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# *Prometheus Bound* Reappropriated: A Modern Greek Promethean 'Palimpsest' by Nikiforos Vrettakos

https://doi.org/10.1515/tc-2022-0007

**Abstract:** This article seeks to investigate the cultural and ideological processes conditioning the reception of *Prometheus Bound* ascribed to Aeschylus in the so far unexplored poetic drama *Prometheus or The Play of a Day* (1978) by the renowned Modern Greek poet Nikiforos Vrettakos. It is argued that his rewriting of the tragic myth bears the features of a palimpsest, whose layers include archetypal features of *Prometheus Bound*, such as the Titan's dignified struggle, his philanthropy, and the concept of human progress, filtered in varying ways through the mediating receptions (Goethe, Camus, Kazantzakis, Sikelianos, Varnalis, Michalakeas) of the ancient *exemplum*. At the same time, Vrettakos chooses to deploy Prometheus as his self-image and grafts the poetic ego onto the title-character to raise critical awareness and convey his ideological and ethical stance. These elements contribute to the play's distinctiveness, as well as its power to move beyond the immediate socio-political circumstances of the military dictatorship in Greece (1967–1974) and offer a diachronic perspective on intrinsic aspects of the human condition: the dignified resistance to oppression, the limits of human intellect and the sense of humanism emerging from the perception of mankind and nature as an inseparable entity – a feature of Vrettakos' poetics *par excellence*.

**Keywords:** *Prometheus Bound*, classical reception, Greek tragedy, Modern Greek poetry, cultural intervention, palimpsest, poetic ego, Nikiforos Vrettakos.

*In memory of Professor John N. Kazazis*

## Introduction: Aims, scope and evidence

This article seeks to explore the literary, ideological, and cultural processes determining the reception of *Prometheus Bound* ascribed to Aeschylus in the poetic

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drama entitled *Prometheus or The Play of a Day* (*Ο Προμηθέας ή το παιχνίδι μιας μέρας* [1978]) by the renowned Modern Greek poet Nikiforos Vrettakos (1912–1991). The play was written in the period of the poet's self-exile during the military dictatorship in Greece (1967–1974) and has so far received little scholarly attention, having been overshadowed by the popularity of Vrettakos' purely poetic oeuvre.[1]

What makes the play's re-reading appealing today? What is the distinctiveness of this reworking of the tragic myth? What difference does it make? As Lorna Hardwick has pointed out, "Prometheus has historically been an icon for defiance and struggle, appropriated for 'causes'".[2] Vrettakos' use of the Titan as an embodiment of resistance to oppression is in line with the cultural conditions in Greece during the dictatorship. In fact, the ancient *exemplum* of his play, *Prometheus Bound*, was twice brought on stage in that period (in 1967 and 1974) as a means of political and cultural intervention in the struggle against the anti-intellectual, authoritarian regime.[3] In turn, Vrettakos' reappropriation of this tragedy could give scope for a case study that may yield insight into the ideological forces determining cultural production in a state of crisis; indeed, the most critical period of the recent Greek past. At the same time, as it will be pointed out, his treatment is not restricted to the immediate socio-political situation, but also appeals to a wider transhistorical context of political resistance and humanism.

To understand Vrettakos' poetic agenda, it is essential to address the play's 'palimpsestuous' character, that is, to explore the ways in which this poetic drama grafts itself onto its source-texts.[4] As it will be shown in the next sections, the poet reconfigures distinctive aspects of the plot, characters, and concepts of *Prometheus Bound*, whilst imbuing his play with key literary and ideological elements coming from mediating (European and Modern Greek) reworkings of this tragic myth. I shall argue that from an aesthetic and conceptual viewpoint this interplay generates a rich, multi-layered palimpsest, which is employed to convey the poet's own voice in a time of heightened crisis. The final section will address the issue of the play's performativity, which is a vexing matter in the case of poetic dramas.

To this end, the evidence employed emerges from a close reading of the play, which could give scope for mapping and peeling the intertextual layers that can be deciphered. Significant evidence for the making of the play is provided in the

**1** There have only been few references to aspects of the play's plot: Raizis 1993 and 2004; Chassapi-Christodoulou 2002, II, 1043–1051; Xanthaki-Karamanou/Panagoulea 2009, 713–716.

**2** Hardwick 1999, 1.

**3** See Van Steen 2015, 120–133.

**4** On 'palimpsest' as the outcome of a transformative process through which a literary text is grafted onto an earlier one, see Genette 1997a, esp. 5–10.

Archive of Nikiforos Vrettakos at the Municipal Library of Sparta. This involves paratextual material, such as the manuscript of *Prometheus or The Play of a Day* with marginal notes by the poet;[5] his correspondence with members of his family (especially his son, the author and director Costas Vrettakos, who passed away in 2018) and friends, which sheds light on the poet's thoughts and intentions during the writing process; copies of the literary works which were kept in his library and informed his play, including passages of interest marked in the margin by the poet himself. This rich material contributes to contextualizing the evidence coming from the dramatic text and could yield insight into the poet's *modus operandi*.

## 1 The play and its author: An overview

Nikiforos Vrettakos was born in the Laconian village of Krokees, near Sparta, in 1912. He spent his early childhood in his family's farm on the slopes of Mount Taygetos in Laconia, where he developed a close, almost mystical communion with nature that determined his poetics.[6] In 1929 he moved to Athens to study Law, but due to financial difficulties he left a year later to undertake various jobs as a clerk. In 1937 he began a thirty-year career in the Greek Civil Service. The War, German occupation (1941–1944), Resistance and the ensuing civil strife (1946–1949) shaped his poetic conscience. During the War he joined the left-oriented National Liberation Front and subsequently became a member of the Greek Communist Party; he was expelled from the latter in 1949 due to his pacifist stance against Cold War conflicts, as expressed in his collection of lyrical essays entitled *Two People talk about Peace in the World* (*Δυο άνθρωποι μιλούν για την ειρήνη του κόσμου*).

In 1967 he responded to the military coup in Greece by going into self-imposed exile at the International Children's Village of Pestalozzi at Trogen on the Swiss Alps. In 1970 he moved to Palermo and returned to Greece after the reconstitution of democracy in 1974. In a literary career of about sixty years, he published more than eighty-five collections of poetry, eight prose works and numerous newspaper articles. In the 1950s and 1960s he also produced a series of translations of works by Honoré De Balzac, Romain Rolland, Attila József, Pearl Buck and Edita

**5** On the term 'paratext' (i. e. the accompanying material surrounding, presenting and extending the text) see Genette 1997b, esp. 1–15 and 1997a, 4–5.

**6** On the decisive significance of the poet's early years in Laconia see his autobiography, *Anguish* (*Οδύνη*) 43–120; cf. Andreiomenos 2015, 16–53 and n. 4 with rich bibliography; Gotovos 1989, 27–42, 70–72.

Morris. The choice of these authors reflects his own ideological concerns about social structure, human socialism, as well as pacifism in the wake of the Cold War.

Vrettakos belongs to the so called 1930s generation of Greek poets, which includes, among others, Giorgos Seferis, Odysseas Elytis and Yannis Ritsos, his slightly older contemporary, with whom he went to the same school. The conceptual framework of this generation's literary production involves the effort of constructing a fresh cultural identity through a dialogue with the archetypes of the Classical, Byzantine and Early Modern Greek past on the one hand and European culture on the other that could offer an invigorating and liberating balance between tradition and progressivism.[7] This is significant for understanding the convergence between the Modern Greek and the European perspective that pervades Vrettakos' rewriting of the tragic myth in the 1960s and 1970s.

The poet was nominated four times for the Nobel prize, he won three State Prizes for poetry (1940, 1956, 1983), the Academy of Athens Award (1977) and the rarely awarded National Prize for Letters (1985). In 1987 he was elected member of the Academy of Athens; in fact, the first left-oriented member of the Academy. His work has been translated into most European languages, as well as into Arabic, Turkish and Japanese.

In 1978 Vrettakos published *Prometheus or The Play of a Day,* a poetic drama in free verse, following a lengthy writing process. In his correspondence with his son and his friends kept in his Archive, Vrettakos states his purpose of writing a *Prometheus* play as early as November 1967. This was the start of the period of his self-exile at Trogen, when he was writing an autobiographical chronicle entitled *Anguish* (*Οδύνη*) published in 1969.[8] Nonetheless, the process of writing this play took him much more than he expected, as he was working on it along with parallel poetic projects. Moreover, the fact that it was his first (and only) attempt to write a drama may also account for the length of time in the making of his *Prometheus*. In his subsequent letters he mentions that he started drafting it in May 1971 and was heading towards completion by the end of 1973 alongside his poetic collections entitled *Protest* (*Διαμαρτυρία* [1974]) and *The River Byes and Seven Elegies* (*Το ποτάμι Μπυές και τα εφτά ελεγεία* [1975]).[9] He was then nursed for five months

**7** See Tziovas 2011, esp. 310–312, 544–546 and Beaton 1999, 128–257; cf. further Vitti 1995; Layoun 1990 and Tziovas 1997 with relevant bibliography.

**8** Letter to his son, Costas Vrettakos (13/12/1967): "By the time I have finished *Anguish*, I shall have the rest of the winter to write a *Prometheus*".

**9** Letters to his son (7/1973) and his friends, Anthoula Ganiari (3/3/1973, 16/3/1973, 22/3/1973, 9/4/1973, 28/7/1973, 1/8/1973, 4/8/1973, 10/8/1973, 16/8/1973, 25/8/1973, 4/9/1973, 26/9/1973, 5/12/1973, 7/12/1973, 17/12/1973) and Kalliopi Nakopoulou (29/4/1971, 27/3/1973, 30/3/1973, 4/9/1973, 17/5/1973, 22/6/1973, 1/8/1973, 16/8/1973).

in a sanatorium and in August 1974 he returned to Greece, where he completed his play. Hence, the contextual works to his *Prometheus* are *Anguish*, his autobiography, which sheds light on the factors shaping his poetic *persona*, and the two aforementioned collections (*Protest* and *The River Byes and Seven Elegies*), which employ powerful language to disparage oppression and political tyranny.

*Prometheus or The Play of a Day* consists of four acts and begins with an imposing image of darkness and the sound of the voices of Hephaestus, Power and Violence, as well as those of Deucalion, Pyrrha and of Zeus himself. Unlike *Prometheus Bound,* the characters of Hephaestus, Power and Violence do not appear, but their voices are heard offstage (Act I, 9–17). Moreover, in Vrettakos' play there is no hint of pity expressed by Hephaestus towards the Titan, unlike his ancient counterpart (*PV* 12–72);[10] instead, he submissively aligns himself with Power and Violence, the instruments of Zeus' tyranny. In contrast to *Prometheus Bound,* where Zeus does not appear at all, though his will is conveyed through his henchmen, Vrettakos introduces the god's offstage voice, which evidently serves to enhance the distance and the detachment of Zeus' ruling power. At the same time, he inserts the figures of Deucalion and Pyrrha, the well-known benefactors of mankind (see e. g. A.R. 3.1084–1089, Ov. *Met*. 1.313–415). Vrettakos follows a widespread mythical version going back to Hesiod (*Cat*. fr. 2 M.-W.), according to which Deucalion was Prometheus' son (see also below, § 3.4).[11] The former and his wife both remain loyal to the Titan throughout the play and exhort humankind, which is represented by the chorus, to proceed using the gift of fire without any fear of Zeus (pp. 30–31). He also introduces Ephestios, who helped Prometheus give fire to men. Towards the end of the first act Hermes makes his first appearance, asking men to return the fire to Zeus. His demand is rejected by Deucalion, Pyrrha and Ephestios, and the god appeals to Zeus, who sends a storm to put out the fire (pp. 31–37); the men of the chorus urge each other to protect the fire in eight different languages (Greek, English, Russian, French, Chinese, Italian, German and Spanish), which brings forward the ecumenical angst lying behind this collective cry.

The second act starts with an altercation between the voices of Zeus and Prometheus, serving to delineate the god's absolute power and his blind retribution for the theft of fire, which Prometheus regards as a rightful possession of mankind (Act II, 41–46). Subsequently, Prometheus confronts Athena and his brother Epimetheus, who are both presented as mouthpieces of Zeus trying to urge him to submit to his will (pp. 47–58). Meanwhile, Vrettakos deploys the tragic conven-

**10** On Hephaestus' compassion for the Titan in *Prometheus Bound* see Conacher 1980, 32–34; Griffith 1983, 85.

**11** Cf. also Acusil. *FGrH* 2 F34; A.R. 3.1086–1087; [Apollod.] 1.46.3–4.

tion of the secondary chorus,[12] by introducing a subsidiary chorus of Nymphs, who enter divided into three groups and attempt to beguile Prometheus; first they challenge his faith in peace, justice and love and then they employ seductive, honey-sweet words reminiscent of the enticing manner of the Odyssean Sirens (pp. 59–62). Unlike *Prometheus Bound*, where the chorus of Oceanids is sympathetic to the Titan, Vrettakos' female subsidiary chorus is an agent of Zeus, whilst the main chorus of his play is male representing the benefitted mankind. The use of the antiphonal choruses serves to underscore their alignment with two competing, hegemonic forces.

Hermes' archetypal confrontation with Prometheus, which originates in *Prometheus Bound* and highlights the Titan's relentless spirit as against Hermes' wholly submissive attitude, signposts the beginning of the next act (Act III, 69–75). Subsequently, Epimetheus reappears to break his brother's spirit by reporting that mankind has abandoned him and succumbed to the power of Zeus (pp. 76–87). Indeed, in the fourth and final act the chorus-leader admits that they have yielded to the absolute power of Zeus, who lured them by offering untroubled life, as long as they kneel before him and perform all humiliating tasks assigned to them, such as providing Hera with perfumes or carrying whips to guard Zeus' tyranny (Act IV, 91–94). Heracles arrives to liberate Prometheus; he is sympathetic towards the Titan, albeit a servant of Zeus. But instead of compromising and accepting Zeus' luring gifts, the freed Prometheus chooses self-exile on Mount Caucasus (pp. 95–100, 105–108). Zeus' apparent 'generosity' seems to allude to the superficially 'clement' and quasi liberalising practices of the Greek dictatorial regime in its effort to gain legitimacy during the period before the Polytechnic uprising (November 1973).[13]

Following a procession of legendary monsters, including the Harpies, Scylla and Charybdis (p. 114), there is a change of setting from Mount Caucasus to Mount Olympus at the end of the last act. A closing tableau displays Zeus' feast on Olympus; the most violent, oppressive or disgraceful figures of history including Nero, Attila, Genghis Khan, Pope Gregory the 13th, Hitler, Stalin and Nixon (U.S. president who escalated the Vietnam War, during which this play was written) have been invited to the banquet to celebrate Zeus' triumph (p. 113). Hermes then appears to inform Zeus of Prometheus' self-exile on Caucasus and to convey the Titan's message that the struggle is not over (p. 114). Zeus is infuriated by Epimetheus, who failed to convince his brother to reconcile, and punishes him as a traitor, whilst the latter is kneeling before him begging for his forgiveness

**12** Cf. Aesch. *Supp.* 825–902, 1018–1073; *Eum.* 1032–1047; Eur. *Hipp.* 58–112; *Supp.* 1123–1164. See also Xanthaki-Karamanou/Panagoulea 2009, 714.

**13** Cf. Raizis 1993, 111 and 2004, 137–138.

(pp. 114–116). The play ends with a metatheatrical address of Hermes to the audience, signposting the drama as a 'play within a play':

> Κύριοι, τελειώσαμε. Μπορείτε να πάτε
> τώρα στα σπίτια σας. Ο Δίας, το Κράτος,
> η Βία, ο Ήφαιστος, κι όλοι οι άλλοι,
> μικροί και μεγάλοι θεοί, αποσύρθηκαν πάλι
> τώρα σε σύσκεψη. Την επόμενη μέρα,
> μετά από χρόνια, ένας άλλος ποιητής
> θα ετοιμάσει για σας μιαν άλλη παράσταση.
>
> Gentlemen, it is over. You may now go home. Zeus, Power, Violence, Hephaestus and everyone else, great and lesser gods, have now gone to another meeting. On the next day, years later, another poet will prepare another performance for you.[14]
>
> (Act IV, 117)

In this manner, the poet refers to the gods as quasi politicians, thus alluding to politics as a performance that keeps repeating itself and as a 'play', which accounts for the title of this poetic drama. At the same time, the second term employed in the title, the 'day', could be suggestive of the unity of time involving the development of the plot within the course of one day; this is a technique going back to Greek tragedy, through which Vrettakos' metapoetic debt to tragedy seems to be further acknowledged.

## 2 Vrettakos' dialogue with *Prometheus Bound*: Convergence and Variation

As would be expected, Vrettakos, like other poets revisiting this tragedy, was evidently not concerned with the scholarly discussions about the authenticity of *Prometheus Bound*, whose Aeschylean ascription has been challenged – though inconclusively – on philological grounds.[15] Rather, he seems to have used the ancient play as the springboard for the making of a new drama that exploits

**14** Translations from Greek are mine, unless otherwise stated.

**15** Modern discussions of this debate, which goes back to 19th century scholarship, include Griffith 1977 challenging its Aeschylean authorship (summarized in Griffith 1983, 31–35); Conacher (1980, 141–174), Lloyd-Jones (2003, 52–55 with an overview of earlier bibliography) and Ruffell (2012, 14–16) have stressed the inconclusiveness of the evidence; the Aeschylean paternity was favoured, among others, by Saïd 1985, 32–36, 65–73 and Podlecki 2005, 195–200.

formal conventions of Greek tragedy (the unity of time, the chorus – main and subsidiary – and the debate) and the core Promethean concept of the duality of the human condition, involving the potential for progress and suffering, in wholly different ideological and cultural contexts.

Vrettakos reiterates key facets of *Prometheus Bound* which determined its subsequent receptions, such as the spirit of justified rebellion, the defence of the weak and the concept of progress.[16] In particular, he builds upon Prometheus' tragic portrayal as a philanthropist whose help of mankind is perceived as a challenge to Zeus' prestige (*PV* 11, 27, 30, 123, 446, 506, 543–544, 547–551, 613–614).[17] The polarity between Prometheus' championship of man and his defiance of Zeus emerges especially from *PV* 10–11 (*ὡς ἂν διδαχθῇ τὴν Διὸς τυραννίδα/στέργειν, φιλανθρώπου δὲ παύεσθαι τρόπου*) and 28–30 (*τοιαῦτ' ἐπηύρου τοῦ φιλανθρώπου τρόπου./θεὸς θεῶν γὰρ οὐχ ὑποπτήσσων χόλον/βροτοῖσι τιμὰς ὤπασας πέρα δίκης·*), where this notion is further underscored by means of the term *φιλάνθρωπον* ('man-loving'). Vrettakos imbues the Titan's philanthropy, which pervades his ancient *exemplum*, with altruistic notions, such as compassion for the weak and the quest for social justice (Act I, 21–26, Act II, 58, 61, Act IV, 106–107). His own Prometheus describes how he was roused by human suffering due to Zeus' injustice and his sense of debt to help mankind and the new generation:

> Αλλά αυτό που αναρρίπισε
> το μέσα μου φως και το έκαμε λάμψη
> ήταν το κλάμα τους. Τα δάκρυά τους
> έμοιαζαν ως ν'αναδύονταν μες
> από ασύλληπτα βάθη, κυανά
> και δονούμενα. Και κάθισα τότε,
> σκέφτηκα και είπα: μπορεί όσα άστρα
> είναι πάνω από μας, ορατά και αόρατα,
> να 'ναι και μέσα τους. Ασπάστηκα έπειτα
> τα βρέφη τους και έφυγα.
>
> But what roused the light inside me and turned it into sparkle was their cry. Their tears looked as if they were coming from immense depths, blue and vibrant. And then I sat, thought, and said: Perhaps the stars upon us, visible and invisible, may be inside them too. And then I kissed their babies and left.
>
> (Act I, 21–22)

**16** Cf. Raizis 1983, 30.

**17** On Prometheus' philanthropy see Tromp de Ruiter 1931, 271–272; Griffith 1983, 9; Podlecki 2005, 21–27; Pucci 2005, 56, 59–61.

Vrettakos' credo is permeated with features of Christian faith; instead of accepting the (initially) grateful crowd's kiss of his feet, Prometheus asks them to kiss each other (Act I, 25), which recalls Christ's commandment "love one another as I have loved you" (John 15.12). The portrayal of Prometheus as a martyr and as a philanthropist, as a Messianic figure, also emerges from Heracles' appeal to the Titan to remember him when he comes to power (Act IV, 99), which alludes to the well-known gospelic passage from Luke (23.42: "Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom"). Likewise, Pyrrha's earlier description of Prometheus as carrying the whole human race on his shoulders (Act I, 18) echoes John's Gospel 1.29 ("There is the Lamb of God, who carries away the sin of the world').

The autocratic features of Zeus go back to *Prometheus Bound*, where he represents the archetype of the 'bad tyrant';[18] he governs with lawless customs (*PV* 150–152), keeps justice in his own hands (186–187, 402–405), has subjugated the rest of the gods and will not stop until he has satiated his soul or until he loses his empire by guile (163–166). Vrettakos revisits the ancient paradigm to bring forward multiple facets of Zeus' tyrannical power. This is conveyed through Prometheus' fierce altercation with the god's offstage voice (Act I, 11–16 and II, 42–46) and Zeus' manipulation of the forces of nature to break Prometheus' spirit and human spirit (eclipse of the sun, thunderbolts, storm: Act I, 9, 11–12, 16, 19, 37, II, 42, 46, III, 75, IV, 116); the latter idea originates in the closing scene of the earthquake in the source-text (*PV* 1043–1052, 1080–1088). At the same time, Vrettakos' play also echoes the Titan's prediction of Zeus' downfall in *Prometheus Bound* (507–525, 757–768, 907–940, 955–959), stressing that his harsh authority will eventually be challenged (Act I, 13–14, III, 79, IV, 114). The delineation of Zeus' tyranny in the ancient paradigm is appropriated by the modern poet to bring forward facets of violent oppression across place and time, such as Zeus' atrocious consorts at the closing scene on Olympus.

The oppression imposed by Zeus is similarly conveyed through Prometheus' confrontation with the god's subservient agents, namely Hermes, whom Vrettakos naturally derives from *Prometheus Bound* (943–1079), but also Epimetheus and even Athena. In more specific terms, Vrettakos reiterates Hermes' servile character-portrayal in *Prometheus Bound*, where the god is contemptuously addressed by Prometheus as Zeus' servant (*PV* 954: *ὡς θεῶν ὑπηρέτου*, 966–967: *τῆς σῆς λατρείας τὴν ἐμὴν δυσπραξίαν,/ σαφῶς ἐπίστασ', οὐκ ἂν ἀλλάξαιμ' ἐγώ*). Similarly disdainful comments on Hermes' slavishness are delivered by the Titan in Vrettakos' poetic drama (Act III, 69, 74, cf. also below, § 3.4). Moreover, Hermes

**18** See Conacher 1980, 70; Griffith 1983, 7; Podlecki 2005, 35 (including all relevant passages); Dougherty 2006, 71–73. Cf. further Séchan 1951, 49–68.

himself cynically admits that to be able to serve Zeus one should be as unscrupulous as possible. He even goes as far as to assert: "I have as many flaws as needed to be Hermes" (Act III, 71). This is a remarkable metatheatrical self-representation of his *persona,* as shaped by the tragic tradition; this case of dramatic self-reflexivity prepares the audience to anticipate nothing less than the calculating and insensitive mouthpiece of Zeus that Hermes traditionally represents. Further correspondences with the source-text include the Titan's uncompromising stance, which Hermes interprets as imprudence (*PV* 964–965: *τοιοῖσδε μέντοι καὶ πρὶν αὐθαδίσμασιν/ἐς τάσδε σαυτὸν πημονὰς καθώρμισας*, 977: *κλύω σ' ἐγὼ μεμηνότ' οὐ σμικρὰν νόσον*, 982: *καὶ μὴν σύ γ' οὔπω σωφρονεῖν ἐπίστασαι*, 1008–1013, 1054–1057). Like his ancient counterpart, Hermes in Vrettakos' play threatens Prometheus that his immoderation will be brutally retributed (Act III, 75: "I am seized by terror for your fate!"). Notably, Vrettakos adds further opponents to Prometheus, such as Athena and Epimetheus, whilst depriving him of allies, if we also consider his ultimate betrayal by mankind. At the same time, he deliberately omits moderate and well-meaning characters advising the Titan to give up self-sacrifice, such as the Ocean (*PV* 284–396), with the purpose of drawing a sharper contrast between Prometheus' relentless *ēthos* and the subservience of Zeus' henchmen.

In showing both the tyrannical features of Zeus and Prometheus' tragic portrayal as a philanthropist, Vrettakos conceivably engaged with the Romantic interventions of Byron and Shelley, albeit in a less direct way than with the works discussed in the next sections. In Byron's *Ode to Prometheus* (1816), which brings together the Titan's suffering for the sake of mankind with his heroic fight against tyrannical powers, it is stressed that "Thy Godlike crime was to be kind" (v. 35). Whilst writing this ode, Byron interacted with Shelley, who was working at the same time on his *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), a closet drama which focuses on the liberating power of love and forgiveness for the salvation of humanity, advocating equality and denouncing violence.[19]

Another feature of Vrettakos' play that echoes Shelley is the former's choice to employ Zeus' offstage voice, which is equivalent to the Shelleyan use of the phantom of Jupiter as a means of stressing his ruthlessness and detachment. Although the use of the voice of God is a literary motif (and thus not restricted in these two poets), the shaping influence that Shelley's lyrical drama exerted on the perception of the myth in Western thought makes it likely that Vrettakos may

**19** On the treatments of Byron and Shelley see Trousson 1964, 321–334; Duchemin 1974, 131–143; Raizis 1982, esp. 91–93; Dougherty 2006, 97–104; Ruffell 2012, 114–118; Corbeau-Parsons 2013, 63–69.

have consciously or unconsciously have it in mind. In contrast to Byron's and Shelley's defiantly atheistic versions, however, Vrettakos' text is permeated with the aforementioned Christian references, which are consistent with the Christianised features of modern Hellenism (on the 'amalgamation' of Prometheus with Christ see below, § 3.3).

It is noteworthy that the Titan's steadfastness and uncompromising attitude mirror the ethical stance of Vrettakos himself, who seems to deploy the tragic *persona* to voice his own internal anxieties. Prometheus as a self-image of the poet is part of a rich literary legacy, involving, among other cases, the Romantic poets. In Shelley the Titan represents the poet-saviour, in Byron the poet's unyielding will, whilst in Goethe the artist rejoicing in his own creative power (see § 3.2).[20]

Vrettakos' intention to present Prometheus as his mouthpiece emerges from his correspondence with his friend Anthoula Ganiari:[21]

> There was this frustrating winter, my staying inside, the vagueness of tomorrow. Fortunately, I prepared Prometheus in my mind, and he says everything that I would say if I was tied to Caucasus (aren't I?).
>
> (Palermo, 3/3/1973)
>
> I have based my Prometheus on excellent findings and I shall address with an intense voice through him my 'brothers' Attila, Hitler, Stalin, Nixon etc.
>
> (Palermo, 30/3/1973)

This purpose seems to be most eloquently articulated through the theme of the Titan's self-withdrawal at the end of the play, which provides a lucid case of poetic self-representation. Having to choose in real life between his own civic principles and compromise with the regime of the colonels in 1967, Vrettakos opts for self-exile on his own 'Caucasus', the Alpine village of Trogen and, more specifically, the Pestalozzi Foundation for war-affected children. This choice bears a particularly symbolic meaning, as the poet chooses a children's shelter from war as his own shelter from oppression, thus seeking purity as against political corruption.[22] This concept also emerges from the dramatically nuanced change of setting from Caucasus to Olympus at the closing scene, which draws a telling con-

**20** See e. g. Dougherty 2006, 95–96.

**21** Similarly in a letter to his other friend, Kalliopi Nakopoulou (30/3/1973).

**22** This choice is expressed in another letter to Anthoula Ganiari (16/3/1973). On further autobiographical elements in Vrettakos' poetry see Gotovos 1989, 322–328.

trast between the ascetic purity of Caucasus and the idea of tyrannical corruption attached to Olympus.

Likewise, the concept of self-withdrawal is represented in two of his collections coming from the same period, *Protest* and *The River Byes and Seven Elegies*. In his 'Farewell to the Sun of Greece' from *Protest* the poet speaks in the first person powerfully asserting that he has chosen self-exile over submission to political tyranny ("I chose to leave my enslaved land lot, taking a cane and a sack. Desert and exile will be sweeter; the sand will be like soft grass under my feet, as long as I keep my soul, o my sun, and my word").

# 3 Mediating receptions and Vrettakos' poetic agenda

## 3.1 Light and darkness: the discourse with Kazantzakis

The most concrete evidence for the mediating routes chosen by the poet in the process of his refiguration of *Prometheus Bound* concerns the *Prometheus* trilogy (1943–1944) of Nikos Kazantzakis (1883–1957). It was published during the German occupation of Greece, when civil strife was imminent, and consists of *Prometheus Fire-Bringer* (*Promitheas Pyrforos*), *Prometheus Bound* (*Promitheas Desmotis*) and *Prometheus Unbound* (*Promitheas Lyomenos*).[23] By that time Kazantzakis had completed the final version of *Askitiki: Salvatores Dei* (*The Saviours of God: Spiritual Exercises*), his great philosophical treatise encapsulating his ideology and determining the conceptual kernel of his work on Prometheus. My research in the archive of Nikiforos Vrettakos has brought to light his own copy of Kazantzakis' *Prometheus* trilogy and of *Askitiki*, both of which he had discussed in his critical analysis of Kazantzakis' oeuvre.[24] In these copies the poet marked many passages of interest, elements of which have imbued the making of his play.

Vrettakos derives the idea of Zeus' manipulation of the forces of nature from *Prometheus Bound*, as noted in the previous section, whilst infiltrating it with the symbolic implications of the light and darkness metaphor, which he largely draws on Kazantzakis. In more specific terms, the image of darkness opening

**23** On its plot see Chassapi-Christodoulou 2002, II, 677–687.
**24** Vrettakos 1960, 91–105, 603–610.

Vrettakos' *Prometheus* is entangled with a forceful description of cosmic turbulence involving the primordial struggle of natural forces:

> Δεν προφτάνει σχεδόν ν'ανατείλει ο ήλιος
> που επανέρχεται κι άλλη νύχτα στη γης
> σαν εκείνη που πέρασε. Μεγάλες στοιβάδες
> σκοταδιού περιφέρονται στον ορίζοντα, ενώ
> κονταίνουν βυθίζοντας τους κορμούς
> λίγο-λίγο τα δέντρα απ'το φόβο τους.
> Τρεμουλιάζουνε κάνοντας μπρος-πίσω
> ως να θέλουν να κρυφτούν τα ποτάμια.
> Μουγγανίζουν οι βόνασοι, κλαίνε τα βρέφη.
> Τα στοιχεία σα να'χουν λυθεί και να τρέχουν
> έξω απ'τους νόμους τους, κόβουν τις ρίζες
> των νερών και βροντώντας ως απάνω
> βαδίζουν όρθια στα πέλαγα, ενώ πότε
> πότε, κεραυνοί από αίμα κρεμούν
> ξαφνικά τα κλαδιά τους στην άβυσσο.
>
> The sun barely sets, and there is another night on the earth, like the night before. Huge layers of darkness move across the horizon, whilst the trees are shortened, immersing their trunks little by little out of fear. The rivers tremble moving forth and back, as if they want to hide. The cattle moan, the babies cry. It is as if the elements of nature are unleashed and run beyond their order, cut the springs of water and thundering upwards they tread over the seas, while blood thunders hang now and again their branches in the abyss.
>
> (Act I, 9)

This account displays notable verbal echoes of the beginning of Kazantzakis' trilogy, which has been marked in the poet's own copy:

> Ραγίσαν τα βουνά και γκρεμιστήκαν,
> χοχλάζαν τα νερά, φωτιές πηδούσαν,
> τα σπλάχνα ανοίξαν του Θεού, και φάνη
> γυμνό, φριχτό, το πρόσωπο της Μοίρας.
> Το βράχο τούτο αγκαλιασμένος, θώρουν
> τις φωτερές και σκοτεινές δυνάμες
> στην άβυσσο από πάνω να παλεύουν.
>
> The mountains cracked and came crumpling down, the waters were boiling, fire was breaking out everywhere, the bowels of God opened and the naked, horrible face of Fate revealed itself. Clinging to this rock I watched the forces of light and darkness struggling on top of the abyss.
>
> (*Promitheas Pyrforos*, 12; transl. Petrides 2015, 374).

The battle between light and darkness, the former representing the ideas of life and hope offered by the gift of fire and the latter being imposed by Zeus to mankind, lies in the kernel of Vrettakos' play. At the same time, the poet cross-fertilizes this duality with the particular idea of darkness as a symbol of oppression, despair and death that permeates Post-War Greek political poetry, especially that concerning the circumstances in camps of political prisoners.[25] Moreover, darkness bears a further symbolism in Vrettakos' poetics, in that it is a technique of providing the illusion of the length of time, as the poet himself notes in his manuscript ("darkness is a symbol of time").

The polarity between light and darkness brings forward the sun's fundamental position in Vrettakos' oeuvre as a whole and, in broader terms, in the poetry of the generation of the 30s, including the poetics of Odysseas Elytis *par excellence*.[26] In the course of the first act, Prometheus accuses Zeus of depriving mankind of the vital force of the sun (Act I, 19), whilst encouraging the chorus by appealing to the sun's lucidity (Act I, 30). The sun holds a cosmogonical role, representing the light of life and hope, which through its purity could lead to man's inner transformation, raising him to a superior state of existence.[27] The poet's agony for the absence of the vitality of the sun is conveyed in the works written during the period of his self-exile, such as the aforementioned poem 'Farewell to the Sun of Greece' (1967) and the poem 'My Sun' (1972) from his collection entitled *The Route* (*Οδοιπορία*).

Vrettakos' sun-centered universe is similarly delineated in his autobiography (*Anguish*, 46–47, 52, 72, 240–241, 331). Likewise, his later collections *The Distinguished Planet* (*Ο διακεκριμένος πλανήτης* [1983]) and *The Philosophy of Flowers* (*Η φιλοσοφία των λουλουδιών* [1988]) stress the symbolic, almost ritual essence of nature, which through its perfection mirrors the ideal purity of mankind.[28] The poet conjoins the benevolent influence of nature with his sense of philanthropy and social justice; in his eyes, man and nature form an indissoluble whole. This trend towards an 'ecology of emotion' relying on the ongoing interaction between person and environment is a distinctive aspect of Vrettakos' poetics. The strong human attachment to nature is repeatedly stressed by Prometheus in his altercations with Zeus and Epimetheus (Act I, 15, Act II, 50, 56, Act IV, 92). As the

**25** Ilinskaya 2004, 44–45, 54–56. Cf. also Van Steen 2011, 132–133, 163, 308–309 on the image of darkness pervading the plays staged on Greek prison islands.

**26** Elytis 1987, 122, 260, 285, 427, 452–543, 579.

**27** Mastrodimitris 1993, 52–54; Gotovos 1989, 376–382.

**28** Kapsomenos 2004, 29–41; Mastrodimitris 1993, 61–63; Rotolo 1976, 12–15; Gotovos 1989, 251–252.

poet himself noted, when he received an honorary degree from the University of Athens, "I did not get to know nature through man, but man through nature. I do not know if in any other case I would have dreamt and demanded that man should have the perfection of a flower".[29]

The light and darkness metaphor also permeates Prometheus' uncompromising self-withdrawal and his ascending route to Caucasus, as reported by Pyrrha (Act IV, 108):

> Ούτε είδε ούτε μίλησε ούτε
> και συμφώνησε, είπε, ποτέ με κανέναν!
> Κι όπως πάντοτε αδιάφορος, πες στο Δία,
> μου είπε, πως η πάλη δεν τέλειωσε!
> Κι ότι θα'ναι την επόμενη μέρα πιο σύντομη!
> Πώς σας πέρασε, είπε, απ' το νου πως μπορεί
> να με ιδείτε στον Όλυμπο, καθισμένον
> ανάμεσα σ'αυτούς που ατιμάσανε
> το ανθρώπινο γένος! Κι αμέσως μετά,
> γυρνώντας τις πλάτες του απότομα, πήρε
> τον ανήφορο κι έφευγε. Προμηθέα!
> Του φώναξα. Προμηθέα! Μα κείνος
> τους βράχους ανέβαινε σαν σκαλοπάτια!
> Ώσπου κάπου ψηλά κατάκορφα ίσως
> διακρίνονταν έπειτα σαν μια φωτιά
> διπλωμένη σε σύννεφο.
>
> He did not see or talk or agree, he said, with anyone! And indifferently, as always, "tell Zeus", he said, "that the struggle is not over! And that next time it will be shorter! How could it cross your mind that you may see me on Olympus sitting among those who disgraced mankind!" And then, he turned his back abruptly and took the uphill route and went away. "Prometheus!", I cried. "Prometheus!". But he was climbing the rocks like stairs! Until somewhere high, perhaps at the top, he was discerned like a fire wrapped into a cloud.
>
> (Act IV, 114)

Upon reaching the top of the uphill route, the Titan is likened to a liberating, dazzling fire. The notion of the 'ascent' pervades Kazantzakis' *Prometheus* trilogy and *Askitiki* and is perceived as an ascetic stance *par excellence,* paving the way for freedom and salvation:

**29** Vrettakos 1993, 70.

Και πια δε θ'αγωνίζουμαι; Πιο πέρα
δε θα κεντώ το νου μου στο ανηφόρι;

Will I not fight anymore? Will I not spur my mind further towards the uphill course?

(*Promitheas Desmotis*, 150)[30]

From this viewpoint, Kazantzakis' ascetic Prometheus is shaped into the likeness of his two other great heroes and frontrunners of humanity, Odysseus and Christ; notably, Christ's figure is conjoined with the Titan in an amalgam by Sikelianos, as will be discussed in § 3.4. The hero's ascent from the abyss, that is, from the depths of darkness and materiality, towards the spirit encapsulates the push of the Bergsonian élan vital, the evolutionary force elevating matter and liberating beings from inertia.[31] The abyss, in particular, is a notion that Kazantzakis derives from Nietzsche to describe the lack of anything fixed underlying the realm of apparent things.[32] In his analysis of Kazantzakis' work Vrettakos stressed the former's metaphysical agony to pave his way through the Nietzschean abyss.[33] Vrettakos, nonetheless, seems to have transplanted the notion of the ascent from the abyss in his poetic drama in a more conventional way, mainly as a literary trope, keeping its symbolic significance and conjoining it with the light and darkness imagery without being concerned for its philosophical implications. As Deucalion points out, stressing the harshness of the route from darkness towards light:

Κι ότι ο δρόμος που πήραμε δεν οδηγεί
αλλά βγάζει απ'την άβυσσο.

The road that we took does not drive us to the abyss but leads us out of it.

(Act I, 33)

**30** Cf. *Promitheas Pyrforos,* 53, 74, *Promitheas Desmotis,* 120, 176, *Promitheas Lyomenos,* 194, *Askitiki* 47, 54, 57, 59, 80, 81, 84. For this idea in the *Prometheus* trilogy see King 1970, 110; Constantinidis 1987, 161–162, 177–178; Bien 1989–2007, II, 185–194; Petrides 2015, 362–363.

**31** See Vrettakos 1960, 93–101; Petrides 2015, 374–377; Bien 1989–2007, I, 36–54; Poulakidas 1971–1972, 267–283; Dombrowski 1997, 9–26.

**32** On the Nietzschean concept of the abyss see Bornedal 2010; Weineck 2002, esp. 79–87.

**33** Vrettakos 1960, 603–608. Cf. the passages marked in his own copies: *Promitheas Pyrforos*, 24, 55, *Promitheas Desmotis*, 147, *Promitheas Lyomenos*, 252, 263 and *Askitiki,* 20–21, 39–40, 47, 92, 96, 110.

The abyss is here perceived in a less complex way as being equivalent to the darkness of oppression imposed by Zeus. Likewise, the aforementioned description of Prometheus' ascent to Caucasus by "climbing the rocks like stairs" is suggestive of his inner liberation and free-willed rejection of Zeus' manipulating practices without, however, bearing the Kazantzakian sense of an ascetic ordeal.

## 3.2 Mind and intellect: the dialogue with Goethe, Kazantzakis, and Camus

The available evidence indicates that Vrettakos derives the roles of Athena and Epimetheus from the *Prometheus* trilogy of Kazantzakis and the first act of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Prometheus: Ein dramatisches Fragment* (1773), which was written at the start of his career. The prominence of Athena, who embodies, by definition, wisdom and intellect, generates varying ideological implications.

Vrettakos' emphasis on mind and intellect is a legacy of Kazantzakis and Goethe, whose (similarly early) famous lyric ode to Prometheus (1774), a 56-line monologue, was incorporated as the third act of the aforementioned dramatic fragment later, in 1830.[34] This ode celebrates the power of human intellect, in that it presents Prometheus as forming mankind in his own likeness ("Hier sitz ich, forme Menschen/nach meinem Bilde", Ode *Prom*. 52–53). As Goethe himself noted in the autobiographical *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, "the old Titan robe I adapted to my own measurements";[35] the poet's identification with the mythical *persona* forms a key principle of the 'Sturm und Drang' movement, in that it deploys the energy of the archetype to express poetic genius and individual experience. This ode is a turning point in the reception history of the Prometheus myth, since Goethe introduced Prometheus as his self-image mirroring his own creative impulse. The Titan's *persona*, in turn, became established as a vehicle of poetic self-representation, being also employed by Vrettakos to articulate the poet's own voice, as discussed above. Promethean elements have imbued most of Goethe's oeuvre, including *Faust*, which Vrettakos greatly admired, as he mentions in his autobiography (*Anguish*, 102).

Prometheus' gift of intellect to humanity is an idea originating in *PV* 442–68, where the Titan describes how humans became 'possessed of minds', learned arts

**34** For Goethe's emphasis on intellect see Kerényi 1963, 9–18; Trousson 1964, 240–259; Duchemin 1974, 119–129; Vöhler 1999, 437, 448–450; Corbeau-Parsons 2013, 38–56; Dougherty 2006, 92–96. On this concept in Kazantzakis see Bien 1989–2007, II, 187–190; Petrakou 2005, 394–395; Petrides 2015, 383–385.

**35** Transl. Steele Smith 1908, II, 178–179.

and crafts and developed from a pre-civilized to an intellectually advanced state thanks to his gift of fire.[36] Goethe in his dramatic fragment and, subsequently, Kazantzakis expand on this concept by introducing Minerva/Athena not merely as an ally of Prometheus, but as a part of his own being, thereby underscoring their close intellectual affinity.[37] On the other hand, Vrettakos innovates in his portrayal of Athena, ironically presenting her as another mouthpiece of Zeus and thus stressing the Titan's isolation. Athena engages in a captivating debate with Prometheus that encompasses contrasting definitions of wisdom (Act II, 46–55); for her, wisdom is the submission to Zeus' will and involves Prometheus' abandonment of any effort of overturning the status quo. Conversely, Prometheus considers *sophia* to be intrinsically interwoven with philanthropy as against Athena's so-called 'wisdom', which is subdued to Zeus' violent power:

> Μια κολώνα
> του Κράτους του είναι η σοφία σου!
>
> A pillar of his power is your wisdom!
>
> (Act II, 53)

These lines allude to the calamitous subservience of knowledge and science, as represented by Athena, to political sovereignty.[38] This is a matter which preoccupied the poet, as it emerges from his correspondence with his son during the period of the composition of *Prometheus* (18/12/1967) and, even earlier, from his *Letter to Robert Oppenheimer* (*Στον Ρόμπερτ Οπενχάιμερ* [1954]), the inventor of the atomic bomb. This epistolary poem underscores the scientist's arrogant ego serving ruthless politics and causing the desecration of human and natural environment.[39] At the same time, this text anticipates the ending of the play, in that it similarly features Prometheus' self-withdrawal, this time in despair of the destructive use of crafts by mankind. The poet addresses an apostrophe to the Titan:

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**36** See Edelstein 1967, ch. 2; Dodds 1973, 30–36; Podlecki 2005, 16–27; Dougherty 2006, 75–78.

**37** Athena's association with Prometheus is attested in ancient sources: Duris *FGrH* 76 F47; Serv. on Verg. *Ecl.* 6.42; Fulgent. *Myth.* 2.6. Cf. Dougherty 2006, 49–50.

**38** See also Raizis 1993, 107. Professor Stephen Harrison draws my attention to the possibility that Athena's submission to Zeus' tyrannical authority may represent the coup leaders' conquest of Athens, from where Vrettakos willingly departs; this is feasible in the light of his use of Prometheus for poetic self-representation.

**39** For this work see esp. Ilinskaya 2004, 95–96; Gotovos 1989, 257–264.

> Άτυχε Προμηθέα, που σου 'κλεψαν το φως από τα χέρια σου
> και διάλεξες το βράχο μόνος σου!
>
> Unfortunate Prometheus, you had the light stolen from your hands and you chose the rock of your own free will.

Vrettakos' criticism of unbridled technological development to the detriment of mankind and nature is also likely to have been informed by Albert Camus' treatment of the Prometheus saga.[40] The poet was well acquainted with Camus' oeuvre and kept a copy of his *Rebel* (*L' homme révolté* [1951]) in his own library. This work stresses the absurdity and totalitarianism of the modern world, which, according to Camus, is ruled more by the children of Cain than the disciples of Prometheus. For him, Prometheus is the ideal rebel, as he converges intellect with moderation, displaying features refigured by Vrettakos, such as steadfastness, idealism and resistance to the deformative misunderstanding of human life. In a similar vein, in the aforementioned collection *Two People talk about Peace in the World* (p. 54), Vrettakos asserts that he shares Camus' agony about human condition and the consequences of totalitarianism after WW II.

I suggest that there are even closer conceptual correspondences between Vrettakos' *Prometheus* and Camus' essay entitled *Prométhée aux Enfers* (1946), which anticipated the *Rebel* and was published in his collection *L'Été*. Camus deploys Prometheus' *persona* to underscore the latter's isolation in the sinister ambience of Post-War Europe. He even goes as far as to suggest that if Prometheus ever came back, contemporary people would do what gods earlier did; they would tie him to the rock in the name of the humanism that he was the first to uphold. The Titan's loneliness and betrayal by mankind are concepts reiterated by Vrettakos. Moreover, Camus' emphasis on the modern world's preoccupation with technology to the detriment of human freedom and integrity seems to be encapsulated in the poet's choice to introduce Athena's mind as subservient to tyrannical authority. Furthermore, Vrettakos' aforementioned 'ecology of emotion' displays close affinities with Camus' track of thought and the emotional climate of his essay, which is imbued with the imagery of nature. Camus' argumentation is constructed upon the belief that nature is the source of all humanism; only by resorting to nature may the inherent order of things be restored in the darkness of Post-War Europe. His perception of the vanity of crude anthropocentrism and, in turn, of technologically driven science and material culture as artificial and ephemeral seems

**40** On Camus' approach to Prometheus see Trousson 1964, 464–465; Crochet 1973, 69–77; Podlecki 2005, 60–61.

to be echoed in Vrettakos' criticism of the misuse of scientific knowledge at the expense of humanism.

The poet's reworking is part of a broader cultural trend emerging from the idea of the mishandling of the Promethean 'fire' in the second half of the twentieth century. It may suffice to mention Tony Harrison's later film poem *Prometheus* (1998), in which the author deploys the 'fire' trope to set his work against the backdrop of humanist disasters and atrocities to the detriment of innocent victims from WW II onwards.[41] This historical gaze shapes Harrison's radical transplantation of ancient dramatic characters into the particular socio-economic contexts of Post-War Britain that brings forward, among other issues, the dire threats which technological advances, including industrialization, pose to humanity and humanism. Unlike Vrettakos' Prometheus, Harrison's protagonist is a hero of Labour, an old coal miner suffering from an advanced lung disease; this gives scope to the author to deploy the ancient myth in order to delineate the struggle of the British working class for the right to work with dignity under healthier conditions, whilst alluding to the pollution caused by heavy industry through visual poetry.[42]

So far, this reading of the play's source-texts has brought forward key aspects of its palimpsest-like nature; the poet grafts his reworking onto the ancient *exemplum* and its mediating receptions, from which he derives aesthetic and conceptual elements enabling him to address ideological issues concerning the quest for freedom, human potential and its limitations, and the cost of progress. At the same time, he embarks on an ecumenical treatment of these ideas by employing paradigms across time and place. For instance, the multilanguage appeal for the protection of fire (Act I, 37) underscores an agony beyond borders. Moreover, this modern Prometheus, like his ancient counterpart, is presented as endowed with a diachronic view of history (Act III, 85), throughout which wars are waged for the sake of 'Helen' covered by varying national flags, whilst people are manipulated by multiple replicas of Zeus (Act III, 83). Furthermore, the play closes with a transhistorical representation of tyrannical violence involving Zeus and his atrocious co-banqueters (Act IV, 113), whilst the metatheatrical coda alludes to a 'performance' re-enacted time after time (IV, 117). Hence, the poet seems to exploit the elasticity of the Promethean narrative to move beyond the immediate situation, that is, the oppressive military junta in Greece, to pose broader ideological questions and set his play within an international and diachronic framework, thus making his case more lucid and compelling.

**41** See his own introduction to *Prometheus* (Harrison 1998, xx).

**42** See Hardwick 1999; Hardwick 2000, 130–138; Hardwick (2022, 108–111); Hall 2002, 130–134, 136–139; Hall 2021, 132–136; Stead 2022, 202–219; Michelakis 2013, 164–168; Dougherty 2006, esp. 124–131.

## 3.3 Vrettakos and Sikelianos: Prometheus 'amalgamated'

Another, more oblique, intertext seems to be *Christ Unbound: The Death of Digenes* (*Χριστός Λυόμενος: Ο θάνατος του Διγενή*, *Thymele*, II, 1950) by the well-known Greek poet Angelos Sikelianos (1884–1951), whom Vrettakos regarded as his mentor.[43] The participle 'unbound' hints at *Prometheus Unbound*, though the Titan is only allusively deployed by the poet. In this poetic drama Sikelianos revisits the defining cultural myth of Prometheus earlier shaped in his two Delphic festival productions of *Prometheus Bound* to compose his own tragedy in his effort to rekindle interest in this genre.

The two performances of the ancient play held by Sikelianos and his first wife Eva Palmer in Delphi (1927 and 1930) posed a cultural and ideological statement that converged the features of the ancient theatrical tradition with elements of folk culture, Byzantine and Oriental music; a quasi-Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* emerging from the fusion of art, cult and ideology.[44] Their aesthetic and mythopoeic vision exerted a shaping influence on its Greek refigurations for the following decades, including the afore-discussed trilogy of Kazantzakis, who was a cordial friend of Sikelianos.

In *Christ Unbound: The Death of Digenes* Sikelianos introduces an amalgam of the Byzantine epic hero Digenes Acritas, Christ and Prometheus, incarnating in an almost mystical sense the idea of the self-sacrificing hero for the freedom of mankind in a period of Post-War transitions. The fusion of Prometheus and Christ seems to represent for Sikelianos the 'bound' mind of man, which is about to liberate itself – an idea consistent with the concepts of freedom and redemption that are pivotal in Greek poetry of the 1940s.[45] A copy of this verse drama – with the passages of interest marked in the margin – is kept in Vrettakos' own library (bearing a dedication to the latter's wife by Sikelianos dated on 4/4/1950). Although there are no verbal echoes of Sikelianos' text in Vrettakos' poetic drama, there are conceptual equivalences, in that Vrettakos refigures Sikelianos' key idea of the Christ-like figure (on the Messianic features of his *Prometheus* see § 2) striving for freedom and justice in similarly critical conditions of political violence and oppression. Notably, Sikelianos' Christ assumes features of Prometheus, as he is nailed on the cross by the tyrants for having opened his hands to embrace the

**43** On Vrettakos' deep admiration for Sikelianos see Gotovos 1994, 46–63.

**44** See recently Leontis 2019, 148–164 (with an emphasis on Eva Palmer); Dorf 2019, 107–137; Tsitsiridis 2017, 267–269, 288–295.

**45** Cf. Sikelianos 1950, 100–105; Constantinidis 1987, 170–172; Yatromanolakis 1996, 153–154; Ilinskaya 2004, 35–36.

whole earth (*Christ Unbound: The Death of Digenes*, p. 20); he has been wounded by the tyrants so as to be deprived of the desire for life and freedom (p. 20); and he is finally liberated to guide with his Promethean spirit Digenes and his fellows to the struggle for freedom (pp. 58, 60, 75). Vrettakos thus draws on Sikelianos in terms of the amalgamation of Prometheus with Christ in a parallel socio-political framework. The former's fusion of ancient and Christian elements to promote an ideological stance anticipates his *Liturgy under the Acropolis* (*Λειτουργία κάτω από την Ακρόπολη* [1981]), which converges features of the classical, Byzantine and folk heritage to set forth the notion of Hellenic cultural identity.

## 3.4 Vrettakos and Marxist ideology

Prometheus as a symbol of revolt and deliverance from tyranny through conquest of material power became an icon of leftist committed ideology.[46] Vrettakos was evidently well acquainted with works coming from Marxist circles, considering that he had been a member of the Greek Communist Party until 1949. His early abandonment of party politics accounts for the fact that his poetry is not politically engaged.

Vrettakos was familiar with the work of the Marxist poet Costas Varnalis (1884–1974) and after the latter's death in 1974 he wrote a brief (undated) study on his oeuvre, which has been preserved in his archive among his manuscripts. In his library he had a copy of Varnalis' dramatic composition *The Burning Light* (*Το φως που καίει*, 3rd ed. 1945), certain aspects of which are echoed in his *Prometheus*, as well as in Kazantzakis' trilogy.[47]

Varnalis subjects Prometheus to the Marxist criticism of Momus, the personification of blame and mockery, for employing the idea of revolt with the purpose of manipulating the proletariat. His approach is critical to Prometheus and thus clearly different from Vrettakos' own position; nonetheless, I believe that there is one instance in which the latter presents Hermes as a counterpart of Varnalis' Momus sardonically commenting on Prometheus' imminent defeat by Zeus:

**46** See Ziolkowski 2000, 562; Ruffell 2012, 124–130; Van Steen 2011, 32–33, 114–127; Van Steen 2015, 128 n. 53 (with further bibliography).

**47** These elements include Kazantzakis' perception of Prometheus as lonely and self-absorbed and a verbal allusion to *The Burning Light* in *Promitheas Pyrforos*, 40; see Petrides 2015, 378–380. On the political character of *The Burning Light* see e. g. Beaton 1999, 115–117.

Ερμής: [...] Κι εκείνη την ώρα
διαλογίστηκα πως, αν νικούσες ποτέ ...
Προμηθέας: Αν νικούσα; ...
Ερμής: Δεν ξέρω ...
Προμηθέας: Φαντάστηκες πως
«αν νικούσα ποτέ» θα γινόμουνα Δίας
να χρειάζομαι Ερμή;
Ερμής: Αλλά
δεν θα νικήσεις ...

Hermes: [...] And that moment I thought that if you ever won ...
Prometheus: If I won?
Hermes: I don't know ...
Prometheus: Did you imagine that "if I ever won",
I would become someone like Zeus
to need a Hermes?
Hermes: But you will not win ...

(*Prom.* Act III, 74)

Hermes' malevolent remark is followed by the frustrating news that mankind abandoned Prometheus and sided with powerful Zeus. This passage bears a notable correspondence with Momus' bitter comment in Varnalis' work:

Αν νικούσες το Δία, τότες όλοι θα'τανε μαζί σου. Και θεοί κι ανθρώποι.
[...] Δεν το ξαίρεις; Πάντα οι νικημένοι έχουνε τ' άδικο. Και τ' άβουλο πλήθος πάει ταχτικά με τους νικητές.

Had you won the battle against Zeus, then everyone would have been with you. Gods and men.
[...] Don't you know? The defeated are always wrong. And the idle crowd regularly sides with the winners.

(*The Burning Light*, 3rd ed. 1945, 19)

Vrettakos chooses to invert Varnalis' sarcastic approach to Prometheus' betrayal by mankind by underscoring the Titan's dignified self-withdrawal and unyielding *ēthos*. This choice is better understood in the light of the particular 'psychology' of Post-War poets, involving the ambivalence between struggle and betrayal, as well as a sense of tortured hope arising from adversity.[48]

A similar inversion of Marxist concepts occurs in Vrettakos' discourse with the play *Prometheus Freed* (*Προμηθέας ελεύτερος* [1946]) by Tasos Michalakeas. This

**48** See Ilinskaya 2004, 12; Gotovos 1989, 83–85.

less known leftist author, who was influenced by Varnalis, among other poets, wrote socio-political plays, including reworkings of tragedy, such as his *Electra of Resistance* (*Η Ηλέκτρα της Αντίστασης*), and the heroic dramas *Digenes Acritas* and *Spartacus*. His published work also comprised studies on the Greek folk songs and edited volumes on political affairs, such as the volume on the prominent Greek statesman Eleftherios Venizelos, who promoted liberal-democratic policies, and on the Russian revolution. *Prometheus Freed,* written in a radical literary vernacular that draws on folk tradition, is the first part of his *Trilogy of Deliverance* (*Τριλογία του Λυτρωμού*) and anticipates the Civil War.[49] Although I could not find this work in Vrettakos' Archive, there are notable correspondences between particular characters of the two plays, which do not occur in any of the aforementioned intertexts of Vrettakos' *Prometheus* and thus make it likely that the latter had Michalakeas' work in mind. At the same time, it will be shown that these equivalences are much differently nuanced.

Both plays introduce Deucalion as Prometheus' son, though in Michalakeas' treatment he bears the features of a Marxist Enlightenment figure. Likewise, Michalakeas approaches Hephaestus, who is presented by both him and Vrettakos as hostile towards Prometheus, from a Marxist perspective, as he is reproached for submitting crafts to the benefit of the ruling class. Unlike Michalakeas, who introduces the personified Earth as Prometheus' mother supporting his socio-political struggle, Vrettakos opts for a ritually and emotionally nuanced perception of human relationship with nature. Vrettakos also seems to derive the two choruses from Michalakeas' play. The latter, nonetheless, exploits the choral duality to underscore class conflict, in that the chorus of deities represents the elite as against the male chorus living frustrated and humiliated under the tyrannical yoke of Zeus.

Prometheus manages to break his bonds, being bolstered by Deucalion, Athena, whose combativity supersedes the intellectual power assigned to her by Kazantzakis, the male chorus and the very forces of nature represented by Earth and Atlas. He features as the symbolic leader of a proletarian revolution, following Marx's perception of him as a personification of the chained proletariat.[50]

Vrettakos opts to refrain from adopting the Marxist connotations of Michalakeas' politically committed work. The most crucial of the aforementioned divergences lies in the former's choice to introduce Prometheus' uncompromising self-exile after his abandonment by mankind instead of the popular revolt con-

**49** See Michalakeas' introduction (1945, 7–19) and Chassapi-Christodoulou 2002, II, 805–808.

**50** On Marx's portrayal of Prometheus see e. g. Kelley 1978 and Wessel 1984. Beyond the Eastern Bloc, see John Lehmann's *Prometheus and the Bolsheviks* (1937) featuring a fictional Prometheus who decides to join Bolshevism.

cluding Michalakeas' play. Taking into consideration Vrettakos' renouncement of communism as early as 1949, this denouement may provide an implicit antiphonal response to the Marxist re-imaginings of Prometheus in favour of a more pacifist stance. After all, this choice is eloquently articulated in his inclusion of Stalin in the pantheon of the evil surrounding Zeus in the play's closing scene.

## 4 A performance script?

A final question concerns the performativity of this poetic drama. Has it been staged? How often? Which factors may determine its theatricality? The genre of poetic drama has given rise to much theoretical discussion about the 'rivalry' between what is theatre and what is poetry. Theatricality requires that poetic diction and its registers should be bearers of meaning in performance; the poet needs to forsake the purely logocentric and produce a text for the stage 'translated' into sights, sounds and actions.[51] This is a highly perplexing matter, given that a 'recipe' for performativity does not exist. I am thus going to put forward some thoughts about staging and the restrictions that seem to be imposed by the 'poeticity' of the work.

The play has been staged only once, in a high school performance in 2012 owing to the prominence of Vrettakos' poetry in the secondary school curriculum.[52] Nonetheless, as the poet himself mentioned in his correspondence, he wrote this play with a view to be (professionally) performed.[53] His choice to write a theatre piece is probably related to his intention of communicating the ideological tenor of his work to broader audiences through performance. This purpose also emerges from the staging directions incorporated in the dramatic text, including references to visual elements of the performance, namely the setting (Caucasus and Olympus), stage props (the rock on which Prometheus is bound), costumes (the golden costumes of Power and Violence, Athena's attire, Hermes' camouflage) and stage lighting (the lighting of the actors' faces, the interchanges of darkness and light and stage effects, such as clouds and lightning). Likewise, there are directions pertaining to the aural components of the performance, such as human voices, animal sounds, Zeus' thunderbolt, the sound of human steps and of musical instruments (trumpets, drums) and instructions about onstage

**51** See Hardwick 2009, 42–43.

**52** Performance date: 25/04/2012. https://www.arsakeio.gr/gr/psychico/psychico-high-school-b/events-activities/10130-nikiforos-vrettakos (last accessed: 10/6/2021).

**53** According to his letters to Anthoula Ganiari (16/3/1973 and 25/8/1973).

movement: entrances and exits, identification cues, the division of the chorus into groups and the use of kinesic signs (gestures, facial expressions, proxemic signs).

Despite this variety of staging directions, this work seems to be principally a poetic text cast in dramatic form. The use of conceptual imagery in lengthy passages to the detriment of dramatic economy, the sometimes didactic and grandiloquent rhetoric, lyric vocabulary, *hyperbaton,* and further poetic figures seem to diminish the text's performative effect. Modern audiences are accustomed to stylistic naturalness, and this could be one of the reasons why verse drama does not sit easily with their theatrical expectations and sensibilities. Therefore, the use of staging directions cannot as such ensure theatricality, if the language of the dramatic text is not performative *per se,* integrating both verbal and non-verbal (performative) codes, which 'translate' words into physical enactment and vocal delivery.[54]

At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that the degree of the play's theatricality may have well been determined up to an extent by its intertexts. Even the ancient *exemplum* of Vrettakos' poetic drama, *Prometheus Bound*, presents inherent staging peculiarities, in that it is a rather static tragedy constructed upon Prometheus' immobility and, simultaneously, a 'spoken' play whose action is mainly carried out with words. This feature was enhanced in the subsequent Prometheus dramas, by which Vrettakos' play was similarly informed. The overwhelming literariness of Kazantzakis' *Prometheus* trilogy and Varnalis' *The Burning Light* does not make them suitable for the modern stage.[55] Although Sikelianos' *Christ Unbound: The Death of Digenes* (intended for performance as a part of his agenda to revive tragedy) was staged twice (1957, 1975),[56] theatre reviews stressed that it should be evaluated as a poetic and not as a theatrical text.[57] Such cases of verse dramas could account for the limited performance of plays of this genre as against the more realistic prose drama, which was more suitable for the stage.

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**54** See Pfister 1988, 6–11, 17–19; Elam 1980, 85–88; Short 1998, 9–13. On the performative features of theatrical dialogue see further Hall 2010, 14–15; Fischer-Lichte 2010, 34–36; Hardwick 2010, 196–199.

**55** Kazantzakis' *Prometheus* was professionally staged only once as a dramatic composition of different parts of the trilogy alongside *Prometheus Bound* and Euripides' *Bacchae* ("Theatro Dromou" 2002–2004). See Petrakou 2005, 395; Petrides 2015, 357–358.

**56** Staged by Nikos Hatziskos at the National Gardens Theatre (Athens 1957) and by the State Theatre of Northern Greece (Thessaloniki 1975). It was also presented as a radio drama (1960): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPxovH1Xcns (last accessed: 20/7/2021)

**57** On the 1957 performance see P. Kounelaki, 'Angelos Sikelianos, the Dreamer', in: *Kathimerini* 6/7/1997, 22; on the 1975 production see esp. Th. Kritikos, in: *Acropolis* 20/8/1975, M.M. Papaioannou, in: *Rizospastis* 3/8/1975, T. Tsirbinos, in: *Thessaloniki* 18/8/1975.

On balance, *Prometheus or The Play of a Day* is well understood and deeply appreciated primarily as a poetic text. It is mainly known to us through reading, as is the case with its aforementioned intertexts, including Goethe's dramatic fragment and Shelley's closet drama. All the same, the play's lesser theatricality does not entail that it cannot be performed by means of an adaptation fulfilling staging requirements. After all, more than a few literary texts (including verse dramas of considerable length, such as *Faust*) have been adapted for the stage. In such cases, a symbiosis between the dynamics of the text and the director's conceptual approach is required, so that the polarity between poetry and theatre is 'reconciled'.[58]

## Concluding Remarks

This discussion has attempted to bring forward the distinctiveness of Vrettakos' reappropriation of *Prometheus Bound* in a critical period of socio-political oppression. The rewriting of the tragic myth bears the features of a palimpsest, whose layers include archetypal elements of *Prometheus Bound,* such as the Titan's dignified struggle, his philanthropy, and the concept of human progress, filtered in varying ways through the mediating receptions of the ancient *exemplum*. These include Vrettakos' reconfiguration of the pivotal notion of intellect in Goethe and Kazantzakis to allude to the subservience of knowledge to authoritative rule. Moreover, the poet's agony for the abuse of Promethean technology at the expense of mankind and nature seems to echo Camus' rejection of crude anthropocentrism. At the same time, the Titan's Messianic suffering draws on Sikelianos' fusion of Prometheus with Christ, being also congruent with the Christianised character of Modern Hellenism. Vrettakos' ideological posture has also shaped his consciously antiphonal response to the Marxist appropriations of Prometheus, in that he upholds a pacifist position, which permeates his oeuvre as a whole. His cross-fertilization of conceptual and aesthetic elements from varying sources thus forms a complex ideological amalgam conditioned by the driving energy of his poetic agenda.

In his multilayered reworking of *Prometheus Bound* Vrettakos exploits the Titan's iconic appropriation for causes by choosing to deploy him as his mouthpiece. The poetic ego is grafted onto the title-character to raise critical awareness and convey the poet's ideological and ethical stance. What makes the re-reading of this poetic drama captivating even more than forty years later is its power to

**58** See also Hardwick 2009, 43–45, 58 on the challenges in staging verse drama.

move beyond the immediate socio-political circumstances and offer a diachronic perspective on intrinsic aspects of the human condition: the dignified resistance to oppression, the limits of human intellect and the ecology of emotion that encompasses mankind and nature as an inseparable whole.

**Acknowledgements:** I am much indebted to Professor Antonios Rengakos for his brilliant advice throughout the editorial process. This paper has emerged from the "Classics and Poetry Now" research project launched by Professor Emerita Lorna Hardwick, to whom I am most grateful for her valuable comments. An earlier version was presented at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford in November 2019; sincerest thanks are due to the seminar members, especially to Professors Stephen Harrison and Fiona Macintosh, for their most constructive feedback. Likewise, I owe a significant debt to Professor Stavros Tsitsiridis, Professor Emerita Kyriaki Petrakou and to the anonymous reviewer of the article for vigorous scholarly advice. An essential part of this research has been conducted at the Archive of Nikiforos Vrettakos kept at the Municipal Library of Sparta.

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