

Books

Outside the Walls by Vassilis Vassilikos

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 192 pp.; \$6.95)

The Harpoon Gun by Vassilis Vassilikos

(Harcourt Brace Jovanovich; 246 pp.; \$6.95)

Stephen Rousseas

On April 21, 1967, Vassilis Vassilikos and his wife, Mimi, were traveling on a train in Germany en route to Greece. They were riding second class with a group of Greek immigrant workers going back to spend Easter with their families. A transistor radio was tuned to the American Armed Forces station in Frankfurt. The music was lulling Vassilikos to sleep. As the train pulled into Nuremberg he turned to remind his wife of the Nazi trials when the music on the transistor was interrupted for a special news bulletin: *Tanks invaded and occupied the city of Athens. Anyone circulating without a special pass, after six, will be shot on sight.* Mimi started to cry. They pulled out the antenna to its full length and held the radio against the window, but the train by this time had picked up speed and they were unable to hear anything more.

They arrived in Monaco that evening and took a room at a hotel near the station. The telephone lines to Athens had been cut. They knew no one in Monaco. It was nine o'clock and the Greek-language newspapers at the kiosk were a day old. He bought a copy of *Makedonia*. Scanning the headlines life in Greece seemed normal; nothing about an impending coup as had been so frequent in the past. He

thought, hopeful, that whatever had happened in Greece it couldn't have been as bad as the radio bulletin had indicated. Vassilikos approached a group of Greek immigrant workers sitting dejectedly on their cheap valises. They had been scheduled to board a train for Greece at 8 P.M. It was from them he learned that the Greek frontier had been closed. Vassilikos and his wife returned to their hotel. All night the American Armed Forces Radio repeated the news of the coup. The next morning it was snowing in Monaco when Vassilikos and his wife boarded the train for Rome. A day later, on April 23, *Le Monde* listed Vassilis Vassilikos as one of those rounded up and arrested by the military junta in Athens. Protests poured in for his release. Had he not had an aversion to flying, he would have been in Athens in time for the coup, and he would have been arrested.

Vassilis Vassilikos is the young Greek novelist and poet who, one year before the coup, had published his book *Z*, a documentary account in novel form of the Salonika assassination in 1963 of the Greek deputy, Gregoris Lambrakis (the novel was published in English in 1968 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux). The film *Z* by Costas Gavras was based on the book. For seven years now Vassilikos has lived in exile, shuttling back and forth between Paris and Rome. The English versions of his two latest books, *Outside the Walls* and *The Harpoon Gun*, were published in 1973. They reflect the torment and the despair he feels for his country and for the life of a writer living in exile, torn and uprooted from the soil which has nourished his creative talents.

In *Outside the Walls* he reaches back, in a series of autobiographical and descriptive sketches, to recreate the mounting terror and despair of life in Greece in the years immediately before the coup. He sees Greece one hundred years behind Europe and two revolutions away from the present: "Only in a series of leaps and bounds lies any cure for our ills; . . . radical measures

are needed, measures reflecting the spirit of the times, the wind of change." Yet rot and stagnation permeate Greece.

Seeing modern Greece as "heir to ancestral death," with its youth "tramping the dust of a country once a cradle of civilization and now teeming with tombstones," he sets out his credo as a writer. Vassilikos has been deeply influenced by Georg Lukács's *Studies in European Realism*. Prose stands "in direct dependence on social conditions," with great writers cropping up "only in great societies boiling on the brink of great upheaval"—Dickens, Balzac, Dostoevski. To Vassilikos Greece is an arrested society; not great and never likely to be great. The novel, therefore, is "a form barred from the outset." The only form of prose writing which "alone can bear rich fruit" in Greece's present condition is "the novella, or short story; and the testimony—the eyewitness account, reportage, documentary." To be a Greek writer means to be committed, to eschew neutrality. One cannot be a *private* citizen. It was Panayiotis Moullas who pointed out that the Ancient Greek word for private citizen is *idiotis*, which roughly translates into *idiot* in French and English. "For our illustrious ancestors," writes Vassilikos, "anyone not engaged in public affairs was an idiot."

Vassilikos imagines a three-story building inhabited by three classes of Greek intellectuals. The uppermost floor, farthest from the ground, is populated by arty aesthetes appalled by the vulgarity of ideological disputes and opposed to the idea of political commitment. The second floor, a bit closer to the ground, is occupied by serious, progressive intellectuals with good intentions. They are well-educated, cosmopolitan, *au courant*—but they have no roots in the people. They are suspended in midair, and though their windows do show the city and the sky, none of the "hubbub of the street" can be heard; their windows are "superbly executed paintings." On the ground floor the windows are real. They look out into "villages

scourged by disease" lacking "the most rudimentary living conditions beyond the pigsty level." Even the "faith of men dying before the firing squad can be seen." Though the world is dark on the ground level, it is in this thick darkness that "the dialectic of the sunrise" lies. "Art becomes life's resurrection" and artists on the ground floor deal in renewed faith and tend to "the rebirth of the world." (This is somewhat reminiscent of the views of Mikis Theodorakis; I am not convinced by either. See *Worldview*, October, 1973.)

Though Vassilikos's conception may be a bit grandiose in design and simplistic in its interior relations, he nevertheless sees himself standing firmly rooted on the ground floor of his edifice looking out squarely and unblinkingly at the world around him, hubbub and all. And as a writer, a *public* man, he is committed to changing it. His two books, however, depict neither "the dialectic of the sunrise" nor "the rebirth of the world." They are suffused throughout with an unyielding despair.

Outside the Walls is a series of sketches in four parts. It exudes a quiet desperation, a melancholia for things past combined with a bleak hope for the future. It depicts the ragpickers of the Athenian garbage dump, living in *bidonvilles*, whose wretched livelihood is threatened by the march of progress in the form of new trucks that grind the garbage before dumping the undifferentiated, useless pulp at their feet. And nobody cares. He also tells the story of Greek youth. Years of work in school, then, perhaps, university, where professors sitting as a "Supreme Tribunal of Inquisitors" preach to the students *ex cathedra*, rewarding only those who parrot their sadly outdated lecture notes (which students are forced to buy at exorbitant prices) and flunking most of them at least once in order to compensate for their own inadequacies. After university the "awful sense of wasted time," and conscription into the army for two years, where captains replace the "obsessed

high-school teachers" and the invisible, unapproachable university professors. And after the army the desperate search for a job. "No vacancies," followed by the demeaning search for a fix, for a man with pull and influence dispensing jobs at a price.

A popular saying in Greece lays down the conditions for getting ahead in the world . . . —*Ta Trîa Mi: Mésa, Monéda Kai Mounf* . . . (the Three M's: Who do you know, how much money are you prepared to pay, and . . . the last of the three M's is best left untranslated). "Hideously duped," as Vassilikos puts it, the student "unconsciously begins to serve the grand delusion"—and becomes, in turn, the terrorizer of the next generation. Either that or he emigrates to the United States or Canada; or, in the case of the uneducated poor, to West Germany as grist for its factories on a last-in-first-out basis. Greece is one of the few countries that exports its unemployed on a mass basis to support the economic growth of *other* countries.

The most moving sections of *Outside the Walls* describe the plight of political prisoners in the 1960's, rotting in jail since the Civil War of 1946-48. These were the hardcore Communists and resistance fighters who repeatedly refused to sign a "Declaration of Recantation" as the price for freedom. Greece was the only European country in the postwar period to install its collaborators in power, with British and American backing, and to crush, jail, and murder its resistance fighters. It is a sorry story, which has been often told and continues to this day, with a new round of political prisoners since the coup of April 21, 1967. George Mavros, a moderate leader of the Center Union Party, is the latest to be sent in exile to one of Greece's celebrated island concentration camps for political prisoners.

Vassilikos visited the families of political prisoners during the tenure of Constantine Caramanlis, the U.S.-designated prime minister from 1955 to 1963. Most of the prisoners were in jail continuously for eigh-

teen years. Sons and daughters left as infants grew up in poverty and visited their fathers on rare occasions on those far-flung prison islands. A few had never seen their fathers. Vassilikos relates the story of a first meeting between father and son. The wife of the prisoner retells the story:

"They were transferring him from Aliarnassos to Amphissa Prison. He sent us a wire. Friday evening: 'Am at Athens Transit Camp.' He'd be there just a day. Saturday morning we started off. The guard wouldn't let us in. I told him I hadn't seen my husband in ten years and my son was going to meet his father for the first time. No dice. So I went straight to the warden and begged him to let us see him. He gave permission. I had to see about a parcel. My boy went in on his own. He looked hard but he couldn't make out which was his father. His father spotted him but didn't know if it was his son or some other prisoner's boy. So he got a friend to call out his name. My son glanced up and he ran over and threw his arms around him. When I arrived, I stood back and watched them gazing at each other."

After the thaw of 1963-65 under the Center Union Party of George Papandreou, the political prisoners were released; they came home to aged wives and grown children. The tragedy continues. Vassilikos revisited one family to find the son sorting out his papers to leave for Germany.

"Since his father's been back, he hasn't felt right. Over the last twenty years he'd grown used to living alone with his mother here in this hovel. Just the two of them. Now they're three, he doesn't exactly feel he belongs. . . . The return of his father forever weeping on his aged wife's shoulder fills no gap. Merely opens up a new one. . . . For twenty years he'd learned to live with his absence. So he'd made the decision to leave with a friend of his for Germany."

Or, the father who wrote poems for his unseen daughter while in prison and then returned to find himself estranged from her: "She's

a full grown lady now. I go to give her a kiss, she backs off. I haven't been a father to her since she was a baby." He then changes the subject abruptly and tells Vassilikos that "he has to report once a fortnight to security headquarters; and to go see his sister who lives in Thebes, he has to get permission from security, then report to the Thebes Police Department." Then there is the story of two former political prisoners meeting by chance in Athens, one of them in the company of Vassilikos.

"Meet my wife," says the latter. The man at my side seems not to have heard. 'My wife,' the other man repeats. I watch him turn, shake her hand, and say, 'Pleased to meet you,' careful not to look her in the face."

The real-life sketches of *Outside the Walls* were written before the 1967 coup, the novellas and short stories of *The Harpoon Gun* between 1969 and 1971 during Vassilikos's accidental exile. In these short stories Vassilikos is bitter at

the sheeplike absence of resistance in Greece and full of contempt at the chaos and quarreling among the many-splintered resistance groups in exile. He has particular scorn for the intellectuals in exile, those who had the means to get out of Greece—the paperpushers and manifesto writers who spend their time either inking their mimeograph machines or playing the pinball machines in Paris cafés. "The intellectuals," writes Vassilikos, "are trying to formulate the epistemology of the dictatorship." He returns in his short stories to the ground floor and to the common men who inhabit it. This is his only hope, and since even the common man in Greece is quiescent, he activates him in the eye of his imagination.

Lakis and Sakis are two young men in the novella from which the book takes its title, uncontaminated by the ideological squabbles of the Left. They are hard as steel, cool, and without nerves. With the aid

of a Parisienne who sets the trap, they kidnap an American colonel and force the release of Panagoulis, Glezos, Notaras, and eighteen other well-known prisoners of the junta. They pull off the job brilliantly, and the story ends with Lakis and Sakis, harpoon gun in hand, taking the first boat to Hydra, presumably for some fun and for some nonhuman spearfishing. The story is highly improbable, if not in fact then in its conception. It just doesn't hold. It goes too smoothly; nary a hitch, and little drama to it. It is the weakest of all of Vassilikos's stories. It tries too hard to make a point and winds up screeching at the young in Athens: *Why can't you, too, be like the Tupamaros?*² It is a story written out of Vassilikos's anguish that nothing is being done in Greece—just leaflets, some quickly painted wall slogans, and a few sporadic, harmless bombs. It is a Walter Mitty story from beginning to end.

The Tupamaros seem to be an



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obsession with Vassilikos. They keep popping up in several of his stories. The password in the lead story is *Tou ípa páre méros* (I told him, "Take part"), which, if pronounced quickly, comes out as *Toupamaros*. "The Tupamaros are the Alcibiades of Latin America," explains one exile with the strange theory that "races grow old just as individuals do"; and that the "cells" of the Greeks "were at their peak two thousand years ago," whereas those of the Latin Americans are young and still intact.

Vassilikos wants to shake young Greeks to action in order to overcome Flaubert's observation that "human nature has inexhaustible reserves of indifference." Ideology is the great deadener, whether it be from a Kautsky opposing the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 or the syndicalist unions of Europe steeped in ideology and playing the social democratic game, as opposed to the early, violent, nonideological trade-union movement of the United States or the pragmatic opportunism of a Lenin stretching his Marxism to suit the times. In his last novella, "Self-Slaughter," Vassilikos brilliantly pulls all the loose threads together to weave an engrossing story of intrigue and revolutionary praxis, which ends in a tragic, spine-tin-gling failure.

In keeping with his credo, "Self-Slaughter" is a novella based on an actual story, as was the case with *Z*. The story takes place in Koper (Copenhagen), the capital of Norland (Denmark). The protagonist is known as K (in actual fact, George Mavrogenis)—a Greek travel agent working in the Greek resistance in Koper. He is found shot through the right temple deep in a forest outside of Koper. Suspicion is aroused, since K is left-handed and the gun was found in his right hand. The Norland government labels his death a suicide, and Vassilikos, basing his story on the actual case, spins a tale of intrigue that is absolutely engrossing.

K was apolitical. He lived and worked in Koper for several years before the 1967 coup. After the

coup he headed the Committee for Restoration of Democracy in Greece. Though on good terms with other resistance groups, he steered clear of their ideological squabbling and, like Vassilikos, felt nothing but contempt for their wordy manifestos and their lack of concrete action. For K the paper stage was over. He felt an imperative need for action. Without action "the daily diet of fascism . . . warps the human consciousness." Only violent action can jolt the people out of their altogether too easy accommodation to life under the junta. Time is always on the side of the dictators. "No more words and meetings and anti-fascist jamborees—everyone must go into action." K's plan is to blow up the Esso-Pappas refinery at Salonika and the atomic base at Souda. Divers and frogman were to be used, and K was in the process of accumulating the needed monies and explosives.

At first there is suspicion that Greek agents murdered him; that he was betrayed by an inside informer. Then doubts arise when his medical record of a previous suicide attempt is revealed. Two of his friends refuse to accept the Norland government's explanation of suicide. The "Chief," a former Greek parliamentary leader (actually, Andreas Papandreou), arrives from a neighboring country (Sweden) on the day of K's funeral and labels his death a political assassination by agents of NATO and the U.S. Pentagon—much to the irritation of the Norland government, itself a member of NATO. With a majority of only two in parliament the Social Democratic Party was in a precarious political position. It was to its interest, therefore, to insist on a suicide in order to forestall a public outcry that would bring the Christian Democrats to power (all this in the story, of course).

One of the first suspects is Buddha, "a great bull-necked fellow shaved bald as an egg," of unknown origin. Under the German occupation of Greece he was an agent in the Intelligence Service who was later dismissed for sympathies with the Left. He next turned up in one

of the Russian satellite countries, but had to flee after he was "accused of being an agent of Western Imperialism." He joined the Greek resistance movement in Koper and soon become one of the prime movers, issuing directives that held the student movement enthralled by their brilliance. After K's "accident," he disappeared. Suspicion then centered on a young Norlander girl named Karine, who once worked for the Pappas Standard Oil Company. A good-looking young Greek bartender, Theo, is assigned to seduce her and find out if she was the informer. He succeeds in getting the information after almost strangling her to death. Karine names a homosexual American captain assigned to NATO in Koper as her boss. In a reckless step Theo visits the captain at his NATO headquarters and uses the code word supplied to him by Karine. The captain invites Theo to his home for further discussion and then propositions him while playing bouzouki music on the Hi-Fi. While Theo is wiping the floor with the captain, who is in a state of masochistic ecstasy, he suddenly feels his head spinning and winds up on the floor next to the captain. He raises his head slightly, and the last thing he sees before dying are the boots of Buddha, and the last thing he hears is the music of Mikis Theodorakis playing on the Hi-Fi.

Vassilikos has done his homework and has obviously researched the actual case thoroughly. It is highly probable that, as a writer, Vassilikos has embroidered the real story, as he has every right to do for literary reasons. But so many of the minor details of the story fit the real one that some readers may be led to accept it as an authentic, novelized version of the truth—much as Vassilikos's version of the murder of Lambrakis in *Z* was based on thousands of pages of court documents. The death of the real K was thoroughly investigated by the Danish police, the military, and the secret service. There was no doubt that K had committed suicide. The fact that K was left-handed was itself due to an injury to his right hand in an

other suicide attempt eight years earlier. He had a case history of mental illness and often thought that various parts of his brain were fighting each other. The police determined that K had left his home at 7:20 in the evening, and though much was made by the Greek community that his watch had stopped at 11 P.M., police tests showed it had simply run down at that time. The Greek exiles made much of K's death and loosely cast suspicion about concerning perfectly innocent persons. Some even made the headlines in the Danish press by stating they had proof of his murder. The facts are that K committed suicide. The story of K is not on a level with that of Z.

Vassilikos's fictionalized version of the death of K is nonetheless gripping. The tension mounts unbearably and the denouement is swift and sudden, with everything falling neatly into place. I wouldn't be surprised if Costas Gavras buys K as a film property and makes it a part of a political trilogy—from Z, to

State of Siege, to K. The dictators may have the upper hand now, but in the darkness lies the dialectic of the sunrise.

I should point out to American readers that the American publishers of Vassilis Vassilikos have done them a great disservice. In Part II of *The Harpoon Gun* six of his more powerful short stories that were a part of the French edition (*Le Fusil-Harpon*, Gallimard) have been dropped. Why? Vassilikos deserves better.

Vassilis Vassilikos is undoubtedly one of the best contemporary writers to have come out of Greece in recent years. For his sake and for the sake of all his countrymen we can hope that he and all his fellow exiles will be able soon to go home again, no longer to be forced to walk along foreign paths. "Every land is cold when it is not one's own country." The sorrow of Vassilikos is reflected in the title to one of his shorter stories: *Ça ne peut pas durer*. Perhaps one can add, *Ça ne doit pas durer*.

and Burma), the relation of the Roman Catholic Church to revolution (from the French Revolution to the Spanish Civil War), and to the most recent religious legitimations of revolutionary change (Muslim, Buddhist and Catholic). A final section summarizes some of the major findings. Lewy is not out to make spectacular points (indeed, the tone throughout is refreshingly sober and factual), and his conclusions are anything but sensational. In the main he lists conditions (such as those existing when a colonial people is struggling for a sense of collective identity) that are conducive to the rise of millenarian revolts, and characteristics that commonly pertain to such revolts (such as the more or less ubiquitous feature of charismatic leadership).

Scholars will undoubtedly argue about Lewy's conclusions, as they might question the logic of some of his selections. For example, the only Muslim developments discussed at any length are the revolt of the Mahdi in the Sudan and the Nasserite revolution in contemporary Egypt. Islam, which has spouted one millenarian movement after another over the centuries, might well have been given more extensive treatment. So might the millenarian movements of the Christian Middle Ages. But whatever the criticisms, there can be no doubt about the scholarly standards of Lewy's book. It is certain to become a major point of reference.

The general reader is likely to be impressed with something only indirectly connected with the topic of millenarianism proper—namely, the pervasiveness of religious motives and themes in contemporary social change, especially in the Third World. Nor is this impression due to any terminological tricks on Lewy's part: He explicitly excludes from his purview such quasi-religious phenomena as Marxism or nationalism; when he speaks of religion, he does so in the conventional sense and almost entirely in terms of the great world religions. Thus the present book has considerable relevance to the current debate concerning secu-

Religion and Revolution by Guenter Lewy

(Oxford University Press; 694 pp.; \$17.50)

Peter L. Berger

Millenarianism has always been a fascinating topic. In an age of revolutions it is also a timely topic. Historians, social scientists, philosophers and theologians have devoted much attention to it in recent years. The present book constitutes a weighty entry, almost seven hundred pages of closely packed data and argument, by an historian whose best-known work to date has been on the German Catholic Church under Nazism. In the preface Lewy (who teaches at the University of Massachusetts) explains the connection between this book and his earlier interest: Having studied a situation in which religion reacted

in a mainly passive way to a revolutionary movement, he wanted to look at cases where religion took a more active role. The result of his shift of focus is impressive.

Only the first part of the book deals with millenarianism in the narrower sense of the term. After a rather brief discussion of the relation of the major world religions to social change, Lewy discusses a number of classical millenarian movements, ranging in time and space from the Maccabees to the Cargo Cults of modern Melanesia. Later sections of the book are devoted to the place of religion in recent anticolonial revolts (in India