

## **Allegorical Readings and Metaphors of Identity: Sexuality, Society and Nature in Vassilis Vassilikos' *To Φύλλο***

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Vassilis Vassilikos (b. 1934) is one of the most prolific Greek writers and published his first short novel when he was just twenty. Since then he has produced a considerable number of novels and stories, some of which have been revised more than once. His trilogy *To Φύλλο, Το Πηγάδι, Τ' Αγγέλιασμα* [*The Plant, The Well, The Angel*]<sup>1</sup>(1961) has been praised for its allegorical inventiveness, parodic playfulness and the versatility of its style and received the 'Group of the Twelve' award, the most respected prize in Greece at the time.<sup>2</sup> Though the quality of his writing was immediately recognised, in his early writing career Vassilikos tended to be irreverent and provocative.<sup>3</sup>

His second novel is called, tongue in cheek, *Victims of Peace* [Θύματα Ειρήνης, 1956] and portrays the restlessness of youth and the difficulty young people were having in adjusting to peacetime life after the war. Ten years later he was fed up with the resistance chronicles, claiming that previous generations had nothing to offer to young writers such as himself (Vassilikos 1966a and 1966b). He also argued that in his time people were experiencing a new type of occupation which required a new type of resistance. This claim provoked an angry response, in the form of a letter to the left-wing journal *Epitheorisi Technis*, from the poet Manolis Anagnostakis, who considered Vassilikos to be a leading example of verbal and intellectual arrogance, provocative narcissism and profound irresponsibility (Anagnostakis 1966). With the publication of *Z* (1966) and the subsequent imposition of a military dictatorship in 1967, which led to a period of self-exile

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of the English translation by Edmund and Mary Keeley (Vassilikos 1964). All references to the English translation of Vassilikos' stories are made to this edition and page numbers are given in parenthesis after each quotation or reference. Reviews of this translation have been published in the *New York Review of Books* (John Gross 1964) and *The New York Times Book Review* (Zuckerman 1964)

<sup>2</sup> For a critical evaluation of Vassilikos see the brief comment in the avant-garde journal *Πάλι* (nos 2-3, 1964/5, pp. 138-40).

<sup>3</sup> Vassilikos has been seen as the Greek version of the group of English writers known as 'angry young men' among whom John Osborne and Kingsley Amis were prominent (Moullas 1989: 62 and Raftopoulos, 1965: 255).

from Greece, his fiction becomes explicitly political and more documentary.<sup>4</sup> Generally speaking it could be said that his novels range from lyrical parables and allegorical fantasies to testimonial narratives.<sup>5</sup>

Vassilikos published his trilogy on his return from the USA where he had studied film and television and it seems likely that his American experience had an impact on his later writing and outlook (Vassilikos 1964c). It should also be noted that two of the most promising Greek writers of the early 1960s, Tachtsis and Vassilikos, wrote their influential fiction during sojourns in America or Australia or immediately upon return from their travels there. Vassilikos also seems to echo Gide, Camus and Kafka as well the Beat generation, while the influence of the modernist intellectual climate of Thessaloniki on his early published fiction (set in that city) is scarcely negligible, though it has been claimed that he is the most detached from the city's literary tradition (Apostolidou 1997: 160).<sup>6</sup>

The trilogy consists of three symbolic narratives of exploration and erotic initiation; three acts of the same drama about an 'angry young man' in search of identity.<sup>7</sup> Exploring sexual fantasies, the hedonism of danger and metaphysical anxieties, they centre on love and death: the names of the three protagonists Lazaros, Thanos<sup>8</sup> and Angelos all evoke death or resurrection. Kimon Friar suggests that Vassilikos 'has written his own Divine Comedy, that the protagonist Lazaros-Thanos-Angelos (Resurrection-Death-Eternity) wanders in the dark wood of existence seeking to find the source of light, of essence, spurred on by love that is at times narcissistic, or feared, or sublimated' (Friar 1964). The trilogy has also been described as 'Anti-Eroica' (alluding to the celebrated novel by Kosmas Politis) and as the narrative of a well-planned suicide of a young person.<sup>9</sup> In this

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<sup>4</sup> For an overall assessment of Vassilikos' fiction see Sachinis 1965: 176-192 and 1985: 95-120, Ziras 1988: 342-356 and Vassilikos 2007: 373-536. This edition includes useful information about the different editions and the critical reception of the trilogy.

<sup>5</sup> See Vassilis Vassilikos, 'Αυτοπροσωπογραφία' in Vassilikos 1976: 131-32.

<sup>6</sup> See also Vassilikos' interview with Tasos Goudelis where he talks about Thessaloniki during the 1950s and claims that his novels are always based on the work of other writers (Vassilikos 1992: 14, 29 & 31 and Vassilikos 1983: 34).

<sup>7</sup> In his entry on Vassilikos Alexis Ziras (1988: 349) argues that his oeuvre is replete with symbols and allegories.

<sup>8</sup> The following passage from *To Πηγάδι* is telling: 'Θάνατος, Θανατερός, Θανάσιμος — αν ήμουν επίθετο έτσι θα κλινόμουν' [Deadly, Deadlier, Deadliest; if my name were an adjective, that is how I'd be declined' (127)] (Vassilikos 2007: 164). All references to the three stories are made to this edition and page numbers are given in parenthesis after each quotation or reference.

<sup>9</sup> Raftopoulos 1965: 266. K. Porfyris anonymously in the newspaper *Avgi* (11 July 1961) finds in *To Φύλλο* a new form of romanticism in which the isolated individual is in conflict with a debased society.

paper I will concentrate only on the first story in the trilogy, taking into account that Vassilikos himself, in his preface to the 1994 edition (Nea Synora-Livani), points out that the three stories should be read separately. He also suggests that the reader should start with *To Πηγάδι* (written between 1954 and 1957) and then move on to *To Φύλλο* (written between 1957 and 1959).<sup>10</sup>

In *To Φύλλο* a student steals a pot plant from the garden of a girl he has seen in the street and secretly followed. He takes the plant to his room in a new block of flats where it grows out of all proportion, taking over the family flat. The extraordinary growth of the plant threatens the stability of the entire building and the tenants, not knowing the cause of the problems they encounter or the source of the strange noises they hear, are bewildered and scared. Discovering that the plant is causing these problems, they pronounce a danger to the safety of the building and finally destroy it after which the young protagonist contemplates making his escape from the city.

In the novel Vassilikos brings together two themes: the clash of nature and culture and the protagonist's search for identity. These themes are even alluded to in punning fashion by the title *To Φύλλο* which alludes to nature (φύλλο) as well as to gender and sexuality (φύλο). The story also deals with social disillusionment and loneliness, even fear, while the block of flats functions as a metaphor for a whole society undermined from within, thus adding another dimension to a multi-layered and intricately structured narrative.

The novel opens with a passage with biblical overtones ('Στήν αρχή ήταν το χάος. Πάχνη, ομίχλη, βροχή, χιόνι και χαλάζι. Ένα διάστημα αδειανό και το σκοτάδι πάνω στην άβυσσό του' ['In the beginning was chaos. Mist, fog, rain, snow and hail. A void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep']). This is accompanied by a parody of the creation of the world which takes the form of a description of the construction of a block of flats in which the role of the Supreme Lord is assumed by a civil engineer ('Και είπε ο Κύριος: να έρθει πρώτα ο εκσκαφέας' ['And the Landlord said: let the digger go']). The opening and closing pages of the novel invite a reading of the novel in terms of the clash between

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<sup>10</sup> See also Sainis 2007: 347. Dealing with adolescence, love and sexuality, the recently published trilogy of stories *Τρεις Γυναίκες* (Three Women) by Vassilikos, written between 1953 and 1956, can be seen as a precursor of his later trilogy *The Plant, The Well, The Angel*. The first story takes place on the island of Thasos and the central character is called Lazaros while the young protagonist of the last story is a student of agriculture like the hero in *The Plant* (Vassilikos 2009).

nature and culture. They refer to the rapid reconstruction in Greece during the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the erection of blocks of flats. Judging from references to (inter alia) the Upper City, Yiadi-Koulé and the Rotunda the novel would appear to be set in Thessaloniki (Mackridge 1997) and its rebuilding causes social divisions and creates a sense of two worlds existing in the same city.

Είναι περίεργο, πολύ περίεργο να ζεις πάνω στην κόψη του ξυραφιού, πάνω στα σύνορα των δύο κόσμων. Γιατί έτσι όπως είναι το καινούριο σπίτι μας, από τη δώθε μεριά της Εγνατίας κι απέναντι είναι η Καμάρα και η σειρά των χαμηλών σπιτιών με τα ραγισμένα και φθαρμένα προσωπεία, έχω την αίσθηση πως βρίσκομαι πραγματικά πάνω στα σύνορα, στο μεταίχμιο της νέας πόλης με τα τετράγωνα θηρία της και της παλιάς με τα σεμνά και φτωχικά της σπίτια. Στον κόσμο που ανήκω υπάρχει άνεση, μα καμιά χαρά. Στον απέναντι κόσμο μπορεί να υπάρχει φτώχεια, μιζέρια, δυστυχία, μα ωστόσο μια κάποια διάθεση κεφιού απλώνεται με τη νύχτα κι οι άνθρωποι εκεί τραγουδάνε πιο αμέριμνοι, ανασαίνουν πιο ελεύθερα, γιατί λιγότερη είναι η στοιβαγμένη πέτρα κι υπάρχουν ακόμα δέντρα και λουλούδια στις αυλές. Οι γραμμές των τραμ είναι τ' ορόσημο. Τα περίπτερα, τα συνοριακά φυλάκια. Γι' αυτό σου λέω πως είναι δύσκολο να ζεις πάνω στα σύνορα. (Vassilikos 2007:29-30)

It's strange, very strange, to live on the razor's edge, on the border between two worlds. Because the way our new house is situated, on this side of Egnatia Street, opposite the Arch of Galerius and the row of low houses with their cracked and worn masks, I have the feeling that I am indeed living on a border, in the no man's land between the new town, with its square monsters, and the old, with its poor and humble houses. In the world I belong to there is ease but no joy. In the world opposite there may be poverty, misery, unhappiness, but there is also a certain disposition toward gaiety which spreads out with the coming of night, and the singing there is more carefree, one breathes more easily, because there is less heaped-up stone and there are still trees and flowers in the courtyards. The streetcar tracks are the borderline. The kiosks are the guardhouses. That's why I tell you that it's difficult to live on the border. (Vassilikos 1964: 9-10)

By contrasting the poorer but apparently merrier old world with the modern but unhappy new world, this passage points to a reading of the novel which opposes poverty and modernity.

At the end of the novel the social contrast between the two worlds gives way to an image indicating the defeat of nature and the old style of life:

Μα ο αριθμός 17 δεν υπήρχε. Δεν υπήρχε ούτε η σιδερένια πόρτα ούτε η αυλή με το κηπάκι της ούτε το διώροφο σπιτάκι με το πορτοκαλί φως στα παράθυρα. Τι τέρας εφταώροφο υψωνόταν μπροστά του; Σκαλωσιές από

δοκάρια, το βαρούλκο σταματημένο χαμηλά, η μπιτονιέρα ακίνητη στο δρόμο μέσα σε λόφους χαλικιού και άμμου και τσιμέντου. Μια πινακίδα κρεμόταν κατάστηθα, όπως το πέταλο που είχαν οι γκεσταπίτες:

ΠΑΠΑΔΟΠΟΥΛΟΣ  
ΠΟΛ. ΜΗΧΑΝΙΚΟΣ

Και μια άλλη

ΜΟΝΩΣΕΙΣ ΦΕΛΙΖΟΛ

Και μια άλλη:

ΑΠΑΓΟΡΕΥΕΤΑΙ Η ΕΙΣΟΔΟΣ  
ΕΙΣ ΤΟΥΣ ΜΗ ΕΡΓΑΖΟΜΕΝΟΥΣ ΕΙΣ ΤΗΝ ΟΙΚΟΔΟΜΗΝ  
(Vassilikos 2007:117)

But number 17 didn't exist. Nor did the iron gate exist, nor the courtyard with its small flower bed, nor the two-storied house with the orange light in its windows. What was this seven-storied monster rising before his eyes? Scaffolding with girders, the hoist down low, the cement mixer motionless in the middle of the road among piles of gravel and sand and cement. A sign hung over its heart like the horseshoes that Gestapo soldiers wore:

PAPADOPOULOS  
Civil Engineer

And another:

FELIZOL INSULATION

And another:

NO ADMITTANCE EXCEPT ON BUSINESS  
(Vassilikos 1964: 96-97)

Now monstrous high-rise buildings suggest that the culture associated with technology, reconstruction and urbanisation has taken over by destroying the old and more 'natural' ways of living. The plant could be seen as a metaphor for nature and its unnatural growth as its revenge.

The anxiety about man's dangerous attempt to control nature is the theme of another novel published in the same year: *Το Φράγμα* [The Dam] (1961) by Spyros Plaskovitis. Allegory, fantasy and nature's revenge interact in these narratives which engage with the existential anxieties of their readers at a time when Greece was experiencing the consequences of entry to the technological age and a rapid urbanisation. Both novels could be read as sinister warnings to those who favour urban development or technological progress at the expense of nature.<sup>11</sup>

Though the opening pages of Vassilikos' novel could be seen as a transition from nature to culture, a kind of rite of passage, they could also be read in psychoanalytic terms as an attempt by the protagonist to enter the Symbolic order

from the chaos of the Imaginary.<sup>12</sup> As he writes to his friend Kostas he lives on the boundaries of two worlds, constantly trying to define his position and identity. In the same letter he also writes of being dissatisfied with the society in which he lives and wanting to join another.

Κάθε τόσο νιώθεις την ανάγκη να δραπετεύσεις, να πας να ζήσεις για λίγο στον κόσμο εκείνο που δεν ανήκεις, αφήνοντας τον κόσμο όπου ανήκεις χωρίς καθόλου να ζεις. Ωσπου στο τέλος το μόνο που κερδίζεις είναι να μην ξέρεις πού είσαι και να χάνεις κάθε τόσο την οποιαδήποτε σιγουριά που σου χαρίζουν τα οποιαδήποτε όριά σου. (Vassilikos 2007: 30)

Every now and then you feel the need to escape, to go live for a while in the world to which you do not belong, leaving behind the world to which you do belong but where you do not in fact live at all. Until finally the only thing you gain is not knowing where you are, while losing sometimes whatever security you may have found within whatever boundaries. (Vassilikos 1964: 10)

The main character increasingly shuns the outside world as the action unfolds and the fact that he does not fit in breeds resentment within him. At first, though he by no means dares to engage with society, he does allow himself to experience it, going as he does for walks through the city at night and viewing the town from his balcony with a certain sense of pleasure while longing to become part of the other side of town, i.e. a different society to the one (he thinks) he belongs to. He is afraid of not belonging to any society and is determined to overcome this problem by creating a safe little world of his own to provide him with the security and protection he requires: ‘Το μόνο που ξέρω ότι θέλω προς το παρόν είναι να φτιάξω μέσα στη δική μου κάμαρα έναν κόσμο δικό μου’ (Vassilikos 2007:30) [‘The only thing I know that I want for the time being is to build within my own room a world of my own’ (Vassilikos 1964: 10)]. Indeed he is happy to have a room of his own at last which acts as a substitute for a girl and even gives him the opportunity to develop erotic fantasies (‘βρέθηκε μέσα σε μια κάμαρα παρθένα, αμόλευτη, άσπιλη, όπου κανένας άλλος πριν από Αυτόν δεν είχε κατοικήσει μέσα εκεί’ (Vassilikos 2007: 28) [‘was finding himself in a room that was virgin,

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<sup>11</sup> For developments in fiction during the 1960s see Beaton 1999: 239-257.

<sup>12</sup> For the terms ‘Symbolic’ and ‘Imaginary’ see below note 17.

untouched, unsullied, where no one had lived before him' (Vassilikos 1964: 8)].<sup>13</sup> By trying to claim his own space, he in turn attempts to define his identity.

Indeed, the protagonist of *Το Φύλλο* lends himself to an absorbing and complex analysis. Through the third-person narrator's descriptions of his actions and behaviour, and the occasional forays into his thoughts and monologues, the reader is treated to telling insights into his mental processes, insights which are invaluable to the study of his character from a psychoanalytical perspective.

Though the main character has a name, Lazaros or Lazos, he is referred to throughout as He (Αυτός).<sup>14</sup> The initial capital suggests that the word is a substitute for his real name, which is only mentioned four or five times, and then only after he has been introduced as Αυτός, and exclusively in his dealings with others. For example, his real name is first given when, at the end of a letter to his friend Kostas in Munich, he signs off as 'Lazos' and later during a conversation in which his parents' guests ask after 'Lazaros'. To the narrator, and therefore to the reader, he will always remain He; in other words, he is effectively without a name. Names are used for differentiation, to distinguish people, and assign an identity to an individual. If to possess a name is to possess an identity, it can only follow that to be without a name is to be without an identity.

As has already been made clear earlier, Lazaros is not overtly fond of the people he is closest to, including his fellow residents in the apartment block and even his own parents, and goes to increasing lengths to avoid them as much as he can.<sup>15</sup> His dislike of others is manifest in his hostile attitude to the maids and the electrician (whose only crimes are being too noisy and asking after the plant respectively), while his childish attempt to intentionally shock his parents' guests at the dinner table by blurting out 'εντελώς ξεκάρφωτα' (Vassilikos 2007: 42) ['quite irrelevantly' (Vassilikos 1964: 22)] and repeatedly asserting that all the maids in the block are in fact 'whores' smacks of repressed bitterness of an

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<sup>13</sup> In his later text *Οι φωτογραφίες* we find a passage which evokes the atmosphere of *Το Φύλλο*: 'Είχε μείνει τώρα σχεδόν γυμνός κι απροστάτευτος μέσα στην κάμαρά του, φυτόριο της πιο οργανιστικής φαντασίας, αλλά παρθένα σαν δάσος απάτητο από κυνηγούς' (Vassilikos 1964b: 28).

<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that Lazaros Lazaridis is also the name of the main character of his *Οι Φωτογραφίες* (1964) and the real name of the eponymous protagonist of *Γλαύκος Θρασάκης* (1974-76, translated into English by Karen Emmerich as, *The few things I know about Glafkos Thrassakis*, Seven Stories Press 2003). For a comparative reading of the Trilogy and *Glafkos Thrassakis* see Koula Chrysomalli-Henrich 1979. See also Farinou-Malamatari 2002.

<sup>15</sup> It could be argued that Vassilikos' character presents some similarities with *Αντρέας Δημακούδης* (1935) by Nikos Gavriil Pentzikis.

immature kind released in an immature way. His feeling of not belonging leads him to sympathise only with the Armenian family; as he explains to his newly acquired plant, they are: ‘Οι μόνοι που συμπαθώ σε τούτο το σπίτι. Ίσως επειδή είναι κι αυτοί εξόριστοι, όπως εγώ’ (Vassilikos 2007: 53) [‘the only ones I like in this place. Maybe that’s because they, too, are exiles like me’ (Vassilikos 1964: 32)].

He tries a series of projections and identifications and occasionally suffers from a siege mentality in his short-lived attempts to come to terms with the outside world. His discomfort in his present society results in his becoming more and more insular, rejecting everything and everybody in turn (first the city, then the maids and other residents, his friends and finally his parents), until only his precious plant remains. And when that is destroyed without his having succeeded in completing his Oedipal trajectory, he has no option but to leave society altogether never to return: ‘Γύρισε κι έριξε μια τελευταία ματιά στον κόσμο που άφηγε πίσω του (...) Όχι, δεν θα γυρνούσε ποτέ πίσω, ποτέ πια’ (Vassilikos 2007: 119) [‘He turned and cast a last glance toward the world he was leaving behind him (..) No, he would never go back, never’ (Vassilikos 1964: 98)].

Before we turn our attention to Lazaros’ relationship with the plant, it will be useful to examine the role of the plant in the story. Despite the fact that the plant is not human, and therefore not capable of thought, action or communication, it plays such a vital role that it becomes a character in its own right. Although physically it does nothing but grow (out of all proportion), to Lazaros it is not just a plant, it is invaluable as a companion, ally and parent figure. He treats the plant like a person, confiding all his secret thoughts, fears and emotions to it as one might to a parent, lover or friend. Assigned various roles and genders, in which the humanising factor is quite evident, the plant is also compared to a person on a physical level. In the frequent descriptions of the plant, analogies are made not only with the human character, but also with the human body, the best example of which is probably the final one, when the plant has been hacked down and is reduced to a ‘corpse’ with its internal organs and structure splayed out on the floor: ‘Από τη σφριγηλή σάρκα του είχε απομείνει μια μεμβράνη. Όλο το άλλο σώμα του έγινε νερό που πλημμύρισε το πάτωμα (...) η ραχοκοκαλιά ήταν σπασμένη σε τμήματα, τα πλευρά κι αυτά τσακισμένα σαν τόξα δίχως χορδή, μερικές πέτσες κρεμόνταν’ (Vassilikos 2007:113) [‘of its robust flesh only a membrane was left. The rest of

its body had turned to water, flooding the floor (...) the spine was split into sections, the ribs too had snapped, like gutless bows, shreds of skin hung loose' (Vassilikos 1964: 92)].

By talking to it and interpreting its feelings, moods, fears and desires as he watches it change, Lazaros bestows on the plant a certain personality of its own, his mind working in much the same way as that of a child who creates an imaginary friend. It is perhaps because he is identity-less himself that he endeavours so hard to put a name to the object of his desire, but his attempts to discover exactly what the plant is are largely in vain. All he can deduce is that the plant appears to have characteristics of both an 'αλλομπέτσα' [monstera deliciosa] (a feminine noun) and a 'φυλλόδεντρο' [philodendron] (a neuter noun).<sup>16</sup> The ambivalent gender of the plant reflects in a way Lazaros' own confused sexuality. He often sees the plant as a girl/woman whom he calls 'Ariadne', suggesting that she will give him the thread to find his way out of the labyrinth of selfhood and identifications. On one occasion, Lazaros even sees the plant as himself though he soon brushes the thought aside. The plant and its subsequent demise could be seen as a metaphor for desire and its suppression. Thus, the plant contributes to an ambiguous interplay in the story between identification and sexuality.

Despite it having attributes belonging to different sexes, for the most part Lazaros views the plant as a female, that is, mother and mother as lover. Under normal circumstances, on account of her sexual difference to an Oedipal child, the female subject is the site of fascination and desire, but also threat, 'her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure' (Mulvey 1989: 21). However, here the plant is both dual gendered and, as it has no sexual organs, asexual. And as such it is a far less threatening figure to the Oedipal child (Lazaros), who as a result feels much more in control.

The protagonist's lack of identity (except where it is imposed on him by others) is a sign that he has so far failed to reach this crucial point in human personality

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<sup>16</sup> The uncertainty of the gender of the plant is highlighted in the text: 'Οι μέρες, οι βδομάδες που θα 'ρθουν θα μου πουν για το πραγματικό φύλο του φύλλου μου. (...) Παράτησε τότε τα βιβλία, που δεν του έλεγαν τίποτα, μια που το φύλλο του ξέφευγε από τους συνηθισμένους τύπους, τα καλούπια. Κι ήταν ακόμα χωρίς όνομα, όπως η κοπέλα που το είχε και δίχως πρόσωπο, μια που άλλαζε πρόσωπο κάθε τόσο» (Vassilikos 2007: 60-1) ['The days, the weeks ahead will show me the real sex of my plant. (...) So he abandoned the books, which could tell him nothing now that his plant eluded definition under the usual types and forms. It was still without a name, like the girl who had owned it, and without a face, since it changed its face every so often' (Vassilikos 1964: 39-40)].

formation and is still stuck somewhere in the pre-Oedipal phase or Mirror Stage of his psychological development.<sup>17</sup> Vassilikos' novel could be read from a psychoanalytic perspective though such a reading, as Felman argues, should not be an 'answering service' telling the reader what the text 'really' means since the traditional method of applying psychoanalysis to literature is in principle ruled out:

The notion of *application* would be replaced by the radically different notion of *implication*: bringing analytical questions to bear upon literary questions, *involving* psychoanalysis in the scene of literary analysis, the interpreter's role would here be, not to *apply* to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to *generate implications* between literature and psychoanalysis. (Felman 1982: 8-9)

Hence, in this paper psychoanalysis is not seen in terms of application, but as providing a framework for exploring the protagonist's selfhood and understanding Vassilikos' multi-faceted narrative.

Although actually a mature young man, Lazaros is curiously childlike, displaying the immaturity and mentality of someone much younger than his twenty-two years. His obsessional behaviour regarding the girl ('Ariadne') and the plant, his paranoid suspicions that others are against him, and his frequent espionage fantasies all point to someone who is not fully in touch with reality and looks out on the world through the eyes of a child who does not fully comprehend or appreciate what is right, acceptable or logical. At one stage, his overactive imagination, combined with his aforementioned aversion to everything and everyone around him and sense of persecution, even goes so far as to see the furniture in his room as taking a hostile stance to his beloved plant. On his birthday, he himself does not admit that anything changed, as he still indulges in the same activities and sings the same old songs as if to demonstrate the fact.

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<sup>17</sup> In the mirror-phase stage, the child identifies with its specular image, and this inaugurates the series of identifications that will form the ego. The child is captivated by a specular other thanks to an identification which is also an alienation. The Imaginary is thus the realm in which self and other merge, and in which identity is grounded in a mere semblance of unity. The Imaginary is not a stage which is overcome or transcended, and is a constant presence in the lives of human subjects and in the stories they tell. Adapting Lévi-Strauss's study of how kinship rules and exogamy govern exchanges between human groups to the field of psychoanalysis, Lacan describes the Oedipus Complex as a process which imposes symbolic structures on sexuality and allows the subject to emerge. Pre-Oedipal sexuality is likened to a state of nature and unbridled sexuality; the role of the Name-of-the-Father is to disrupt the dual relationship in which the child tries to fuse with the mother in an incestuous union. Culture and the Symbolic are thus imposed upon nature.

Establishing Lazaros as a man/child takes on increasing significance when we turn our attention to his relationship with the plant, which can be seen very much as a parental figure. Left to his own devices when his real parents are away on holiday, Lazaros takes off all his clothes and proceeds to wander around naked, lying on the damp new shoots the main plant is generating. This reverting back to his natural state, i.e. naked as a new-born infant seeking the touch and comfort of his ‘mother’, can be explained in two ways. Firstly, it may be a regression back to the womb, or alternatively, it may be a result of his Oedipal (sexual) feelings for the mother figure. Although he desires ‘her’, obviously he cannot physically possess ‘her’ as she is not human, therefore he does the next best thing in order to get as close as possible to satisfying his desires. Either way, this is a strong indication of his incompleteness as an adult. This desire is also relieved somewhat by his constant stroking of the plant, and the first physical (and erotic) contact he has with his surrogate mother-to-be leaves him with a self-confessed feeling of fulfilment: “Με τα χείλια του ακράγγιξε το χλωμό δέρμα του φύλλου. Η στιγμιαία τούτη επαφή τον γέμισε ευτυχία. Δεν ήταν άδειος τώρα. Είχε ένα βάρος γλυκό πάνω στο στήθος του, που γαλήνευε την καρδιά του” (Vassilikos 2007: 48) [‘With his lips he touched the pale skin of the leaf. This momentary contact filled him with delight. He was no longer empty. He had a sweet weight on his chest which calmed his heart’ (Vassilikos 1964: 28)].

In a child caught up in the tumult of self-identification, one moment identifying with the mother figure and the next with the father (i.e. the patriarchal male), it is hardly surprising to find confused behaviour as regards gender roles. The childlike element in Lazaros is by no means the only aspect of his character, since he can simultaneously be classed as personifying the female/mother and the male/father. The first of these provides us with an interesting case of the reversal of gender and/or roles, where Lazaros as both male and child finds himself acting as both lover and mother. Although the plant is essentially a mother figure, in an ironic and dramatic reversal it is not the maternal figure that cares for the child, but the child who nurtures the mother.<sup>18</sup> In another reversal of the norm, in the hands of

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Lacan’s Symbolic is not simply synonymous with language and should be understood as comprising the entire domain of culture (See Lacan 1977 & 1987 and Vice 1996).

<sup>18</sup> It may also be worth mentioning here that a daughter is arguably more likely to look after a needy parent than a son; with this in mind, it could be said that not only is Lazaros as male and

the child/carer it is the ‘mother’ who grows and develops and not the child, who has, physically speaking at least, long since ceased to do so.

The confusion as to who is the child and who is the mother arises again when Lazaros’ secret world is discovered and destroyed by the hated enemy (the neighbours). Seeing his beloved plant in such inescapable danger he does little to protect it (something which might be expected of a mother), seeking instead to find protection in it by wrapping his naked, vulnerable self up in the main leaf. In running to and hiding in the ‘arms’ of his ‘mother’ he exhibits his childlike aspect to perfection, and the plant fulfils its role in shielding him until the last possible moment. However, when the plant is finally destroyed he faints, displaying what could arguably be seen as a reaction much more suited to a female parent seeing her child die than vice versa.

In contrast with this female/maternal side to Lazaros’ character, there are also several occasions on which he assumes more masculine roles, namely those of a lover and a father, as well as of the aforementioned (male) child. As a lover he almost fulfils his Oedipal desires, viewing the plant very much as a mother/lover figure, initially misrecognising it as representing the girl he stole it from. However, when the plant begins to develop, it takes on an identity of its own, and he acknowledges that he no longer treasures it because it reminds him of the girl. From the start he is smitten and fascinated by it, endeavouring to find out all he can about it; caressing it, talking to it gently and referring to it as ‘φύλλο μου, γυναίκα μου, άτλαντά μου’ (Vassilikos 2007: 110, 111) [‘my plant, my woman, my Atlas’ (Vassilikos 1964: 89, 91)], and generally neglecting everything else to devote his whole existence to it. His devotion is repaid in full when the plant-mother responds to his love and affection by giving birth to numerous offspring, sending him into raptures of paternal delight. He has become a father, and does what any new father would do on the delivery of his first born:

*Δάκρυα χαράς τού ερχόταν στα μάτια. Και για να γιορτάσει τα γεννητούρια του, γέμισε ένα ποτήρι κονιάκ, έσπασε λίγο πάγο στην κουζίνα και το κατέβασε μονορούφι. (...) Η πληρότητα. Αυτή η μικρή στιγμή της αιωνιότητας που κυνηγούμε στη ζωή μας. Κ’ έπειτα δεν με νοιάζει. Έπειτα θα μπορώ πιο εύκολα να πεθάνω. (Vassilikos 2007: 82)*

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male child transformed, in the abstract, into female as mother but also female as child, thereby making for an even more complex inversion of role and gender.

Tears of joy came into his eyes. And to celebrate, he filled a glass with brandy, got some ice from the kitchen, downed the brandy in one swallow. (...) The fullness. This small moment of eternity that we pursue all our lives. And afterwards I don't care. Afterwards I'll be able to die more easily. (Vassilikos 1964: 61)

The unfortunate irony of this statement is of course that though Lazaros finally feels complete within himself, he has been lulled into a false sense of security. He will never be really complete unless he resolves his Oedipal complex, and his cyclical and simultaneous adoption of so many different aspects of the human character indicates that he is still wavering between identities, unable to decide on one specific gender and/or role in his confused and incomplete state until a father-figure intervenes to help him fix it by putting a stop to his improper, incestuous behaviour.

For a child in the Oedipal phase or Mirror Stage, identity is a complex issue. Insatiably seeking his identity, a male child who has initially identified with his mother only to discover that she is not at all the same, and who then looks elsewhere for someone to satisfactorily supply him with an image to identify with, is effectively 'identity-less' until he settles on siding with a patriarchal representative, thus completing his Oedipal trajectory. An individual who has not resolved his Oedipus complex has not yet reached the point of self-identification, therefore he is not yet ready to pass from the Imaginary Order into the Symbolic, in other words become fully integrated into society.<sup>19</sup> If he is not destined to enter society, he is fated to become an outcast, ostracised by and ostracising himself from the world in general.

Given all this, Lazaros' rejection of his real parents in favour of the abstract substitutes provided by the plant is inevitable. He spurns both, but it is his mother who most feels the exclusion from his new life. As far as he is concerned, she is largely insignificant, and the best way of dealing with her irksome presence is to

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<sup>19</sup> 'At its simplest the Oedipus complex is the notion that every child sexually desires a parent and wishes to be rid of its rival, the other parent' (Lapsley 2006: 69). Fredric Jameson rightly cautions that 'to speak of the Imaginary independently of the Symbolic is to perpetuate the illusion that we could have a relatively pure experience of either. If, for instance, we overhastily identify the Symbolic with the dimension of language and the function of speech in general, then it becomes obvious that we can hardly convey any experience of the Imaginary without presupposing the former' (Jameson 1982: 350).

ignore her. Only once, momentarily, when she breaks down and pours her heart out to him does he feel anything, but even then he cannot bring himself to approach or comfort her. But why should he reject his real mother for a non-human substitute? The answer to this question may well be because, although he desires her he cannot have her and therefore his desire becomes dislike and disinterest.

However, he still desires the mother-figure and has to find one elsewhere. Initially, he opts to replace her with the anonymous girl, but, as he cannot have her either, he then chooses the object closest to her to associate her with. The plant, therefore, originally represents the girl who in turn represents the mother figure, which effectively means that Lazaros' real mother has twice been usurped her maternal role. She is understandably unhappy about her son's preference for the plant and feels totally shunned, shut out of his room and his life. He is denying her all her maternal pleasures; he no longer eats her cakes and sweets, in fact he no longer eats anything, he does not allow her to clean his room or wash his clothes, letting himself go almost entirely in his devoted love for the plant. When he refuses to bring his mother a glass of water but then fetches a whole jug for the plant, it proves to be the final straw, and she bitterly pours her heart out in a long monologue (reported in indirect speech by the narrator), expressing her point of view.

Earlier in the text, when he makes a fuss on first seeing the plant, Lazaros implicitly accuses her of being jealous and regarding it as a rival: 'Εβλεπε όμως μες στα μάτια της ότι δεν ήταν μονάχα η απορία: κατάβαθα μέσα τους, στις κόρες των ματιών, κρυφόκαιγε κιόλα ένα μίσος, μια έχθρα, σαν να μην ήταν μπροστά της ένα απλό φύλλο που αντίκριζε, αλλά μια άλλη γυναίκα, που ο γιος της την κουβάλησε από το δρόμο' (Vassilikos 2007: 55) [He could see, though, that there was something more than surprise in her eyes; a certain hatred had already started smoldering deep inside them, in the very pupils, a certain hostility, as though she were facing not just a simple plant but another woman that her son had brought in from the street' (Vassilikos 1964: 34)]. Apparently, he observes a 'φλόγα της ζήλιας' ('flame of jealousy') and that same night he has a nightmare that his mother is ripping the plant's flesh to shreds with her painted nails. Although all this could be (dis)regarded as a figment of Lazaros' possessive and obsessive childish imagination, in her monologue his mother actually admits her jealousy:

Και ναι, δεν του έκρυβε πως ζήλευε το φύλλο, που της τον έκλεψε για πάντα μέσα στο ίδιο της το σπίτι, μες στο χωράφι της. Δεν είχε άλλα παιδιά για να παρηγορηθεί, ν' αφοσιωθεί σε κείνα. Έναν τον είχε, μονάκριβο, καμάρι και περηφάνια της. Και τώρα! (...) Και στο τέλος, ποια η ανταμοιβή; Ο γιος της ερωτεύθηκε αυτό το έκτρομα, αυτό το εξάμβλωμα της φύσης, αυτό το τέρας, και τον έχασε για πάντα. (Vassilikos 2007: 73)

And, yes, she didn't hide the fact that she was jealous of the plant that had stolen him away from her forever in her own home, in her own territory. She had no other children to console her, to devote herself to. She had him alone, her only cherished one, her pride and joy. And now! (...) And what was her reward in the end? Her son had fallen in love with this freak of nature, this abortion, this monster, and she'd lost him forever. (Vassilikos 1964:52)

Despite her secret heartache, she never dares to say anything in front of her husband, as she knows he will not back her up. It is ironic that, in an Oedipal situation such as this, which requires a patriarchal imposition of the Phallic No to stop any further yearning for the mother figure, or in this case for the plant, it is the mother who is the obstacle to Lazaros' desires, not the father, who actually approves of it. In his first proper appearance at the dinner table, Lazaros' father is introduced as an 'άνθρωπος ντόμπρος και απονήρευτος' (an honest and unsuspecting man), naively believing his son's story about the plant being an 'experiment' and supporting him in his 'studies'. In other words, Lazaros' father does precisely the opposite of what he ought to do, that is put an end to his son's incestuous activities. In siding with him against the mother he is actually giving him permission to do as he pleases, and hence prolonging the non-resolution of Lazaros' Oedipal complex. It is essential that he should intervene in order to enable Lazaros to complete his Oedipal trajectory, however, at no time does he attempt to do so, proving himself ineffective and impotent in his patriarchal role. This is unfortunate for Lazaros, who is therefore stuck where he is in the Oedipus Complex until or unless he finds another father figure, which he fails to do and hence ends the narrative as he began it, still an incomplete, identity-less individual detached from society.

Bearing this in mind, it could be argued that the novel might indeed be read in different ways. Firstly, as an allegory for the nature-culture opposition;<sup>20</sup> secondly, as the story of a young man who is either at odds with his social context or trying to come to terms with his sexuality; and finally as a narrative of identity, focusing on the childish immaturity of the protagonist and his relationship with others, primarily his parents. The last two readings in focusing on the sexuality and identity of the main character, could be seen as overlapping. Basically all three readings could be summarized in psychoanalytic terms as a transition from the chaotic Imaginary to the Symbolic order, the world of language and culture, which subjects gradually enter in shaping their identities.

Vassilikos subtly weaves into his narrative identity anxieties and existential uncertainties regarding modern progress and the destruction of nature. Youthful anarchism and escapism mingle with latent autobiography. He skilfully intertwines the social and the personal, realism and fantasy, monstrous urbanisation and sexual ambivalence, producing one of the most interesting Greek novels of the last century and one which is still very readable. Though it was widely read at the time of its publication and might have become cult fiction, it failed in the long term to attract a youth readership. Had Vassilikos written the novel today he might have substituted a personal computer for the plant since the obsessive devotion that Lazaros displays towards it is replicated today in teenagers' attachment to their laptops. Yet, *To Φύλλο* can still appeal to modern sensibilities and to young readers trying to reconcile rebelliousness with the search for identity. The modern reader has to decide whether this text comes across as more of an identity narrative than a nature-culture allegory or a novel of anti-social behaviour or even revolt. Though it would be unwise to dilute the complexity of the novel or to ignore the fact that it lends itself to an analysis from an eco-criticism perspective,<sup>21</sup> the theme of identity appears to be more dominant and deeply ingrained in the novel.

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<sup>20</sup> In his introduction to the definitive edition of the Trilogy, Aris Maragopoulos describes *The Plant* as an ecological manifesto ('Τι είναι και τι θέλει η Τριλογία' in Vassilikos 2007: 13).

<sup>21</sup> For an eco-critical approach in the context of Modern Greek literature see Ball 2005.

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