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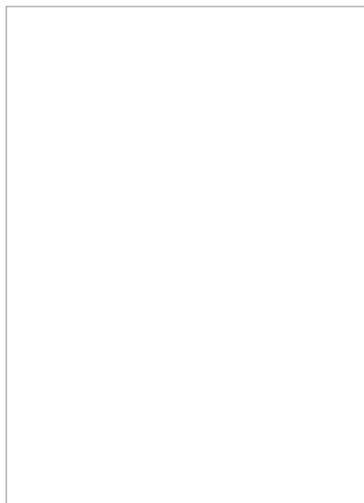
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The “Legend” of Alekos Doukas: A critical counter reading*

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This paper examines how the writer Alekos Doukas (1900–1962) has been read and interpreted in later years as a migrant intellectual and socialist. I argue that Doukas has become a figure of myth through a process of oral and written transmission. He is invariably represented as a unitary socialist subject who encapsulates the experience and revolutionary consciousness of a migrant collectivity. Many writers refer to Doukas’ life and experiences through a quite literal reading of his postwar novels. How do we account for the reading of his fiction as fact? We need to explore the function of myth and its discursive shaping of migrant narratives of the past and present.



Alekos Doukas on back cover of
To Struggle, To Youth, 1953

* The subject of this paper is covered more extensively in my PhD thesis *A Body Broken: A Critical Biography of Alekos Doukas (1900–1962)*. Department of Critical and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University, NSW, 2008.

I

Contrary to the view that Alekos Doukas is a relatively unknown and forgotten writer, a body of literature continues to grow around his work (Fifis, 1983; Vasilakos, 2008). He may in fact be the most quoted fiction writer in Greek-Australian studies of the interwar years. I will attempt here to give a brief survey of how he has been discussed and referred to in this growing literature. My primary interest is in what this body of writing has to tell us about contemporary Greek-Australian discourse around literary, cultural and historiographical issues, rather than its actual representation of the past. The paper raises the question as to why so many writers have so easily accepted an idealised version of a Greek-Australian radical past. Despite decades of debate about the critical revision of the grand narratives of monumental history, ethnic or minority histories have been largely assumed to be unitary and uncontroversial.¹ I suspect that underlying the continued interest in the figure of Doukas is an ownership of and connection to a narrative of a radical and oppositional Greek-Australian past. Collective narratives have mythical qualities and vestiges, and my interest here is to document some aspects of a certain myth or legend that has become attached to the life and work of Alekos Doukas. The issues that arise are not unconnected to the recent debates around the rise of the genre of fictive history, and the competing status of fictional and historical truth (McKenna, 2005; Clendinnen, 2006; Papailias, 2005).

II

Alekos Doukas was born in 1900 in the Ottoman Empire and migrated from Greece to Australia in 1927. He died in 1962 when he was fatally injured by a car in Melbourne. He is best known for his two semi-autobiographical fictional works *To Struggle, To Youth* (1953) and *Under Foreign Skies* (1963) which are among the first Greek-language novels published in book form in Australia. He is also known as a leftwing activist from 1940 onwards and the public face of the workers' club, the Democritus League. An intellectual with a broad and encyclopaedic knowledge, he was a tireless organiser and spokesperson in struggles against fascism and for democratic rights in both Greece and Australia. What is not so well known, is his life before he became an activist and Marxist interpreter of migrant experience. His earlier life and thinking has been largely inferred from his novels which have been read almost universally, and unproblematically, as memoir.

A brief summary of Doukas' early life provides a counterbalance to the almost universal representation of him as a foundational figure of the Greek left in Australia. A detailed study of the Stratis Doukas literary archive,² and in particular Alekos'

¹ See Greek-American debates on migrant history (Georgakas, 1987 and 1991).

² Alekos' brother, Stratis Doukas (1895–1983), is a well-known Greek writer and essayist, whose body

Alekos Doukas (left) with a friend in postwar years

letters (over 300) to Stratis and other family members from 1921 to 1936, has led me to conclude that Alekos’ persona in the early years is both complex and at times contradictory, the product not only of his day-to-day experiences but also of the complex array of philosophical and literary discourses embodied in the texts he was reading. Doukas was influenced by both liberal and modernist thinking although he was simultaneously drawn by certain conservative currents. As a refugee he was typically Venizelist and republican in sympathy but was also for a period in the 1920s attracted to the views of the Rural Party which was a politically ambiguous mix of leftwing socialist, rightwing monarchist and socialist nationalist ideas (Vergopoulos, 1978:130–136). His belief in “ruralism” was a romantic and anti-city view which espoused a return to agricultural life and nature. For most of the interwar period Doukas rejected communist ideas as impractical and ultimately doomed to failure. In fact he was hostile to revolutionary talk. Up to 1936 he was apolitical, believing instead in a religious and spiritual transformation of the world into a universal “society based on brotherhood” (letter from the Asia Minor front to his brother Dimitros, 30.5.1922). His religious views in this period need to be understood as part of a European neo-Christian intellectual movement, and not as a revival of Orthodoxy. They include a type of spiritualism that drew on the Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore and allowed for certain metaphysical interpretations of life. Doukas was also drawn to scientific thought, in the fields of agriculture, evolutionary theory,

of published work, though not extensive, has continued to exert an influence on later generations. A major part of his literary archive is held by the Department of Medieval and Modern Greek Studies, Aristotle University, Thessaloniki. Letter references in this paper belong to this archive.

archaeology and geography. He appears to have combined aspects of both materialist and idealist views of the world. Although after the Greek-Turkish war he rejected chauvinistic nationalism, his views were imbued with a Greek Orientalism and an unquestioning European colonialist and Social Darwinian outlook on the non-European world (Alexiou, 2005). In the literary sphere, Doukas was a product of the Greek neo-romantic symbolist movement of the 1920s. This explains his early writings and high regard for the writer and painter Fotis Kontoglou. An additional powerful influence was the Norwegian school of writers, in particular, Knut Hamsun, whose writing spawned the genre of vagabond writing (*alitografia*) in Greece, and the social realism of Maxim Gorky, which inspired interwar “proletarian” literature (Moullas, 1993:47–60; Dounia, 1996:29–53). Most of these intellectual influences left traces on Doukas’ thinking, but by the 1940s and 1950s these had been transformed and reconstituted into a type of migrant socialist realist writing that characterises his two novels.

III

It is clear that after Alekos Doukas’ death a certain legend or myth grew around his name. I use the term “myth” not in the sense of falsity but through an understanding of narrative as always containing “vestigial” mythical elements usually related to “origins or transformations” (Cochrane, 1992:242). Active myths or legends in the modern era are narratives based on certain events or figures that can act as vehicles for national or collective identities and ideologies. Often a few simple narrative elements, “medical orderly with his donkey rescues injured soldiers” or “young Ottoman subjects read Greek books at night in churches”, can be constructed into enduring national legends (Cochrane, 1992; Angelou, 1997). As Roland Barthes (1972:143–150) has suggested, myths can have strong and weak forms. The former clearly serve national and state purposes with extensive apparatuses that construct, maintain and modify them, while weaker myths are more often associated with groups or stories that have little institutional support or nourishment. In the latter category I would place the historical narrative of the migrant Greek left in Australia. Nevertheless the deciphering of the mythical dimensions of such a narrative is important if we are to understand the needs it fulfilled in the past and its relation to the present.

The first news report of Alekos Doukas’ death, along with the biographical blurb on the cover of his posthumously-published novel *Under Foreign Skies*, have constituted his enduring public image until today. The page-one report of the *Neos Kosmos*’ edition of 31 October 1962 begins:

In the early hours of Thursday 25 October Alekos Doukas’ heart stopped beating. A little earlier a motor car had fatally injured him near his house while he was returning from a protest against the American intervention in Cuba organised by pro-peace forces outside the American Consulate.

His death came at a critical point in the Cold War period and at a time of rising migrant worker militancy (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:241–254). The blurb on the novel repeats the *Neos Kosmos*' report: "Doukas was killed in a motor car accident on 24 October 1962 while returning from a Peace rally". In point of fact he had already returned home, where he lived with his sister and nephew, and was on his way to a Communist Party of Australia branch meeting when he was hit. This is confirmed through interviews with family and friends, and the Coroner's Inquest.³ The omission of this, perhaps mundane fact, undeniably gives the narrative greater dramatic impact. I would argue that exactly at this prosaic point, a mythical dimension begins to operate; an unconscious construction of a legend begins in which Doukas is violently struck down while fighting for a great cause. The mythical dimension represents the transformation of history into "nature", the passage from "semiology to ideology" (Barthes, 1972:126–144).⁴ The mythical reading has the potential to invoke striking workers gunned down in Thessaloniki in 1936 (Kornaros, 1981), the Resistance leader General Stefanos Sarafis run over by an American airman in Athens in 1957 or Grigoris Lambrakis,⁵ the leftwing MP and leader of the Greek Peace Movement, assassinated from a moving vehicle in May 1963, the latter occurring only a month after *Under Foreign Skies* circulated.⁶ The mythical signification encoded in the statement "killed in a motor car accident [...] while returning from a Peace rally" can be understood as a powerful psychological truth for Greeks for whom state assassination and violence were not uncommon. For many years after Doukas' death there were always some who suspected foul play, even though there was never evidence for this.⁷

My interest here is in the mythical resonances that the book blurb can have as an important "paratext" in the "complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader" (Genette, 1977:dust jacket). The blurb's narrative works like a "turnstile" that alternates between biographical statement and mythical "metalanguage" (Barthes, 1972:123). The concepts of the metalanguage might be formulated as a series of mythical statements: "refugee who was proletarianised", "war veteran and hero who

³ Eleni Andronicos and Charalambos Lolis interviewed by D. Tzoumactas (Tzoumactas, 2003:59–60, 63) and M. Sophocleous (Sophocleous, personal archive: 1983; 28.2.1991). Yiannis Mavrokefalos (John Black) interviewed by P. Alexiou (Alexiou, personal archive: 6.11.1986). See also files relating to the accident and the Coroner's Inquest, VPRS 10010/R3, unit 5, Body Card Number 1962/2954 and VPRS 24/P2, Inquest Deposition file number 1963/354, Public Record Office, Victoria.

⁴ Barthes' distinction is useful but requires the qualification that the sharp antithesis between the so-called "objective" or denotative and the "ideological" or connotative meaning in language is, in rigorous poststructural terms, unsustainable, as both levels of meaning are discursive constructions.

⁵ Lambrakis' assassination was the subject of the film *Z* by Costas Gavras (1969).

⁶ In the week before Doukas' death a photo of Stefanos Sarafis had appeared in an article and the photo's caption included the words "killed by an American marine in a car 'accident'". *Neos Kosmos* 24.10.1962, p. 5.

⁷ See statements by Charalambos Lolis (Tzoumactas, 2003:63) and Antonis Hatzilidas interview with P. Alexiou (20.5.1993).

hated war”, “pioneering migrant of the Depression years”, “founder of Greek-Australian literature”, “peace fighter killed in the act of struggle” and so on. A few hundred words, strategically placed, have helped construct and nourish a legend, and of equal importance, signposted the way a fictional narrative might be read. They have influenced the reader’s very understanding of the narrative’s genre, whether it is to be read as simple memoir or constructed fiction.

IV

The most common reference to Doukas’ fictional work is as historical testimony.⁸ In a study of Greek activists in the 1930s and 1940s, Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos (2002) grant the same status to Doukas’ fictional narrative as to the other leftwing veteran interviewees. In their important 2004 study of the Greek left, they frequently quote from *Under Foreign Skies* as historical evidence. Commenting on the closed nature of the prewar Greek communities they write: “Another sufficiently sensitive testimony of the invisible aspect of the communities is that of Alekos Doukas who was perhaps one of the few who lived on both sides of the community ontology” (Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:117). The passage they quote is about Greeks living in their “shell”, nostalgic for home and estranged from the Australian people (Doukas, 1963:233–234). It is one of the most oft-quoted from the novel and its authority clearly rests on the belief that Doukas was a first-hand witness. To test this assumption I will refer to the biographical account of Doukas provided by the late Vassilis Stefanou. Drawing on his memory as an old friend, and framing the past in a Marxist interpretation, he unconsciously borrows from Doukas’ fictional work to illustrate his account. For example, in relation to Doukas’ time as a seasonal worker in the Depression, he writes:

For the first time he became conscious of the class composition of Australian society. He could discern the strong racist tendencies of some of the large and medium block holders of Mildura and the more liberal attitudes of the Australian working class fruit pickers.

For the first time he participated in the attempts by the then militant Australian Workers Union to organise fruit pickers in the area (Stefanou, 1983:16).

Doukas’ letters of the time however reveal a contradictory reality. In 1927 he wrote about Australians in the following way: “Incredibly parochial and xenophobic (I mean the workers and the lower classes)” (letter to Stratis, 24.12.1927). As for organising fruit pickers, this is a fictionalised event in the life of the protagonist Stratis Mourtzos in *Under Foreign Skies* (130–134). A similar real-life incident did occur in Mildura on Sunday 1 November 1931 when local returned soldiers bashed members

⁸ Sneja Gunew (1994:xii) argues that that the discourse of multiculturalism frames “migrant” literature as unproblematic oral testimony, interesting to sociology or history but not literature as such.

of the Unemployed Workers' Movement. Doukas was far away then, working in a fish shop in Dandenong, and according to his letters, quite uninvolved in politics. In other words, even Stefanou who knew Doukas from his earliest years was unable to clearly differentiate between fictional creation and biographical fact. Of course Stefanou is a special case because there is evidence that he had political input into the novel and his article inadvertently reveals signs of the political blueprint behind the novel's narrative plot.

The move from fictional to biographical or testimonial truth is widespread in references to Doukas' work and life.⁹ A few examples will suffice. In his history of the Greek left, and contrary to the evidence available, Stelios Kourbetis (1992:62) has Doukas playing "an active part in Democritus from the first years of its founding". George Kanarakis (1987:99), in the carefully researched notes of his literary anthology, inserts the following about Doukas in 1925: "It was at this time that he also took part in the movement of the tobacco workers of Xanthi against the government lock-out". This is not only incorrect; it is totally out of character for Doukas at the time. The protagonist of *To Struggle, To Youth* however, as it happens, did take part in such an event (Doukas, 1953:297–302). Kanarakis has read the fictional narrative as reliable memoir.

I think there is a problem here at a deeper conceptual level. It has to do with a confusion of periods and genres. For example, Con Castan (1983:7–8) initially believes that *Under Foreign Skies* may have been written in the period of the Depression where its narrative time is set.¹⁰ He partly assumes this because Kanarakis' (1987:xx) four-period classification of Greek authors places Doukas in period two (1922–1939) on the criterion of when he "started expressing himself [...] in a literary way [...] in Australia". The fact is however that Doukas wrote the novel in the 1950s and this has led to a confusion of periods that, together with the novel's socialist realist mixing of genres, has led to the erroneous view that the writing is contemporaneous with the events it describes.¹¹ For example, Michael Tsounis, who in his 1971 foundational history of Greek communities makes only passing reference to the novel as literature, is by 1989 using the fictional narrative to locate Doukas as a historical figure in the prewar period. Accordingly, Doukas was a "severe social critic" and "never hesitated to castigate the ideology and practice of the closed community" (Tsounis, 1989:12). But when? In the 1950s or in the early 1930s? The difference is blurred, as it is in most references to Doukas as historical source. These examples represent a general tendency that also extends to the use of the novel to illustrate the class structure of the prewar Greek community (Doukas, 1963:233; Kourbetis, 1992:17; Tsounis, 1989:12;

⁹ I am not suggesting that these categories are self-evident dichotomies. They are in reality discursive constructions that are often contested and complicated.

¹⁰ Three years later, Castan (1986:65) has realised that the literary context of the novel is the Australian socialist realist movement of the 1950s, although he does not explore this any further.

¹¹ According to Alekos' letter 17.2.1962 to Stratis, the second novel was written between 1953–1956 (Stratis Doukas Archive).

Dimitreas, 1998:187; Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos, 2004:86–87). Again the much-quoted passage is not analysed as a part of the Marxist discourse of the 1950s but as expressing an instinctively radical perceptivity on the part of the leftwing migrant writer Alekos Doukas in the Depression years.¹²

It is the literary analyses that come closest to critically opening up the problem that Doukas' work seems to present. Christos Fifis (1983), Yiannis Vasilakakos (1983, 2008) and Dimitris Tzoumaccas (1990, 2003) provide analyses that identify a range of literary weaknesses. Each of these critics identifies problems of genre or the inability to master its demands. Revealingly, despite these problems, they all agree that Doukas' novels are invaluable "testimony", "biography", "documents of an era" and invaluable to our understanding of our migrant past (Fifis, 1983:6; Vasilakakos, 1983:9; Tzoumaccas, 2003:56–57). Again the actual era being referred to is often not clear. Tzoumaccas and Vasilakakos keep revisiting the subject.

Vasilakakos (2008) tries to understand Doukas' literary shortcomings in terms of his relationship with his older brother and mentor, the writer Stratis Doukas, and the psychological impact of his life experiences. But much of this information is still unavailable in the public domain and Vasilakakos is forced into guesswork with limited evidence. I believe however that his line of questioning is productive as it seeks to interrogate the archival material. Although Vasilakakos sets out to examine Doukas' status as the "patriarch" and "pioneer" of Greek-Australian literature, he concludes, contrary to the body of his paper, that Doukas is indeed such a figure for reasons, not of literary merit, but of historical source and testimony as well as his "humanistic, inter-racial" vision, as Tzoumaccas (2003:57) has argued. Vasilakakos goes further; Doukas is not only a "pioneer", he is a "forerunner" of "multiculturalism" which is the "model" for today's globalised world. While I am wary of such historically uncontextualised statements, I think that the issue of multiculturalism, and the historical and discursive connections or disconnections between the leftwing internationalism and cultural policies of the 1930s, 40s and 50s and the later governmental forms of multiculturalism in the 1970s and 80s, is an area that needs serious study.

V

I conclude with the following brief points: I have looked at one narrative of the Greek-Australian past. Although it is reductive and mythologised, it is not simply a myth; it is an interpretation of real lives, real people, real social forces and movements. The critical interrogation of this narrative is not a capitulation into historical nihilism, nor conversely a retreat into antiquarian historical curiosity; it is a confrontation with the discourses and debates of the present about the past. For example, the issue of hyphenated cultural identity is a related issue that needs study — the sort

¹² Only Tzoumaccas (2003:41) refers to it as Marxist ideology rather than documentary evidence.

of investigation that Nicolacopoulos and Vassilacopoulos (2004:171–172) attempt when they look at the discursive origins of the term "Greek-Australian". The term is a lexical marker for a particular consciousness and identity (Castan, 1988:8), but its historical analysis also feeds into the current debate over the mutual exclusivity or not of a perennial diaspora versus hyphenated identity and culture.¹³ All these issues, and more, are central to narratives of the past. What is required are questions specific to historical and discursive contexts, like the one Tsounis (1987:53) raises about why *Under Foreign Skies* was published when it was and by whom. We need to investigate and bring into the public domain the largely hidden Greek-Australian historical archive so that narratives that have become embedded in our thinking can be critically examined.

I have attempted to suggest some answers to the question of why Alekos Doukas has been read in the way he has. A part of it is the need we have for a radical and culturally progressive narrative of the past that relates us dynamically to the present. Of course this story, preoccupied as it is with male "founders" and "patriarchs" (a mirroring of the colonialist discourse of settlement), conceals its implication in other myths and narrations that exclude Indigenous and women's histories. The same critical examination however needs to be exercised in looking at other Greek-Australian stories of the past, also deeply mythologised in their own way.

¹³ For example, Kanarakis (2005:42) has consistently argued against the use of the hyphenated term "Greek-Australian".

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