

The individual's mission overrides society's mission: responses and dilemmas in contemporary Greek young adults' science fiction

The aim of this article is to chart the transition from society's mission to the individual's mission in Greek science fiction for young adults published over the past forty years.

In the history of the human race, a basic parameter for the survival of the individual is considered to be the mission of society. Aristotle (Politics, 1.2) argues that the man "who is unable to live in society or who needs nothing because he is sufficient unto himself must be either a beast or a god", while the Bible tells us that God created woman so that man would not be alone, thus providing a theological foundation for society. Society's mission is put forward in every age through literature, even though in all ages and societies, as Watt (1993: 60) argues, some people "developed egocentric tensions or were conspicuously independent of current opinions and habits".

In his book *The Rise of the Novel* (1993), Ian Watt raises the issue of individualism, which he investigates more fully in *Myths of modern individualism* (1996). He believes Robinson Crusoe to be a model of homo economicus who abandons his family to make money and "symbolizes the new outlook of individualism in its economic aspect" (1993: 64). On his island, Crusoe enjoys freedom from social restrictions and is free of the hell of other people. His solitude makes him a mythic figure of individualism. Watt (1996: 276) wonders how man can "resolve the eternal and many-sided struggle between the claims of the self and of the social group", and suggests that although we might side with the claims of society, if we considered the murderous collectivist idiocies of modern societies, we might side with the individual. In Greek young adults' science fiction there is no sign of Crusoe's unbridled individualism. The hero always acts in reaction to the society and the state, because he is not happy. It is he who upholds moral and ideological codes, while the corrupt state is striving to retain its power, without considering the people. In Greek YA

science fiction, characters may appear to act for the benefit of the society rather than for themselves or to resolve conflicts on a personal level. This is not absolutely accurate, because the heroes are acting individually or as a collective hero, in order primarily to solve problems they themselves are facing in a dystopian corrupted society.

Studying Greek YA science fiction, I notice that these texts create a myth of individuality different from that described by Watt and personified by Robinson Crusoe as an archetype. Science fiction includes not only texts with extraterrestrials or voyages into space, but also fiction in which "the ideal proportion of a scientifiction story should be 75 percent literature interwoven with 25 percent science" (Gernsback 1926). In this way, science fiction can refer to the society or depict political conditions that may be adverse and oppressive. Power is imposed using technology, and any deviation is punishable by death. Elsewhere, fictional reality depicts good socio-political conditions in which the individual thinks, decides and acts freely. Such utopian situations, in which the hero travels and overthrows the dystopia, are often suggested (*Breath on the windowpane*) or, more rarely, described (*The other*). These novels with features of dystopia/utopia and science fiction may fall under the generic category called dystopian/utopian science fiction. An effort to connect dystopia/utopia and science fiction has already been made by Frederic Jameson in his work *Archaeologies of the future* (2005). In dystopian situations, the hero acts individually within the society but independently of it or as a collective hero, i.e. as a group of heroes that makes unanimous decisions and always acts collectively, as though it were one actant and playing the same part in the plot. Greek YA science fiction includes stories in which the thoughts, feelings and motives of the "collective character", typically acting as a single person, are depicted. In any event, we can observe their fears, dilemmas, responsibilities and maturation process. Although there are no comprehensive studies on the subject, a few articles have been published on characters' minds in children's literature (Kuznets 1989, Goodebough 1994).

The term colonial/postcolonial science fiction is used in the present article in cases where science fiction is linked with colonialism, which is only one form of the practices that have produced a variety of literature (Loomba 1998: 69–103) including science fiction. Advances in technology and man's efforts to colonise space inevitably lead to linking colonialism and postcolonialism with science fiction. In Greek YA science fiction, children do not support adults' colonial and imperialist plans.

In the texts considered in this study, the individual is aware of the troubles and dangers of the outside world that he is experiencing,

and takes the initiative of leaving behind a dystopian, wretched society to seek refuge and personal happiness in a different utopian, but unknown world. When this person meets other worlds that charm him, he encounters problems of adjustment. The most characteristic instance is that of Ismen in Mavrokephalou's novel *The other*, who rejects the dystopian underground city in which he lives as one of the selected few, and flees into the unknown. In Lofousa, a city in which people live with respect for each other, without leaders, police or money, Ismen experiences worry, anxiety and insecurity owing to his previous oppressed life. He is not concerned about returning to his previous life, but rather about how he will deal with his new life under absolutely utopian political, social and physical conditions. In the end, he casts off his fears and concerns and decides to remain in the utopian city in which he has sought refuge.

All stories about the course of the individual's progress towards happiness inside or outside the society show a similar pattern. Initially we see blind submission to oppressive leaders who always prove to be corrupt, but eventually the person rather than the society shapes the new conditions. In Papatheodorou's *Breath on the windowpane*, Alec, the central hero, resides in a political dystopia: all citizens are under surveillance, which is why they feel insecure. Alec accidentally videotapes the murder of a fellow student whom the state regards as a terrorist and an alien. Gradually Alec becomes aware of the dystopian conditions he is experiencing. Even though he is in danger, he makes public the videotaped murder, thus restoring truth, at the same time, he feels happy and establishes personal, social and political harmony.

Despite the fact that since ancient times, actions in Greek literature tended to aspire directly or indirectly to some mission of a social nature (Aristotle, *Politics*, Thucydides, *Historiae*, I, 12.4, 13.1), in modern Greek juvenile science fiction we can talk about the fictional character's transition from the social to the individual mission in order, for instance, to avert a brutal colonialist policy. These are cases that reveal the adults' colonialist plans to which the young heroes, as a collective hero, object, take action and save the planet Mars by preventing the adults from colonising and exploiting it. Thus the action of the individual hero represents anti-colonialist trends. This essay considers children or young adults as individuals or perhaps acting as a collective hero, and distinguished by the missionary spirit of the future. As the ego of the child or young adult or these "collective" egos object to the achievement of society's aims, they develop new aims that they endeavour to fulfil by themselves. And they succeed. Colonial and postcolonial science fiction supplies a good pattern on

which the society could be modelled. In short, colonial or anticolonial individual politics is an expression of personal anxieties over settler issues and hegemonic relations among people, but in particular it is the reaction of the individual to the society's immoral or amoral politics. It is, of course, easier to understand the personality of a literary character than that of a real person. We must likewise consider the fact, as Nikolajeva suggests (2002, x), that the role of fictional characters differs according to the historical epoch and genre.

The arrogant individual

In the Greek social and political YA science fiction that I investigated, the individual can develop arrogant tendencies and destroy himself. This pattern is encountered in just one science fiction novel on a medical and bioethical theme. In Kira Sinou's *Great experiment*, the difference between the mission of the hero and that of the society and his break with it is disastrous. This is a thematically advanced text for the period in which it was written (1980), on the subject of the implantation of a dolphin's bone marrow cells into a clinically dead human being whose life is thus saved and who subsequently engages in scientific activity. But he becomes increasingly arrogant, cuts himself off from the society, dedicates himself totally to science, indifferent to the fate of man, and is ultimately destroyed. This is the sole case of a character in Greek YA science fiction that pursues a mission different from that of the society, but a destructive one. His deviation from the norms of society and from what he had been prior to the implantation of the dolphin's cells was of course due to human intervention, but in the end he proves that he has gone bad and has become quite morally corrupted. As a human being and scientist, the hero raises serious moral issues because he regards everything as having instrumental value alone. This is the only one of the contemporary Greek science fiction texts for young adults that is investigating in my corpus in which the individual attempts to intervene in nature, to change the structure of beings and in the end is destroyed by his own arrogance.

In the stories of dystopia and utopia, the individual lives in a despotic society from which he escapes. Instances of this pattern are set out below.

From dystopia to utopia

This category contains texts that can be assigned to two subcategories. The first describes the early dystopia that obliges the hero to travel to an extraterrestrial utopia.

The novel by Takis Androutsopoulos entitled *Earth 2040 AD* belongs to this category. Owing to a nuclear disaster, the collective hero, elementary school pupils who always act collectively, lives underground in a seemingly democratic but essentially despotic society with colonialist trends. When he discovers the adults' plans to colonise and exploit the planet Mars, he aborts the space mission. His duty is long-term, that is, he travels to Mars and defends it from the adults' continuous colonising efforts. The collective hero acts in a consistent and coordinated manner, persists in his mission, adopts a different position and, as he remains on Mars for many years, matures, and evolves on the basis of his own choices. He also retains his objections to the corrupt earthly society and, in order to survive, transforms himself into a producer of goods, like Robinson Crusoe, but here he improves himself morally without acquiring material wealth. A new type of social mission is created as the individual coincides with the social. Personal enjoyment leads to social happiness, under the new conditions that are created by young, uncorrupted people. This is a New Society in which people exist as individuals and are not assimilated by the whole, and in which a personal utopia leads to a social and political one.

The second subcategory contains texts in which the hero lives in a post-nuclear underground (*The other, Invasion of Myrmigana*). The political leadership is particularly despotic. It has its own select few and its mission is to survive, using drugs to keep people in a state of total submission. In *The other*, terrorism prevails from which the young hero Ismen, objecting to the social and political conditions, decides to escape. All the action takes place around the structural pattern *terror of remaining vs fear of leaving*. The strong desire to escape conflicts with the explicit prohibitions and threats issued by the autocratic leadership that puts to death anybody who disobeys the state authority. In *The giver* by Lowry the member of the community who has heavily infringed the rules "is released". Ismen manages to escape from this social and political dystopia and to liberate himself. He arrives in Lofousa where, despite the security provided to him by the new society and the success of his personal mission, he finds it hard to shake off the fear inspired in him by the absolutist state in which he had grown up and which kept its citizens subjugated. This is a search for personal happiness and self-realisation, through the individual's path from a dystopian to a utopian society, in which the individual remains self-governing but always interdependent on others.

We encounter despotic political governance in an intergalactic universe in the book by Marios Verettas entitled *Invasion of Myrmigana*. Here the society is organised on the model of Sparta in Ancient

Greece (strict discipline, tough labour, little food), with titles for ruling officials that allude to the history of the human race: Myrmigas the Great, as in Alexander the Great in ancient Greece, and Constantine the Great in Byzantium. Warlords have subjugated the entire galaxy except for the democratic planet of Tzitzikoni, where the individual mind does not conflict with the social mind. In the end, Tzitzikoni takes over Myrmigana peacefully and restores political legitimacy. It values the person without bringing him into conflict with the mission of society. Previously, absolutist Myrmigana did not hesitate to use brutal means to crush any personal initiative or mission.

Books such as *The other* (1984), *Invasion of Myrmigana* (1997) or Lowry's *The Giver* (1993) challenge young readers to think seriously about the separate relationship of every individual with the society. It is not accidental that in stories like these, the heroes are young adults who, socially and politically awakened, have become aware of the mistakes and weaknesses of the society and revolt against it. In Greek YA science fiction, young people do not regret their actions because they have grown up and do not grieve, as Jonas does in *The giver* (p. 121), lamenting his lost childhood, since he would have preferred to remain innocent. But Jonas refuses to accept his role or society's rules passively (Latham 2002: 13); in the same way, Ismen in *The other* and a good many other heroes in Greek YA science fiction display strong individuality as well as courage and compassion in trying to liberate themselves from the dystopian world they live in.

The giver presents many similarities with the Greek YA science fiction written many years earlier. **Both Jonas and the Greek protagonists do not die, but adjust to a new society.** This fact shows that social and **political dystopias lead young heroes to protest against the society.** One pattern of this behavior is the defence of space and of other planets (*Earth 2040 AD*). This reaction forces heroes to withdraw from society and reject it, and the hero, individual or collective, acts against society's rules and dictates, because he disputes their correctness and rejects them. Jonas's dilemma in *The giver* is that if he leaves it will cause the disruption of his community, and if he stays the Elders will continue to dispose of those who refuse to compromise. This dilemma torments Jonas, as was also the case of Ismen in *The other*.

From the isolation of the individual to the restoration of personal liberties

In 2007, two dystopian juvenile science fiction novels were published, both of which had a social and political theme wherein the mission of the individual was dissociated from that of society. These two

novels are *Breath on the windowpane* by Vassilis Papatheodorou and *Ariadne and the secrets of an ancient myth* by Anastasia Tsaldari. Dissociation here does not mean that, even when the individual undertakes or is forcibly assigned a particular mission, he rejects society, as we saw in Mavrokephalou's *The other*. In these texts, the individual quietly, owing to lack of confidence, develops conflicting relationships with the absolutist state and separates himself from the terrorised society, until conditions permit him to escape. The common element in them is the dystopian political situation experienced by the heroes, which has eroded the citizens morally so that there is no confidence or trust between them, and even when there appears to be, virtually everybody proves to be a state informer. Another common element in these novels is the society's mission to keep its citizens in subjugation and to use them as secret informers, with the result that human relations have been severely eroded. The hero undertakes to restore the truth and to save his fellow citizens. He is, in other words, acting as a Saviour and Messiah, individually (Papatheodorou) or in cooperation with others (Tsaldari). In *Breath on the windowpane*, the mission of civil servants, as members of the society, is to keep track of all citizens, to ensure that they do not oppose state violence or submission. The system has corrupted everyone's morals. University professors, for example, urge their students to speak freely, ostensibly in the name of academic freedom, but turn over to the authorities anyone who expresses liberal thoughts. When a student from another country is murdered (persons of foreign origin and different ethnic groups are regarded as terrorists), Alec accidentally videotapes the event. This document, which shows the actual murder, conflicts with the official announcements that present the peace-loving student as a terrorist. The distortion of reality and the insecurity created by the despotic regime oblige Alec to make it his personal mission to publicise the evidence he has in every way, without placing his own life in danger. Thus, his personal system of values comes into conflict with that of the society, which is devoid of any social, moral or humanitarian values.

In Tsaldari's novel, the science fiction aspect of the social and political story presents another version of the Atlantis myth, different from that of Plato. The story, particularly complex as regards its mythological elements, revolves around the authoritarian governance of the Council, the limitations placed on births owing to over-population, and Ariadne's effort to save herself from the citizens' xenophobia. The heroes' mission is unique and in total conflict with that of the society of Atlantians who, in order to retain power, have developed mechanisms for monitoring the citizens similar to those encountered in *Breath on the windowpane*, but even more advanced in that they per-

mit the citizens no sense of security. Despite this, the heroes are able to dismantle these mechanisms so that once again in Greek juvenile science fiction, the individual who undertakes missions that conflict with those of the society proves to be its sole saviour.

Even if we see these texts as a metaphor for racism, as Lea (2006: 51–67) does in *The giver*, racism in its cruellest form can be met in *Breath on the windowpane*. Here grim social and political situations are described that oblige the individual to cut himself off emotionally from the society and to fight alone to escape from the dystopia. This is a voyage from dystopia to utopia and the establishment (*Breath on the windowpane*, *Invasion of Myrmigana*) or discovery (*The other*) of a New Society in which the role of the individual is distinct. In *The giver*, Jonas experiences a world without suffering. By contrast, Alec in *Breath on the windowpane* experiences a social and political dystopia, as Ismen does in *The other*.

Lowry, Papatheodorou and Mavrokephalou describe how power and authority are used to manipulate society. In fact, they explore the value of the individual versus the welfare of the group as presented in *The giver*, *Breath on the windowpane* and *The other*. In most of these texts, the protagonists resent the dystopia they experience, and feel the need either to abandon it (*Earth 2040 AD*, *The other*) by voyaging into the unknown, or to reconstruct the society in order to eradicate its corruption (*Breath on the windowpane*, *Invasion of Myrmigana*). Despite the fact that, in all the texts we are studying, the heroes' new destination is totally unknown to them and possibly dangerous ("Elsewhere" in *The giver*, Lofousa in *The other*, Mars in *Earth 2040 AD*, for those who found the courage to abandon the dystopian society, it is nevertheless a place in which the development of financial activity contributes to their survival without exploiting others or wasting natural resources, a place similar to that of Robinson Crusoe. In Jonas's world, those who do not conform are executed; in Ismen's underground society, anyone who disagrees is killed; in Alec's society migrants are regarded as terrorists and frequently murdered. Ismen escapes the underground dystopian society to go to Lofousa. Alec reveals the real murderers and transforms the political dystopia into utopia.

Conclusions

The mission ego unfolds in two subcategories: the first covers cases like Robinson Crusoe, with financial exploitation that we do not find in Greek YA science fiction, while the second covers cases in which the individual acts alone, without the support of the society, inside

or outside it, for his own good and inevitably for that of the community. Thus, a change takes place in the relationship between the individual and the society. Until recently, the customary model was the society's interest in the individual. Lately, with Watt's approach, the individual is interested only in himself and not in the society. In Greek YA science fiction, we witness a merging of these views. The individual is in conflict with a dystopian society that he struggles to escape from. The situations described in the novels studied here reflect timeless Greek views of the society-individual relationship, which also influenced later Western thought.

For this reason, utopias in Greek YA science fiction are always positive. There **are heroes, already, who aim to escape from dystopias**. They do not envision their configuration, but enter them, adjust, and begin a new happy life (*The other, Breath on the windowpane*). They do not perish as in *The giver* and other Western dystopias. Therefore, if international YA utopia science fiction is often a social illusion, and is situated in a distant future and not in a geographical distance (Jameson 2005), Greek YA science fiction appears as a reality which the hero experiences, thus, escaping dystopia.

These texts, in which we observe a transition from the society to the individual, essentially portray the transition from dystopian to utopian conditions. Dystopias are focused on the society that oppresses individuals and obliges them to separate their position, while utopias are found among people who fight all alone for personal and social happiness. In this regard, the hero is shown to be a kind of Messiah who struggles for social prosperity, and his individual mission ultimately becomes a social one. However the difference in his mission with that of the society also reveals the individual's effort to find happiness on his own, in contrast with what the ancient Greeks argued in their belief that individual happiness depends on the society's well being.

All these fictional characters portray dynamic people who will be able to lead individuals and societies in the future so that they can achieve great things and deal successfully with the negative aspects of life. They are shown to be future emblems of humanity guided by thinking individuals. Ismen and Alec reflect the new worldview of the transition from the society to the individual who, without being cut off from the society, achieves his own happiness within a community that is discovered or created by his own personal action. The focus mainly on third-person narratives is an indirect depiction of the individual's ideological identity using two narrative methods. The first includes typical episodes describing thoughts and feelings that conflict with the prevailing ideology and echo experiential dis-

harmonies in a dystopian society. Thus Ismen, despite his ideology, finds it hard to shed his dystopian experiences in order to adapt to the utopian community to which he has fled. The second is manifested in the culminating decision to avoid a crisis of conscience and fears, and to adapt to the new reality.

In conclusion, futurism and the missionary spirit in Greek YA science fiction are now represented by individual minds characterised by universal ideals that have been preserved unchanged. In a deeper sense and at a secondary level, a society exists with its words of command and its visions, but has just begun to collapse. Thus fictional reality in Greek YA science fiction proves, through its general philosophy, that everything is changeable and that "social" is not always ideal, especially when it diverges. On the contrary, the individual is able to play a substantial role in societies' new orientations.

The particular brand of individualism found in Greek juvenile science fiction developed independently of the individualism attributed by Watt to Robinson Crusoe. In Greek juvenile science fiction, however disenchanted the individual may be with the society, however much they try to resolve problems of communication and to address dystopian situations, is essentially never cut off from what is called the society. They fight for themselves, but this battle also has an impact on the society. By overthrowing dystopian situations, they influence an entire society (*Breath on the windowpane*, *Invasion of Myrmigana*), creates a utopia (*Earth 2040 AD*) or becomes part of another utopia (*The other*).

In the texts studied, control and security versus freedom and risk-taking is a pervasive theme (cf. Lehman 1998: 72). These texts conceal a political allegory, as they reflect regimes that are not free and societies that are oppressive and oblige the individual to disagree and to separate himself from the society. The close surveillance of the citizens symbolises the oppression of dictatorships in Greece, the more recent of which lasted from 1967–74, while the protests of the young protagonists depict either those who took up anti-dictatorship action in Greece (*Breath on the windowpane*) or those who, unable to bear being deprived of freedoms and witnessing the deception of the citizens, went abroad, where they found a socio-political utopia compared to the reality in Greece (*The other*).

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