Anarchic Utopia in Aris Alexandrou's *The Mission Box*

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This paper shows that there are two notions of utopia operating in Aris Alexandrou's novel *The Mission Box* (*Το κιβώτιο*). The first is the autarchic utopia espoused by the Communist Party and represented in the novel by the rational, chronologically organised narrative. The second is the anarchic utopia that disrupts the certainty of the rational narrative as well as the belief in a teleology that will lead to the Party's victory. I argue that the anarchic interruption avoids a politics of oppression by extrapolating a notion of freedom whose definition does not rely on a negation of imprisonment.

Interruptions

According to Dimitris Rautopoulos, an interruption structures the "geometry of the narrative" (2004:287–9) in Aris Alexandrou's *The Mission Box*, dividing it into two halves.[1] The first half of the novel describes how the anonymous narrator, a soldier in the communist forces during the Greek Civil War (cf. Tsoucalas, 1969), reports for duty in town N and is selected for the secret mission of transporting a "mission box" to town K. The narrator reaches town K as the sole survivor of the mission, only to discover that the "mission box" is empty, and is promptly incarcerated. The narration is written in the form of a report to "Comrade Interrogator". The report is initially factual, logically and chronologically describing the mission (33, 72/32, 71). Gradually, however, cracks start appearing. The story is continually revised, and its certainty progressively undermined. Then, right in the middle of the book, at the fourteenth report written on 22 September 1949, there is a rupture. The report begins thus: "Comrade or Mr. Interrogator, whoever you are [...] I am directing this to whoever happens to be in charge, for now the issue of whether you happen to be Leninist or dogmatist or even a government interrogator is of secondary importance to me, since I have begun

[1] All references to *The Mission Box* will be given parenthetically in the text, English edition page numbers first, followed by the Greek edition. On occasion, the English translation has been slightly modified.

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to have doubts about something even more crucial: I suspect that you aren't even reading my deposition" (177/186). A new tenor is introduced. The narrative is no longer organised chronologically or logically, tending progressively to more extreme forms of stream of consciousness and extensive digressions.

The second half, however, does not introduce only a different style. A further aspect of interruption comes to the fore. It ruptures the linear and rational progression of narration, no less than the philosophical underpinning of temporal linearity and logical structure. In other words, the interruption is not merely stylistic, but also — and primarily — *discursive*.

The stylistic and the discursive aspects of interruption are related. The rationally organised narrative of the first part evokes the ratiocinations of the Communist Party. The narration is written in officialese, reporting on the exterior circumstances. The anonymous narrator speaks with confidence because "I can easily record the details of the operation" (10/11). As he continually repeats, he is intent to call "a spade a spade" since he is not afraid of words, nor wants to play word games (e.g. 16, 51, 54, 61, 173, 178, 239, and 338/16, 51, 55, 62, 182, 188, 251, and 357 — these references are discussed in detail later). The analogy between the prisoner's report and the language of the Party indicates that this kind of narrative does not dwell on personal dispositions but rather speaks of the certainty about the future victory of the struggle. In the second part, the narrator's disillusionment and doubt continually subvert this rational, exterior narrative. This undermines the certainty of speaking literally and the belief in the inexorable teleology towards the final victory. Working together, the two aspects of interruption enact a critique of a utopian vision based on teleology.

The interruption between the two halves of the book is stylistically obvious, but discursively remains problematic. The reason is that if there is a complete separation between the rational narrative and its interruption, then one of the critical features of the rational narrative, namely teleology, is re-inscribed in the other narrative. A vision of the future can be explicitly negated only with a foreknowledge of the future. A direct negation of teleology is bound to reintroduce it through the back door. The discursive element calls for an examination of the forms of temporality that structure the narrative, providing its political significance (cf. Gourgouris, 2004).

I will approach this problem through the figure of utopia. Rautopoulos mentions, without elaborating, two types of utopia. There is, on the one hand, the "autarchic" or totalitarian utopia (2004:300) that characterises the structure of the Communist Party during the Civil War. It is also prevalent in a play, titled *Silence*, that Alekos reads to his friends. This dystopia, I will argue, shows the impossibility of simply negating teleology. Rautopoulos also mentions Alexandrou's own "anarchic utopia" whose chief characteristic is the opposition to any form of oppression (2004:242). This utopia, I will argue, is anarchic because it denies the hold of regulation over time. There is no linear temporality and hence no teleology. I will show how this is presented in the text through a meditation on Oedipus.

Autarchic Utopia

The narrator recounts how Alekos read to him and Christophoros — his Party comrades — his play *Silence*. *Silence* describes an Orwellian scenario. A state has the auditory technology to eavesdrop on the conversations of its citizens. Its coercive and totalitarian impetus is unmistakable. To counter it, the citizens communicate verbally only about the most meaningless and mundane things, while for what matters they employ a code of silent gestures (240/253).

Christophoros criticises the ending of *Silence* as lacking in political commitment and a clearly stated conviction of the final victory. The narrator raises related criticisms: the play is not realistic enough and Alekos should have "called a spade a spade (*να πει τα πράγματα με το όνομά τους*)" (239/251). Christophoros and the narrator demand that the author "call things by their proper name." The (social realist) demand to see the success of the revolution represented is imperative. This is also, as already intimated, the demand of the Communist Party that informs the style of the report to "Comrade Interrogator". Conversely, Alekos replaces this straightforward naming with a gestural interplay. The confrontation is staged, then, between a project of liberation and freedom based on a commonsensical committed nominalism and, on the other hand, the argument that freedom can only take place as a theatrical enactment, or with the medium of the gesture that repels nominalism.[2] In other words, there is on the one hand the utopian belief in being able to name what will take place in the future, and on the other the refusal to speak explicitly about the future.

Although these two positions seem incompatible, nevertheless they share something in common: a belief in the decision making power of the subject. There is, first, the subject matter of the story, the citizens in *Silence* who decide to express their dissent through gesturing. There is then the writing subject, Alekos, who is judged according to his decision about how to represent the future. Finally, it is the third power or subject, the audience itself, holding the final court of appeal about the revolutionary vision of the play. Even though the audience is named here explicitly as comprising the narrator and Christophoros, still they are nothing but mouthpieces of the Party, loyal to its apparatus and voicing its views and rhetoric. *The determinative role of the third power presents the impossibility of simply negating teleology.* Neither Christophoros and the narrator's utopian teleology, nor the dystopian vision that sought to negate it in Alekos's *Silence* can contain the third power. That third power here is the Communist Party, whose rhetoric is parroted by Christophoros and the narrator in their criticism of Alekos's play. The utopian vision is always tied to the interests of a specific individual or group. That third party concentrates within itself the power to judge the others' decisions.

The same structure of decisionism permeates *The Mission Box*. Power never lies with those actors called upon to decide. The "Comrade Interrogator" casts his shadow

[2] Names are central in this work, where no one is given his real name — everyone uses pseudonyms or remains anonymous (cf. Kantzia, 2003).

over the whole narrative while remaining silent. The ostensible object of decisions with regard to *Silence* and to the report written for the Interrogator may be different. Yet the silence of the Interrogator and the responses provoked by Alekos's *Silence* ultimately, because of their common decisionism, amount to the same thing, namely, they necessitate a third power which owns the utopian vision. They presuppose the same teleological structure. The teleological structure is guaranteed by the third power as the final destination of power. Thereby, such a third power erases freedom, especially when it is most explicitly announced, such as in the rhetorical clichés about the final victory. This is the myth of decisionism: the maker of decision is *ab initio* put in a position in which the decision — or even lack thereof — is robbed of power, is divested of any impact that is not controlled by a third party. The third power coincides with the force of oppression and reveals the autarchic motives of a reliance on decision making for an understanding of the political.

How does Alexandrou avoid a simple negation of autarchic utopia? This question requires an examination of the anarchic utopia in *The Mission Box*.

Anarchic Utopia

Immediately after the account of *Silence* prompted by the piano, a new narrative trajectory begins that includes a debate about Oedipus and is completed at the very end of the novel. The story of Oedipus allows for a meditation on chance and the involuntary by linking them to temporality.[3] Although teleology and utopia are again present, here they do not encounter a dialectical negation. Instead, they are confronted with the figure of suicide. How can suicide subvert utopia's teleological thrust?

The operation of time is critical. After the account of Alekos's *Silence*, the narrative returns to the mission even though it has already been described many times over. The new element pertains to the use of watches. It starts by recounting how time was measured before Haridimos had to kill himself because his injury was slowing down the mission:

> When the hole was dug, the mission leader handed his watch to Haridimos [...] and he told Haridimos, "At exactly three twenty, soldier. I leave it to you". [...] Whoever was to be cyanided from then on, calmly took the watch as if his feelings would have been hurt not to hold it in his hand so as to glance at it now and then, checking to see how many minutes, how many seconds were left in his life (241/254–5).

All wounded soldiers slowing down the mission had to commit suicide by swallowing cyanide. The watch becomes the harbinger of the cyanide capsule.

The conjoining of time and death in the report of 10 November is the culmination of a theme central to the entire novel. Time is always understood as measurable time, as quantifiable. Such a time dictates the rationalist, officialese style of the reports and

[3] For the philosophical import of the Oedipus story, see Goux, 1993. For a fascinating discussion of Oedipus and the Greek left, including the events of the Civil War, see the last chapter of Panourgia's *Dangerous Citizens* (2008).

corresponds to the rationalist demand of "calling a spade a spade". Further, it is linked to the numerous suicides that are described during the mission, since everyone who was wounded and hence slowed down — wasting the time of — the mission had to take the cyanide. These suicides are part of the same logic of the Communist Party ratiocination, according to which "purges [...] strengthen the Party" (61–2/62–3). The Party kills the "treacherous snakes among us" (62/63), like the five soldiers of the mission who were executed in front of the "steel double-door" (66/68) prior to the mission's departure from town N. The demand for plain speaking and the necessity of sacrifice for the good of the Party are integral elements of the mission. "So that we do not play with words keep in mind that we are a suicide mission" (51/51), explains the Major to the missions team. As the Major also informs them, they are not simply volunteers because "we belonged to the Popular Forces, or rather, not to play with words, we were a small unit of the world-wide Red Army" (54/55). The conjunction of the two explains why a "suicide mission" is not a personal suicide, since the mission is part of a larger purpose, of a teleology that leads to the Red victory (56/56–7).

Among the numerous scenes that conjoin measurable time and death, the most important is the final one of the 10 November report. The narrator remembers his conversation about Oedipus with Soldier, the leader in Athens of the Communist group to which the narrator had belonged. The conversation was meant to fill the time until he goes to sabotage an enemy arsenal. The narrator's watch, however, slowed down and he was late. As he was approaching the ammunitions warehouse, the arsenal blew up presumably by an accident. If his watch had been running on time, he would have been killed as well (292–5/309–12).

The digression about Oedipus presents the logic of suicide as a necessary component of thinking of time as measurable. The digression will form the conclusion of the novel. Initially, Soldier uses the elimination of chance as a means of arguing for his autarchic utopian vision. Chance, Soldier claims, is lack of knowledge because "events whose complex causes we are ignorant of we say come about by chance" (292/309). For instance, when two friends meet each other by chance, this only means that they did not know they were both going to be at the same place, at the same time. Soldier here espouses a position against any form of fatalism. Knowledge leads to a pragmatic grasp of the future — this is the insistence on utopia and teleology.

Fatalism, however, is impossible to completely eliminate when teleology and utopia are in play. The argument about measurable time and utopia, Soldier insists, applies to oracles as well:

> Soldier observed that if he was in Oedipus's shoes [...] he would tell Apollo that he wasn't responsible for a thing, since he (Apollo) has set everything up ahead of time. [...] That it was the verdict and command of Apollo, is demonstrated by the fact that finally His will was done [*εγένετο τελικώς το θέλημά Του*] (293/309–10).

The reference to the Lord's Prayer is unmistakable. The replacement of the future with the past tense indicates that the accomplishment of Apollo's will coincides with its articulation — or even its conception. Suddenly, the ultra-practical renunciation

of chance re-inscribes fatalism through the back door. The difference between the secular and the sacred evaporates so long as the future is knowable, so long as time is measurable.

The elimination of chance through knowledge has a consequence even more important than the fatalistic exoneration of Oedipus from patricide. It is the necessary metaphysical assumption of a utopian state of perfection outside the vicissitudes of historical time:

> And even if we assume that Apollo had no intention of punishing Oedipus, [...] the fulfillment of the oracle was essential to the preservation of cosmic harmony [...] and therefore, even if a single grain of mortar was missing, the whole structure would cease to be [...] perfect, why then for this very reason, should Oedipus not be rewarded, since in killing his father [...] he obeyed Apollo's decree and consequently simultaneously contributed to the support of creation? (294/310–1).

Soldier's elimination of chance through knowledge is transferred completely from the individual to the gods. This is essential, Soldier claims, for cosmic harmony to be attained. Thomas More's utopia as the place where there is a stasis of time seems to be fully realised in this conception. Perfection has been achieved, even though it is outside the course of history, not in the hands of the historical actors. Unlike Alekos's *Silence*, in which a dystopian vision necessitated a decision on the part of the actor — the subject — in the historical unfolding, here the cosmic harmony dialectically determines in advance the decision of the actor who can never be in full possession of knowledge. The decision now is purely "objective" in the sense that it can never be owned by a subject or individual. The seconds keep on ticking regardless of the will of the subject. Objectivity is deified.

The novel concludes with the narrator's riposte to Soldier's extrapolation of Oedipus:

> The night the drugstore [functioning as an arsenal] blew up it came to me that Apollo could have said to Soldier's Oedipus, "Quit making excuses, for if you really didn't want the oracle's prophecy to come true, if you really didn't want to obey, as you like to put it — no need to play with words now, right? — my indirect but clear command, if you really didn't want to kill your father, there was a way: you simply had to decide, as you left my temple, to kill yourself right then and there [*επιτόπου*]" (338/357).

The επιτόπου — on that very spot, in that particular place — counteracts Soldier's utopian vision. The narrator returns to the compulsion to avoid playing with words — to "call a spade a spade" — that had been lacking in Alekos's *Silence*. Here, however, the reality principle is not a vision about how to escape from a dystopia, but rather leads to the acceptance of death. Predetermined events are made possible by the passing of time, by the ticking of the seconds, which ineluctably leads to a stasis outside time. The historical actor can decide, the narrator claims, to prevent this. But this objective power can only be exercised in the form of suicide. Suicide is the telos of teleological time. The objective embodiment of utopia entails the disembodiment of the subject. The ultimate decision to remain objectively in time is to cease to be.

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The parenthesis containing the digression about Oedipus closes with the following words: the idea that Oedipus should have killed himself "slipped my mind and thus I did not conceal my cyanide capsule in the bandage" (338/358). The narrator recognises here that the injunction to suicide is an integral part of the utopia vision — but this "slipped his mind" when he arrived at town K. After the parenthesis, the novel concludes thus:

> but if you believe that the box will be filled with my corpse, what are you waiting for, why don't you place me at six paces against the wall, or, rather, against the steel double-door? (338/358).

The narrator invites his captors to purge him, to execute him at the "steel double-door" like his fellow soldiers prior to the commencement of the mission (66/68). This admonition fully appropriates the logic of suicide operating within the autarchic utopian vision. The suggested purge is not a personal suicide, but assists the larger purpose of a Communist victory, a sacrifice of a soldier which belongs to the International Red Army (cf. 56/56–7). In other words, the narrator invites his captor to make the decision on his behalf — he proposes his own execution for the "greater good". Seeing this invitation as the tragic endpoint of teleology would be to highlight the illusions of the autarchic utopia. The actor is insignificant, a slave to death as it is determined by fate — or a third party. Decisionism's tragedy may be an attempt to exculpate utopia, but this is not enough for the box to be filled with anything that will contribute to the final victory. Behind the tragedy, however, an ironic disposition is also operative. The end point of the mission, of all the actors involved, as well as of the third power that ultimately controls decision making, is a death sentence. The telos is empty of any significance other than its own completion, the perpetuation of its fatal oppression. Autarchic utopia disembodies itself, reaches its own self-administered end, at the same time that the subjects caught up in it fulfill their mission through their insignificant death.

The ironic twist entails that the riposte to Soldier and the extrapolation of Oedipus as an autarchic utopian vision is not simply negated here. There is a "denegation" of utopia (cf. Derrida, 1989). The invitation to his captor to execute him at the "steel double-door" appropriates the logic of autarchic utopia. And yet, the question mark, the final character of the novel, simultaneously *dis*-appropriates that utopian logic. The narrator fully embraces the logic of objective rationality and a teleological understanding of history, putting his own life on the line in order to accomplish its fulfillment. But this fulfillment is not present in the form of a stasis of time as the autarchic utopian vision demands, but rather as a suspended question. The teleology has been halted. The image of a teleological time is not simply subverted. There is, rather, a subversion of teleological time's subversion, since it remains unstated explicitly, performed through the final punctuation mark, enacted silently and gesturally. While Alekos's *Silence* sought to disappropriate autarchic utopia through gestural play, here there is an ironic appropriation of teleology — an appropriation of the utopian narrative that gives rise to the possibility that autarchic utopia can deconstruct itself. The

question mark interrupts the inexorable progression of autarchic utopia. This is the discursive interruption of Alexandrou's anarchic utopia.

What, then, does anarchic utopia achieve? The autarchic vision of utopia vacillates between absolute liberation and complete imprisonment. This vacillation is the motor of its logic. Freedom and imprisonment are not effaced by anarchic utopia. Rather, their opposition is suspended. This suspension strips freedom and imprisonment of their absolutism. This requires the continuous effort of presenting and interrupting the demand for absolute freedom and its telos in absolute imprisonment. And this effort cannot but take place from within, that is, from a state of confinement. But it is the special privilege, as well as the exigency of being confined to be afforded the power to carry out that work: the potential inscribed within confinement to interrupt both the totalitarian impulse as well as the illusion of a stasis of liberation. Thus a new sense of freedom is enacted — the anarchic freedom to work towards interrupting autarchic utopia.

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