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Why Write Stories about the Past?

The ideological "uses" of the past in contemporary Greek literature for children: The case of Christos Boulotis

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The article focuses on three representative literary works for children between 9 and 12 by Christos Boulotis, a renowned contemporary Greek writer of children's literature. His works which are exemplary of a broader tendency of contemporary Greek historical literature for children revolve around the concepts of the personal and public past and of personal and collective memory. We show that the specific works by Boulotis tend not only to make the concepts of the personal and public/historical past an issue but also to stress the importance of these concepts for the lives of contemporary people. At the same time, we show that because literature for children is inevitably ideological, the concepts of the personal and public historical past are used by Boulotis as a resource for the promotion of specific contemporary ideologies which are at the forefront of the public debate in contemporary Greek society, such as the universality of the experience of being a refugee, anti-racism, and pacifism.

Keywords: ideology, past, memory, children's literature

Apart from entertaining children and from cultivating their imagination, children's literature has always been written in order to socialise children, in other words, to inculcate ideologies in them. It is, therefore, ***inherently*** ideological: as John Stephens aptly observes, "what the otherwise rather amorphous body of literary texts for children has in common is an impulse to intervene in the lives of children" (1992: 8). Literary texts, as well as their illustrations, help their young readers become members of their society by showing them how to "see" their world, how to think about it and, of course, how to act and behave within it (ibid., see also Kanatsouli 2000, Oikonomidou 2011).

Their ideologies are encoded in them either implicitly, that is, ***passively***, or, more often than not, explicitly, that is, ***energetically***, by advocating specific beliefs, attitudes, behaviours (Hollindale, 1988: 13–14): a great number of contemporary Greek children's books, for instance, advocate ecological thinking or anti-racist attitudes.[1]

A site where one can observe most clearly the workings of ideology is that of historical fiction or, more generally, fiction that deals with the concepts of the past and of memory (Kanatsouli 2000, Oikonomidou 2002). As Stephens argues, writers who write about the past reconstruct and reorganise it into a signifying system which expresses ideological assumptions or intentions (1992: 204). What we must not lose sight of, though, is that those assumptions or intensions are inevitably affected by the ways contemporary writers view the past. Quoting E.H. Carr's definition of history as "an unending dialogue between the present and the past" (1986: 30), Peter Bramwell goes on to observe that "historical fiction inevitably retrojects the sensibilities of the writer's own context" (2005: 109).

If we examine both contemporary and older Greek literature for children, we can safely argue that the past, and more specifically ethnic history, has always been one of its popular subjects – as is evident in the great production of historical novels. Of course, owing to the differences in the writers' historical and social contexts, there are great differences both in the ways they write about the historical past and in their (ideological) purposes in doing so.

In older books, to mention but the major differences, the main tendency was to focus on well-known heroes and on major historical events of the distant past. The main purpose of such books was to bring young readers into acquaintance with their ethnic history which was conceived of as a continuum from ancient Greek times to the present.[2] In contemporary books, though, that is books written more or less in the period after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974, Greek historical writers tend to focus on the recent past and on the individual life stories of ordinary characters, which, however, function as paradigms of general and of collective history (Kokkinos 1998: 269). The main purpose of such books is to show children the causes and/or effects of historical events and to initiate them into an interrogative or an interpreting approach to their ethnic history (Karakitsios 2004: 86, 87). Moreover, as Meni Kanatsouli (2000) suggests, contemporary Greek historical writers tend to subvert their readers' identification with fictional characters and events. "The play", she argues, "between historical truth and its fictional representation, since a novel is first of all fiction, leads them to try very interesting narrative experimentations" (124).

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[1] Indicative titles of books promoting anti-racist attitudes: Nikolas Andrikopoulos (2006): *Η χώρα με τους παράξενους ανθρώπους* [The Country with the Strange People], Argiro Pipini and Achilles Razis (2016): *Μελάκ, μόνος* [Melak, Alone], and Alkisti Chalikia and Daniela Stamatiadi (2017): *Το κουτί του Σιλάν* [Silan's Box]. Indicative titles of books promoting ecological thinking: Andiopi Frantzi (2013): *Πίσω στο δάσος* [Back to the Forest], Giota Livani (2017): *Κάτω απ' τον ίδιο ουρανό* [Under the Same Sky], and Efi Lada (2019): *Οι μέρες της σιωπής* [The Days of Silence].

[2] Two representative examples are the classic works of Penelope Delta (1911) *Τον καιρό του Βουλγαροκτόνου*, [At the Time of Voulgaroktonos] and of Nikos Kazantzakis, (1941) *Μέγας Αλέξανδρος* [Alexander the Great].

Among contemporary Greek historical writers of children's literature, there is a shared understanding that "knowledge of our past", as Joan Aiken, the well-known British historical novelist, has so aptly put it, "can at least give us and our children a sense of context; it can show us where we belong in the pattern, what came before, how everything connects" (1996: 65). There is, moreover, a shared understanding that "children reared without knowledge of their own family past, their local, social, or historical past have inadequate resources with which to face formidable choices ahead of them" (ibid.).

But what about children themselves? Why should a ten-year-old child choose to read stories about the past? Children are eager to grow up. They do not look back, they look ahead. As Aiken remarks (1996: 63) as children are reared in contemporary surroundings and on the visual images of their computers, they are hardly aware that the past exists unless they see it in museums or in archaeological sites. Besides, fashions in living, art, medicine, technology, architecture have changed so much that anything two years out of date may seem archaic.

How, then, can we help young children realise not only the existence but mainly the importance of the past? Literature may be of great help here. It can, and it should, I would like to suggest, make the importance of the past an issue and show children that recalling the past to mind is not a waste of time, but, on the contrary, it enriches their lives. This seems to become a priority in an increasing number of contemporary Greek writers of children's literature such as Alki Zei, Zorz Sari, Loti Petrovits-Androutsopoulou, Anna Gertsou-Sari, Eleni Sarantiti, and Christos Boulotis.

In this article, I have chosen to concentrate on three books by the contemporary writer Christos Boulotis: *Ένα κορίτσι φτερουγίζει στον Κεραμεικό* [A Girl Flies over Keramikos], *Το άγαλμα που κρύωνε* [The Statue Which Felt Cold], and *Το κίτρινο λεωφορείο για την πατρίδα* [The Yellow Bus to Homeland].

Christos Boulotis (1952) is an acclaimed writer of children's literature. He has published more than sixty books in which he has introduced an innovative way of writing for children, in terms of the topics of his stories but mainly in terms of his style of writing. The topics he chooses, in tune with contemporary social issues, revolve around such concepts as alterity, anti-racism, friendship, or ecology. What I find very interesting and innovative about his topics, though, is his focus on one's relation to the past, more specifically on refugees' feeling of nostalgia for what they have lost, and on the importance of personal and collective memory, in general. These topics are difficult to deal with in literature for young children: not only because the very concept of the past is something they have not yet come to terms with, but because concepts such as the trauma of expatriation or the feeling of nostalgia for one's lost homeland are unknown to the majority of them. Boulotis's special interest in such issues is one reason why I chose to concentrate on his work. The other reason is the unique way in which he treats his material: his imaginative scenarios, which bear the magic of fairy tales, are imbued with a unique blend of childish innocence and simplicity on the one hand and adult "wisdom" on the other, as well as with lyricism and emotion.

The books we focus on in this study are illustrated short stories addressed to young children. They are not typically "historical" as they do not revolve around specific historical figures or historical events. However, all three of them, and despite their differences, revolve around the theme of the past. Boulotis, being an archaeologist, is especially sensitive to the subject of the past and to its impact on our present.

What I want to examine in the case of all three books is how he makes the past meaningful for contemporary young children and, more specifically, in the case of two of them, how he deals with the concept of the living collective memory which contains, as Paul Ricoeur has shown, "symbolic wounds that must be healed" (2004: 79). At the same time, however, I want to examine all three books from the point of view of the ideas that are covertly or overtly inscribed in them. My theoretical starting point is that because the past is a form of "cultural capital", to use the term that Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has introduced, we turn to it and use it as a resource on various occasions and with various purposes in mind (Dommasnes and Galanidou 2012). This is the case of literary stories, too, especially those that are addressed to children. The way writers use the concept of the past reveals not only their belief and trust in its importance but also the specific ideologies that they want to promote to their readers. In the case under examination, I want to show how Boulotis uses the past as a springboard for the exposition of specific ideologies which are at the forefront of public debate in contemporary Greek society, such as the concepts of "Otherness", of anti-racism, of pacifism, or of the universality of the experience of being a refugee. But let us examine the three books in detail.

A Girl Flies over Keramikos

The first book by Boulotis that I want to discuss, which is titled *A Girl Flies over Keramikos* and was published in 2011, differs radically in terms of its subject matter from the other two that will be discussed later. For this is a book of historical fiction that refers to the distant past, the 5th century BC, and thus it does not refer to the concept of memory. It constitutes, however, an interesting example of how the concept of the remote past, and in this case antiquity, serves as a resource for the exposition of particular ideologies. As I will show, speaking of the past, Boulotis is at the same time speaking of the present.

The central heroine of the book, Myrtis, is an eleven-year-old girl who lives in Athens in the glorious time of Pericles but also in the turmoil of the civil war between Athens and Sparta. There is a real story behind Boulotis's fiction. While excavating an ancient mass grave of 150 people in Keramikos, the ancient cemetery of Athens, archaeologists found a very well-preserved skull which belonged, as they discovered, to an eleven-year-old girl. A group of scientists worked together and reconstructed the face of the girl whom they named Myrtis. By looking at her, then, we come face to face after 2,500 years with an ancient Greek child. And by reading Boulotis's fictional story, we picture her world.

Boulotis has stated that knowledge about antiquity does not take root unless the ground has been suitably cultivated, that is, unless children sense that that distant world

is at the same time so close to them that if they reach out they can touch it (2012b: 225). In his view, such a sense of proximity with antiquity, with our historical past in general, can be achieved in the best way through fictional stories which can help readers picture in their minds the natural but also the social environment of the fictional heroes (ibid.). If, then, the effect of classroom History is to make children "know" antiquity, the effect of fictional stories like this is to make them "feel" antiquity. One of the priorities of a book like this, then, is to bring young readers into touch with the ancient world in which Myrtis lives, by filling in all the necessary information. Thus, we read detailed descriptions of the Parthenon, of the topography of ancient Athens, of the customs of ancient Athenians, but we also read about the war between the Athenians and the Spartans as well as about the epidemic of the time that killed almost half the population of Athens. In reality, Myrtis herself was a victim of that epidemic. In Boulotis's fictional story, however, she neither falls ill nor dies. "To exorcise the evil with her optimism", as the narrator tells us, "she learns to fly with her imagination over her beloved Keramikos and from up there she corrects life, and annuls war and the misery it brings about" (2011: 49).[3]

The choice of information a writer provides respecting a particular topic is unavoidably ideological since it encourages readers to view the "reality" of the fiction from a specific standpoint. Taking this into consideration, I would argue that the story of Myrtis is at the same time a story about the glorious city/state of Athens. For the latter is presented as a city with magnificent temples, such as the Parthenon, with superb artists, such as Fidias, the sculptor, and with excellent political leaders such as Pericles. In this way, the story of Myrtis reproduces but also enhances the admiring stance towards ancient Athens and the Athenians that runs through the official History that is taught in Greek schools.

At the same time, however, the story of Myrtis is a story that promotes specific ideologies and, first of all, the idea of pacifism. Although it is only in its background that one can "read" the condemnation of the civil war that rages between Sparta and Athens, it is an overt ideological intervention on the part of Boulotis since, by adding a subtitle to the main title of his story: "An anti-war story in Athens of the classic times", he makes clear his intention to use that particular aspect of antiquity to advance the idea of pacifism, and more specifically to condemn civil wars.

Myrtis is portrayed as a lively girl, tender and sensitive at the same time, but also as a girl who is deeply sceptical about the war. It is not coincidental that Boulotis uses the thoughts of a young child to establish his anti-war ideology. It is very often that in literary works for children we find the image of the "innocent" child who can see the wrongs that adults cannot see and who undertakes to save the world in some way. Myrtis, then, may be proud of Athens, and her father may say to her that it is the Athenians who are in the right in this war, but, deeply inside, she knows "how to see the war things with a clear eye, without fanaticism against the Spartans" (Boulotis 2011: 30). So, she thinks to herself that a Spartan father would very probably say the same things as her

[3] Translations from Greek into English are by the author of this paper.

own father to his daughter: that it is all the Athenians' fault. This scepticism about who is right and who is wrong that Boulotis introduces into his story through a small girl's thoughts is very significant. It is a covert ideological comment against pure chauvinism. For Myrtis's way of thinking counters the ethnocentric attitude that somehow manages to surface in the Greek education system. Moreover, it is a way of thinking that sets a valuable foundation for the political thinking that takes root in childhood.

One more foundation for the political thinking of child readers is set by the anti-racist ideology that infiltrates into this story. For the idealised figure of the ancient heroine is also a model of anti-racist behaviour. While her friends reiterate the stereotypes and prejudices of their time, such as the rumour that "Spartan boys are entirely different from the Athenian ones as they are primitive, warlike, and they drink bull's blood instead of milk" (Boulotis 2011: 30), Myrtis pays no attention to "such nonsense" (31). Instead, she dreams of flying to Sparta to meet children of her age and convince them that "in a war, especially when Greeks fight against Greeks, they all lose the war" (ibid.). She also dreams of inviting children from Sparta to come to Athens and play games with them so as to show adults what peace is all about.

The ideological framework of the story of Myrtis is completed with the scepticism that the young heroine expresses about the position of women in classical Athens. From that aspect, too, Myrtis is presented as an unconventional girl vis-a-vis the society she lives in. First of all, she wants to have a say in what happens around her; secondly, she not only knows how to read and write but she enjoys writing; and thirdly she enjoys her freedom and makes the most of it by roaming around her beloved Keramikos. This is why she is not at all attracted to the idea of marriage, since getting married means being imprisoned in her own house.

It appears, therefore, that in drawing this particular portrait of his heroine, Boulotis straddles the gap between the time of writing and the fictional time, and portrays Myrtis as a contemporary girl. This is not because he has lost sight of the differences between the ancient and the contemporary world. Being an archaeologist himself, he is fully aware of such differences. Rather, he chooses to portray Myrtis in such a light of unconventionality to bring his contemporary readers closer to her. Thus, knowledge of remote antiquity becomes all the more meaningful for contemporary child readers since it relates to their own world, and the inscribed ideological propositions of the book become all the more acute.

The Statue Which Felt Cold

The oldest of the three books under examination is the one titled *The Statue Which Felt Cold* (2001). It is a book that places a historical element into a contemporary setting as it refers to a real statue which is currently exhibited in the archaeological museum of Athens and has the form of a little boy holding a small dog in his arms. It was found in an excavation in Asia Minor and was brought to the museum by a Greek archaeologist in 1922, a few days before the catastrophe of Smyrna. The statue now "feels cold" because it suffers from loneliness and from nostalgia for his lost homeland. The Asia

Minor Catastrophe of 1922[4] and the ensuing exchange of populations are cataclysmic events in modern Greek history. In contemporary culture, they have become sites of collective memory since the experience of forced exile finds itself at the centre of Greek national identity. As the statue, too, had to be expatriated, its fictional persona becomes a representation of all the refugees who had to leave their homeland, but who never stop dreaming of returning. In other words, it serves as a representation of the individual whose present is inextricably related to his past.

Boulotis's decision to write a fictional story in which a statue is transformed into a living being seems to be the conscious choice of an archaeologist for it helps bring children closer to a museum exhibit which they would otherwise pass by. As Robyn Fivush argues, "An old terracotta vase has no historical value unless it is framed within a story about where and when it was used, by whom it was used and for what purpose. The mere dating of an object does not automatically make it meaningful" (2012: 54).

At the same time, I must note that Boulotis's representation of the statue as a living being brings to mind similar representations of material relics of the past found in the works of 19th century Greek writers, such as Alexandros Papadiamantis. As Georgia Gotsi observes (2012: 75):

> In 19th century [Greek] literature the representation of material relics of the past as living beings with long-lived memory or dense chronological stratification often constitutes an act of re-negotiation of the relationship between the present and the past of the nation.

We could, therefore, extend Gotsi's argument in the case of Boulotis: for he, too, seems to covertly re-negotiate that relationship through the representation of the little statue of his story. By presenting the statue as a living being and as a refugee, he, too, seems to work against a tendency of "monumentisation of the past" (Gotsi 2012: 75) since he prefers to make his statue represent "a part of the living experience of the nation" (ibid.).

As I mentioned above, speaking of the past and of history and reminiscences to ten-year-olds is difficult. It is equally if not more difficult to speak to them of refugees and especially of their nostalgia for their lost homeland. Not only because young children may have no similar personal experiences, but also because nostalgia in itself is a multi-faceted and fluid concept. I need to elaborate a little on the concept of nostalgia not only because it constitutes a recurrent theme in many of Boulotis's stories but also because it seems to be an impulse, a force that drives him to write stories about the past. Nostalgia is a central concept in the whole area of Memory Studies[5] as it is inextricably

[4] The Greco-Turkish War of 1919–1922 was fought between Greece and the Turkish National Movement during the partitioning of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I, between May 1919 and October 1922. It ended with the victory of the Turkish army and with the expatriation of 1,200,000 Greeks from Asia Minor, the burning of Smyrna and the obligatory exchange of Christian and Muslim populations. This is why that traumatic historical fact has been termed in Greek as "The Asia Minor Catastrophe" and as such it has remained in the collective memory of contemporary Greeks.

[5] See the seminal works of Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969), of Svetlana Boym,

related to both individual and collective memory, and it has been approached from various perspectives. For the purpose of my present analysis, I will use the definition that Barbara Cassin gives in her book *Η Νοσταλγία. Πότε λοιπόν είναι κανείς σπίτι του* [*La Nostalgie. Quand donc est-on chez soi?*]. "Nostalgia", according to Cassin, "is what makes you prefer to return home, even if all you can find there is passing time, death and, even worse, old age instead of immortality" (2016: 39–40). And she goes on to explain, by offering us one more succinct definition of nostalgia: "having roots and being uprooted: this is what nostalgia revolves around" (2016: 65).

In *The Statue Which Felt Cold*, Boulotis chooses to approach the interrelated subjects of memory and of nostalgia, approaching the latter in both the senses that Cassin uses, that is, both as the desire to return home, no matter what, and as the wound of being uprooted. And he does so by using his favourite narrative technique which is magic realism. Thus, he straddles the gap between reality and magic by presenting a recognisable world in which, however, anything may happen: statues stroll around the museum at night, the statue of the title sheds tears which change into pearls, and a magic bird appears out of the blue to help the little statue visit its homeland. Magic realism seems to be the most appropriate narrative technique when one wants to speak of loss and of nostalgia for one's homeland because in the same way as it helps straddle the gap between reality and magic, it also helps bridge the gap between memory and fantasy. Indeed, fantasy is one of the essential constituents of nostalgia, as Svetlana Boym reminds us; for nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy (2007).

Through magic realism, the fantastic, magic events that take place in Boulotis's story, which echo the desires of the nostalgic, are inextricably related to reality: the central hero is a real exhibit of the museum, and another character, the archaeologist, used to be the director of the museum, and they all move around real places, such as the rooms and the garden of the Archaeological Museum of Athens. This stratagem of mingling the real and the fantastic not only serves the personal aesthetics of Boulotis but also serves to promote specific meanings and ideas to his young readers. Often, the narrator uses a tongue-in-cheek style to "warn" the readers that all the strange things happening in the story are "absolutely true" and that the story itself may sound like a tale, but it is not.

One such strange but "true" thing that happens in the story is that the little statue makes friends with Mrs Galatia, one of the cleaners of the museum, who is herself a refugee from Asia Minor. She suffers from the same wound, the loss of her homeland, and she, therefore, understands and shares the nostalgia the small statue feels for his homeland. For just one moonlit night, a magic bird carries the two friends across the Aegean Sea to their homeland. When they reach Asia Minor, the two friends are eager to pick basil and mint, to taste the water of mountain springs, to gather seashells and to roll about in the grass of the fields. In other words, they yearn to "feel" rather than

The Future of Nostalgia (2002), and of Barbara Cassin, *Η Νοσταλγία. Πότε λοιπόν είναι κανείς σπίτι του;* [*La Nostalgie. Quand donc est-on chez soi?*] (2016) [2013].

to visit their homeland. This particular episode of the plot and the particular desires of the central characters bring to mind another dimension of nostalgia that Janelle Wilson pinpoints when she observes that nostalgia is not like a true desire to go back in time but a longing to recapture the mood or spirit of a previous time (2005). Again, it brings to mind a pertinent comment by Barbara Cassin: "nature and culture together is what makes us realize that we are 'at home'" (2016: 53).

When that magic bird offers the nostalgic characters a "nostos", it explains to them that they are worthy of the trip, that it owes it to them. Thus, that imaginary flight to the lost homeland appears to be a sort of justification, a sort of reward for the two characters. The question automatically raised, and that is left unanswered by the narrator, is why the statue and Mrs Galatia are worthy of such a trip. The implied reader of the story is led by the text itself, that is, by its plot, its characters and their dialogues and of course by the way the story ends, to one sole answer to the above question: the two friends are worthy of the trip because they never stopped desiring "nostos", that is, returning home after a long absence. Indeed, the word "επιθυμία" [desire] recurs in the text. Reality is reflected in the mirror of human desire (Kalogirou 2003: 108, 109). The words "επιθυμία" [desire], "θύμηση" [reminiscence], and "νοσταλγία" [nostalgia] constitute the three concepts around which not only the plot but also the ideology of Boulotis's story revolves. This answer leads, in turn, to the central ideological position that runs through Boulotis's story: that the unquenchable memory of and desire for what has been lost, in this particular case one's homeland, is something good – since it gets rewarded. Deeper still, we can "read" the fundamental position that the past is not something gone and forgotten. On the contrary, it exists in the form of reminiscences of lived experiences and affects our present in a catalytic way.

The above ideological position is a covert one. Boulotis does not preach to children but lets his ideas reach them through subtle hints. Thus, the above idea is suggested by a seemingly simple but ideologically charged remark that the narrator makes at the end (Boulotis 2001: 23):

> While having their coffee, [the friends of the small statue] were talking about the old days, the present days and the days that will come. But most of all, they were talking about the days to come that touch on the past.

Boulotis picks his words carefully. The result is, in its simplicity, a childlike but also poetic expression which condenses one of the fundamental ideas that permeate his book: that the existence but also the happiness of an individual depends on their past, on their personal living history. His particular stand echoes the argument of Emilia Salvanou who has studied the historiography of the "refugee question". As Erik Johan Sjöberg observes in reviewing her study, "[Salvanou] argues that history is not only written; it is something that people 'do', meaning that the past, apart from being the object of scholarly study also, is a particular 'practice' of everyday life" (2020: 3).

However, we must not lose sight that Boulotis is dealing here with the nostalgia of refugees. One indirect ideological position promoted by his story is that having to

become a refugee is very painful. It is a wound one can never heal. Deeper still, one discerns an ideological position which condemns the wars which make people leave their homelands for ever.

The Yellow Bus to Homeland

The last of the three books by Boulotis that I want to discuss is titled *The Yellow Bus to Homeland* (2012). It is a short illustrated story with a contemporary setting but with elements of the past. Like *The Statue Which Felt Cold*, it, too, pivots on the interrelated concepts of collective memory, of nostalgia, and of the healing of the wound of having lost one's homeland. Its characters, this time, are not refugees but immigrants who have come to Greece to seek their fortune. The story of the book is this: an old pensioner, Mr Stephanos, who used to be a bus driver but never had the chance to travel for himself, buys an old bus, paints it yellow and starts travelling. However, it transpires that his bus is not an ordinary but a magic bus. For, while travelling in Greece, it passes by other, foreign places: the places that the driver or the passengers of the bus wish to see. This is why Mr Stephanos finds himself driving through Smyrna in Turkey where his family originates. Thus, he takes the decision to offer children of immigrant families trips to their homelands. Crowds of children queue for a ride every Saturday. It is healing to "see" one's lost homeland. From the windows of the bus they see the places where their families used to live, places they have heard about. Through the child characters' brief descriptions of what they see, the readers, too, share in this miracle.

In relation to the *Statue Which Felt Cold*, I would argue that here Boulotis uses his favourite technique of magic realism in order to take the idea of the living collective memory one step further. For he makes it clear that an individual's own memories not only refer to an individual's lived experiences but also to the memories they "inherit" from their family. Mr Stephanos himself grew up in Greece listening, however, to the stories and songs of his grandparents who came from Smyrna in Turkey. Thus, "his grandfather's and his grandmother's nostalgia became his own" (Boulotis 2012a: 16). Choosing his words carefully, Boulotis introduces in this way his young readers to the fairly complex concept of collective memory.

Apart from that fundamental concept, however, the readers of the *Yellow Bus to Homeland* are also introduced to a host of ideas concerning the social phenomenon of immigration. This seems to be a conscious choice of the author since he writes within a specific social/ideological context which determines both the ideas that he chooses to expose and the way he does so. In this particular case, we should bear in mind that over the past three decades, Greek society has undergone a tremendous change: from a relatively homogeneous society it has changed into a multicultural one, due to waves of immigrants that have arrived in Greece. This change has inevitably had repercussions at an ideological level, the most serious of which is the surfacing of deeply buried racist attitudes towards "foreigners". As a "recruit of his time", then, Boulotis takes a stand vis-à-vis the social phenomenon of immigration: he encourages anti-racist attitudes

towards the immigrants, as becomes clear from the converging ideological positions that, as I will show, are inscribed in his story.

One such position may be discerned in the narrator's remark that "all homelands are beautiful, and all homelands together make one vast homeland without borders" (Boulotis 2012a: 49). This is a position that demolishes the nationalistic conception of one's own homeland as "the best of all" and that proposes an egalitarian and respectful relationship between the children of all ethnic groups. What is indirectly proposed is a cross-cultural approach to the concept of homeland, but also to the concept of one's ethnic identity. This same anti-xenophobic and cross-cultural approach on the part of Boulotis is discerned in his description of the young passengers of Mr Stephanos's bus. They may come from different countries but there are many more similarities than differences between them and the children of Greek origin: "They all went to the same schools, they bought their chocolates from the same kiosk, they shared the same sunny days and the same gloomy days, they had fun together" (23).

Another topical ideological position that the story of the *Yellow Bus* seems to promote concerns immigration itself. Why do people leave their homeland to live in a foreign country? Choosing his words carefully, Boulotis touches upon the difficulties immigrants face in Greece today and, in particular, upon the ways in which they are treated by some Greeks, taking care only to hint at the rekindling of xenophobic attitudes among the Greek population. His ideas are voiced by the central hero himself. As the latter draws upon his family past, relating stories about his grandparents and his father who had to immigrate to Australia and to Germany, the past becomes an instrument for the promotion of specific anti-xenophobic arguments: as Mr Stephanos' grandfather used to say, "No one leaves his own home unless they are in great need. And when they do, they leave their hearts behind" (Boulotis 2012a: 25). And also, "the history of the world is a history of refugees and of immigrants" (ibid.). Such arguments become all the more convincing because their truth and import are based on people's lived experiences.

In view of the above, I would suggest that in this book, too, Boulotis emphasises that the past is something that cannot be erased from our lives, something that determines the ways we experience our present. However, this awareness becomes the springboard for the promotion of related ideological positions, which, as was shown above, concern the concept of homeland as well as the phenomenon of immigration. By his specific treatment of the above issues, he turns the attention of his young readers to the similarities among people and not to their differences. Individual and collective memories are presented as things that unite people. Thus, the book transcends a Hellenocentric approach to history and, conversely, adopts a cross-cultural approach to it.

Concluding remarks

Having analysed three representative works of Christos Boulotis, we draw the conclusion that this author approaches concepts that are complex and perhaps challenging for young children, such as the past and personal and collective memory;

he does so in three different ways. In *A Girl Flies over Keramikos* he chooses a historical narrative where in a carefully reproduced world of antiquity he brings to life a heroine who lived in the 5th century B.C. but who thinks and acts as an open-minded and dynamic contemporary girl. Through that fertile "marriage" of historical truth and fiction, the unfamiliar ancient Greek world becomes familiar and accessible to young children who become able not only to know it but also to "feel" it.

In *The Statue Which Felt Cold* he chooses to insert a historical element, more accurately an archaeological finding, into the contemporary world of the fiction. Moreover, by choosing to disengage the ancient statue from its monumental function and to re-signify it as a living creature who has reminiscences and who longs for its lost homeland, he accomplishes two things: on the one hand, he lets his young readers learn the historical background of the transportation of the statue from Asia Minor to the Archaeological Museum of Athens; on the other, he shows his readers the importance of memory of and nostalgia for one's lost homeland, as well as the gravity of the trauma of having lost it.

Finally, in the third of the analysed books, *The Yellow Bus to Homeland*, Boulotis chooses a contemporary setting with elements of the past, and, more specifically, memories of the lost homeland. It is a book in which we can observe most clearly his concern for the concept of collective memory. Reading between the lines of his story, we understand that collective memory is something "alive" as it keeps on being constructed or re-constructed by a multitude of reminiscences that refer not only to an individual's lived experiences but also to the memories "inherited" from the family or from the social group to which the individual belongs.

Recapitulating, I want to argue that Boulotis employs various plots and narrative stratagems to show his young readers the importance of the past, and the impact it has on our present. Thus, he introduces children to the concept of the past in general and of history in particular, not along the path of typical historical fiction, but via alternative routes. Books like his "help children", as Robyn Fivush observes (2012: 54–55):

> […] to understand history as a sum of personal lives which are related to each other through social and cultural interactions that 'weave' the historical narrative. Having realized that, they can then view History as something greater than a sum of events. They can view it as a tapestry of humanity and of its struggle to survive.

Seeing contemporary Greek literature as a continuum, one cannot but observe that the foundations of the above view of history in literature for children were set by such writers as Alki Zei and Zorz Sari. Boulotis, I want to argue, seems to follow in their path but at the same time breathes new life into historical writing for children. For he chooses, as I have shown, alternative forms of writing, such as magic realism, thus promoting alternative ideas in alternative ways. He consequently becomes, I suggest, exemplary of a broader shift in contemporary Greek literature for children. While this literature keeps being concerned with the socialisation of children and with their ideological "education", it also seems to opt for alternative and more playful ways of expression.

In all three of the above books, I have shown that Boulotis uses the past as a resource for the promotion of alternative ideas that seem to be in tune with his time. Thus, he probes into such experiences as being a refugee or an immigrant, he takes a stand against racist or xenophobic attitudes, and he advances the idea of pacifism. In this way, not only does he set the foundations of his readers' historical and political thinking but at the same time he tries to raise their cross-cultural consciousness and help them understand the universality of human experience (Dommasnes and Galanidou 2012: 36).

Contemporary Greek historical literature for children, then, as shown in the example of Boulotis, *can* contribute to the poetic dimension of our contemporary historical culture in multiple ways. After all, as Pothiti Chantzaroula (2004) argues, our relationship with the past is a political issue that *transcends* the field of historical research. It extends, I would add, to the realm of literature, too.

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Čemu pisati priče o prošlosti?
Ideološke "uporabe" prošlosti u grčkoj dječjoj književnosti: slučaj Christosa Boulotisa

Članak je usmjeren na tri reprezentativna književna djela za djecu od 9 do 12 godina Christosa Boulotisa, poznatoga suvremenoga grčkoga dječjega pisca. Njegove se knjige, koje predstavljaju općeprihvaćena stremljenja grčke suvremene povijesne dječje književnosti, zanimaju za pojmove osobne i javne prošlosti te osobnoga i kolektivnoga sjećanja. Pokazuje se da pojedina Boulotisova djela ne samo da problematiziraju pojam osobne i javne (povijesne) prošlosti, nego i da naglašavaju važnost koju ti pojmovi imaju za živote suvremenih ljudi. Budući da dječja književnost neizbježno uključuje ideologiju, Boulotis se navedenim pojmovima služi u promicanju ideološki bremenitih tema o kojima se raspravlja u suvremenoj grčkoj javnosti, poput univerzalnosti iskustva izbjeglica, antirasizma i pacifizma.

Ključne riječi: ideologija, prošlost, sjećanje, dječja književnost