot be a monograph. The *incompleteness* of a collection of essays better suits it.

Conscious of the importance of dialectical structure, the book is divided into three parts. The first part addresses the transition from law to myth, using Kafka's "Before the Law" as a point of departure. Gourgouris shows that no matter how the law is conceived to apply in society, there is always ultimately a discrepancy between the conception that seeks to present the law as a self-constituting entity, and the actual fact of the law's own resistance to foreclosure. Literature assumes an important role in this set-up, since it has the capacity to accommodate both the law's drive to closure as a reflection on history and the law's counter-drive to antagonize itself. Gourgouris summarizes this situation in terms of

myth: "To make the transition from law to myth is to dare imagine the world beyond the order to the sacred. Myth exists at the limit of the sacred. To be at this limit is actually to embody the moment of ethical decision, the moment of *krisis* … which is always a political decision … and is always a social act in its full singularity … is just that instance, not *before the law*, but *beside the law*, the moment of *paranomia*, when myth is staged … in an ever-transitional theatre of history" (89). Literature can address existence only by incorporating the myths of the laws. But such incorporation is only possible if it passes through a critical moment that undoes the ostensible aims of the law. In "The Concept of the Mythical" Gourgouris reads Schmitt, refracted in Sorel and Blumenberg, in order to show how a non-theological, or philosophical, thought is always political in so far as it enacts the transition from law to myth. The upshot is that myth is incorporated into philosophy – which, like literature, is mythical. This incorporation announces literature's capacity to think. Importantly, the moment of *krisis,* that is, the critical moment that calls for judgement, is simultaneously an *hypokrisis*, an acting and enacting according to the meaning of the word in Greek, or philosophy's "performative drive necessary to draw upon the possibility of mere truth and seek it against all odds" (121). "Philosophy's Need for Antigone" shows how *hypokrisis* works in Sophocles' tragedy, while also incisively and decisively criticizing Heidegger's interpretation of *Antigone*.

The second part, "Theatrical Matters," discusses the *hypokritical* faculty in relation to literature and philosophy. Reading the Ulysses' episode with the Sirens as it is adumbrated in Walter Benjamin's essay on Kafka and in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Ulysses is shown to overcome the enchantment of the world by performing a double gesture. It is a gesture cognizant of the fact that "to demythify myth means not to demythify the world, but to desacralize it" (176). The demystification or disenchantment of the world is the denial of any transcendental signifier, while its mythification signals the poetic (creative) intervention in the world as the only way of undoing occlusion. In "The Dream Reality of the Ruin" it is argued that the concept of the 'dialectical image' in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* exemplifies the moment of *hypokrisis* in that it is constructed as a bearer of ambivalence and plurality. This is a methodological instance, but also an instance that affirms the primacy of particularity, since "a thinker in dialectical images recognizes that there is no way to circumvent the mutability of matter" (228).

The third part reads the practical application of myth in the work of three authors. In "Research, Essay, Failure" Gourgouris argues that Flaubert's incomplete project to capture the materiality of clichés and common places in *Bouvard and Pecuchet* and the *Dictionary* is nevertheless successful (a successful failure), since it signifies the impossibility of conceptualizing particularity. The following essay shows that Jean Genet's late work *Prisoner of Love* follows a path of depersonalisation that enacts a 'demystification' of identity with the use of myth. Next, a reading of Don DeLillo's *The Names* shows that "all cults experience everything as an interiority. The outer boundary collapses and a profound solipsism sets in" (311). The cult in *The Names* understands this usurpation of reality through its members' mystical conception of language. This insane project reveals that the projects of self-autonomy and absolute heteronomy are in fact complicit, in so far as the naming of the individual is guaranteed by a separate and mysterious other, a One requiring "that everyone recognize their multiplicity of names in the round mirror of a prevalent monotheistic imaginary" (313). The third part of Gourgouris's dialectic, then, is a praxis of reading, and its vital insight is that the 'subject,' the Name who performs the dialectic has to remain open at all costs, to conduct an "identicide."

Despite the book's successful resistance to closure, the question that remains is whether the subject that proclaims an openness is thereby producing a closure. In other words, what is Gourgouris's own position, as the writing subject of the book, in relation to the book's resistance to occlusion? Does not the erasure of subjectivity, as such, enact a closure of the Name 'Gourgouris,' even within the unclosed structure of a collection of essays? This most difficult question is impossible to resolve, unless one realizes that the second position of the dialectic – its negativity – is explicitly designated as a methodological instance which the readings of the third part do not seek to overcome. Rather, Gourgouris' aim is to speak of particularity by intensifying negativity. This is nowhere more obvious than in the final piece, which is Gourgouris's own most powerful *hypokrisis*. Written with "the left hand that always delivers the decisive blow" (as Walter Benjamin has put it) and eschewing academic conventions such as footnoting, "Beyond the Damaged Life" brings to the fore the political and poetic implications of the book *without* any attempt at a final synthesis. Indeed, what is most prevalent here is an exemplification of the content by the style; the section on the poetic impulse opens with the following sentence:

> In cool late summer mornings, when the sun seems to rise, true to its promise, as an ancient divinity of radiance and heat, when you stand bearing on your shoulders the full weight of the night's vigil – the Bacchic pairing of Psyche (the labyrinth of immanent thought) and Time (the chtonic pool of thought's defilement) – just then, when, standing still, you suddenly reach up to the tree for a perfectly mature fig which is dead sure of its time, you may have touched on what becomes apparent in the barest moment between the sentiment of philosophy and the uninterrupted flux of history in the making: the passage of poetry as it swiftly, elusively, passes you by. (333)

The final chapter is, strictly speaking, neither a coda nor a summary, and as such correctly belongs to the third, the practical, part of *Does Literature Think?* The text succeeds here in saying more than what the words themselves signify,

and remains conscious of the fact that it cannot signify more than the ambiguity between singularity and universality, *while* enacting this set-up. As such, closure is avoided, because openness is not merely proclaimed, it is, rather, enacted. The annihilation of the "transcendental signifier" is a truly revolutionary act, all the more important because it is poetic.

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