



Andreas Karkavitsas' *Travels and Tales from the Prow:*
Re-enchanting Nature

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Introduction

In my research project I explored the representation of the natural environment in Andreas Karkavitsas' literary works using Max Weber, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's accounts of the disenchantment. In the present paper I will discuss how re-enchantment is achieved in Karkavitsas' travel reports *Travels* and his short story collection *Tales from the Prow*. In the present paper re-enchantment refers to the view that non-human nature is wondrous and mysterious, and to the rejection of science and rationality as sufficient epistemic means to comprehend nature (Jenkins, 2000). In *Travels* Karkavitsas treats science and rationality as inadequate epistemic tools to understand nature and he offers a multi-faceted, inter-disciplinary representation of the terrestrial landscape, thus presenting a novel mode of re-enchantment: scientifically-informed wonder. In *Tales from the Prow* re-enchantment is achieved through the presentation of the sea as mysterious and not fully comprehensible through the open-ended and polyphonic, contradictory and complementary, representation of the sea.

Theoretical Framework: Disenchantment

Weber on Disenchantment

Max Weber popularized the notion of disenchantment after Schiller first posited the term, and redefined it as the gradual eradication of magic and/or mystery in people's perception of the world due to the inclination to filter the world through science and rationality (Jenkins, 2000). M. Becker (2019) distinguishes between Weber's thesis of disenchantment, which solely refers to the discrediting of myth and magic, such as the unconventional medical practices of wise-women and cunning-men, and what Becker calls the "disenchantment tale", namely the tale that scholars developed after Weber, according to which disenchantment refers to the loss of a sense of mystery and to the emerging conviction that the world is explainable, understandable and predictable through science and logic. For the purposes of the present paper "disenchantment" will refer both to the decline of the practice of, and faith in, magic, as well as the loss of mystery in the dominant perception of nature in the Western world.

Adorno & Horkheimer on Disenchantment

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer built on Weber's theory to develop an independent account of disenchantment. They attributed disenchantment to the Enlightenment, where "the Enlightenment" does not refer strictly to the relevant historical period, but to a broader inclination towards replacing mythological, scientifically uninformed beliefs about the world with scientific, rationalized views (Stone, 2006).

According to Adorno, the Enlightenment has given rise to 'identity thinking', namely a process by which, upon viewing an object, we think about its classification in a category and perceive it as an instance of a universal type, thus omitting its uniqueness and individuality (Stone, 2006). Given the limited attention to the unique features of the object, identity thinking, otherwise referred to as "conceptualization", limits our understanding of the object in question. Instead, it provides the illusion that we can fully comprehend it; nonetheless, according to Adorno, this does not facilitate the substantial comprehension of the object, but only the ability to organize and control it. Identity thinking cultivates the sense that the perceived objects are fully intelligible, and possibly predictable to us, thus creating a sense of conceptual domination of the world, which permeates the enlightened, disenchanted worldview (Stone, 2006).

Adorno argues that, given that our cognitive approach to nature is one that centers on control and domination rather than substantial understanding of the different, unique natural objects we interact with, our relationship to nature is also one of domination rather than genuine appreciation (Stone, 2006). In other words, what we see in nature is how we can use it to our benefit. Therefore, disenchantment leads to acknowledging primarily the natural environment's instrumental value and ignoring its intrinsic value. This has significant implications for our treatment of nature; we might feel entitled to extract its resources and bend it to our will, given that we view it as here to serve us.¹

¹ Adorno's account of disenchantment is more complicated than this. He argues that there is enchantment even in the disenchanted world. The process of enchantment is standard and necessary, but the content of this process changes. For the purposes of the present paper I use

However, the problematic aspects of conceptualization (identity thinking) can be overcome once we start reflecting on the epistemic limits of concepts (universal types). We need to systematically try to improve the existent concepts we have for an object and revise it in accordance with novel facets of the object that we uncover (Stone, 2006). Adding more perspectives and reconsidering the ideas we already have about an object can help us approximate a better understanding of the object, according to Adorno, although complete understanding might be unattainable. This advanced comprehension of an object does not necessitate abandoning the previous, limited concepts that we have now revised. Instead, it enables the co-existence of different, even contradictory, concepts, rather than one perfected concept. This process of reviewing and enriching our concepts can lead to a re-enchanting conception of nature.

Andreas Karkavitsas' Literary Works: Analysis

Travels

Karkavitsas traveled around terrestrial Greece and recorded his impressions from these journeys. Elias Ch. Papadimitrakopoulos gathered these non-fiction pieces of travel writing in a single collection called *Travels* (1998).² I will use the terms narrator, narrative voice and speaker interchangeably for Karkavitsas in my analysis of *Travels*, since the narrative voice can be attributed to Karkavitsas himself; he is the traveler who records his thoughts. In *Travels* he dismisses the old, enchanted outlook on nature, but he poses a re-enchanted attitude towards it, rejecting rationalization and identity-thinking as the proper epistemic means to understand non-human nature. In other words, he poses scientifically-informed wonder as a new mode of re-enchancement.

The local inhabitants of the rural villages that Karkavitsas visits often still hold an enchanted outlook on nature. The narrator appears dismissive towards these enchanted attitudes, viewing them as ignorant, uninformed, and quaint. For instance, Karkavitsas records the following conversation between a local couple:

- Trust it me, it is nothing to worry about; the goblins left today.
- Yeah, right, you're a poor old woman! In all these years I have never remembered such a great evil happening.
- I always remember it; within twelve days after the rooster's crowing the goblins would go away; and that's what they did! ...
- But such a big storm! Such a sudden blizzard!?
- Listen to me, my old man, the goblins have left. (106)

The narrator immediately distances himself from the enchanted belief that goblins cause natural phenomena by clarifying that "this conversation occurred this morning between two old spouses who were talking about the wind" (106). While in this passage the narrator is only distant from, but not critical of, locals' perception of the

² All references from *Travels* are from: Karkavitsas, Andreas. *Ταξιδιωτικά*, edited by Elias Ch. Papadimitrakopoulos. Athens: Nefeli Publications, 1998. Since there is no complete translation of *Travels* yet, I have translated all the quotes in the present paper from Modern Greek to English.

natural world, he later comments sarcastically on their cosmological theory about the creation of Kravara. The inhabitants of Kravara believe that “God decided to create matter from havoc, as he was bored of being lonely [...] He took a big sieve, hung it on the abyss and grabbed soil with His one hand [...] and threw it on the sieve [...]. Once he saw the sieve overfull with stones and pebbles, he turned the sieve upside down and gathered all these [extra stones] in one place. And this place was named Kravara” (142). The narrator points out sarcastically that “they [the inhabitants of Kravara] omitted [to consider] where He [God] found the soil since everything was chaos” (142) before placing the soil in the sieve. This comment rationalizes a religious myth and demands realism that is beyond the limits of the myth. The narrator criticizes not only the locals’ views towards the environment, but the treatment of nature that results from these beliefs as well. Although the locals feel a sense of sanctity and almost “religious fear” (134) towards nature, “as if there is an underlying strong respect and fear of the oak nymphs in their chest” (134), this respect is restricted only to local nature; they “stand emotionless in the roaring cremation of the most beautiful [foreign] tree” (134) and “it is sad that their respect does not extend to all forests” (134).

Although the narrator criticizes the limits of inhabitants’ respect for nature, he also appreciates the ethical potential of enchantment when he attributes the locals’ refusal to extract resources and invade the forest in their immediate vicinity due to their enchanted respect for it. The fact that he is not fully dismissive of enchanted views of nature is also indicated by the narrator’s re-enchanted perception of nature; he represents the environment in a novel perspective: that of scientifically-informed wonder.

Contrary to the locals, the narrator often resorts to matter-of-fact descriptions of the environment. For example, while roaming around Kravara he exhibits substantial geographical knowledge, as indicated by his comments that “this river springs from the Vardousion and, coming down from the Corinthian [river], is useful as the eastern border of Kravara from the Dorida” (126). Alongside the detailed geographical knowledge, the speaker has good scientific knowledge of natural kinds, as shown when he identifies the “hornbeams, kermi, firs, and sycamores” (190) of the forest. However, the narrator does not deem science and rationality as sufficient epistemic

means for the substantial perception of nature. Karkavitsas integrates in his descriptions of nature locals' personal stories, like that of "the good old woman [who] was ascending it [the hill], carrying the crushed seed of the mill, [and] she fell down and died" (128) in Kravara, as well as historical references, such as his statement that "since 1700, when Nafpaktos became permanently possessed by the Turkish nation, the locals started emigrating, and ultimately Albanian people hunted them out of the walls, allowing only one baker to inhabit among them" (118). Portrayals of nature are also highly imaginative, creative and aesthetic: Karkavitsas describes the river's "running waters looking for an exit" (144), "the red, aggressive rock" (14); the mountains are "strong but lacking an air of mastery" (140); and the valley is "delightful, but lacking a sense of grandeur, and for the most part naked, scabby, ignoble in all its bulk" (140). The narrator also filters his experience of nature emotionally, reporting that "his soul was moved in the view of those mountains [...] with this sensation of warmth in [his] head and lightness in [his] heart" (133). Karkavitsas also repeatedly comments on nature's power for moral inspiration. For instance, after describing the aforementioned "naked, scabby, ignoble" (140) valley, he comments that "it would be impossible for the inhabitants of Kravara to be anything other than ignoble" (141), since "it is true that people develop sentiments and ideas analogous to the natural environment in which they live" (141). The sense of morality, aesthetic beauty, features of personhood like aggressiveness, nakedness, mastery, as well as the morphological and scientific knowledge of the landscape, create a multi-faceted picture of nature.

This outlook on nature extends significantly beyond identity-thinking and scientific knowledge. The local landscape is conceived of through various concepts; one defined by history, one focusing on identifying natural kinds, another focusing on the moral power of nature. These varied concepts of nature create a re-enchanting, holistic view of the non-human natural environment that does not allow the oversimplification that would result from a purely rationalized mode of perception, thus moving beyond both the limited taxonomic mentality of disenchantment and the past scientifically uninformed enchantment that is no longer plausible in the modern world.

Tales from the Prow

In *Tales from the Prow* Karkavitsas portrays the sea in a re-enchanted manner, but achieves this through the collection's strong polyphonic quality rather than the authority of the third-person narrator of *Travels*, as he embraces locals' voices instead of dismissing them.³ It is by means of this polyphony, which often results in conflicting and complementary conceptions of the ocean, that Karkavitsas posits a new mode of re-enchantment: presenting the sea as mysterious and cultivating a sense of wonder due to the complex, nuanced, non-authoritative representation of the sea.

Contradictory and Complementary Representations of the Sea

Each short story invites consideration of a different feature of the sea, such as whether it possesses an independent system of justice and a sense of moral agency, whether it is gendered, the extent to which it is cruel or loving, whether it has agency or it is controlled by another force. The reader's conception of the sea changes and grows when reading each short story. Each of these features is presented distinctly in different short stories. When two short stories complement each other in their representation of the sea, it is the readers who must draw the connection between the two. The active role of the reader is amplified when the portrayal of the sea in different short stories is contradictory, since this indicates either that at least some depictions of the sea are flawed or that it is not possible to convey an accurate depiction of the sea at all.

Let us consider one of the features ascribed to the sea in order to explore the contradictory and complementary ways in which certain short stories depict it: whether the sea operates through a system of justice and, if so, what this system is. In "The Sea" the ocean is presented as unjust, a "cruel beast [...] you flatter it, compliment it, sing to it and it pushes you away as if it is telling you 'what do you want here?'" (21). You can "admire it [the sea] and honor it all you want; it will do what it wants to do [...] Sooner or later it will wreck you or throw you to the world,

³ All references from *Tales from the Prow* are from: Karkavitsas, Andreas. *Λόγια της Πλώρης*. Athens: Estia Publications, 2003.

Since there is no complete translation of *Tales from the Prow* yet, I have translated all the quotes in the present paper from Modern Greek to English.

wiry and useless” (9-10). However, “The Frigates”, the short story following “The Sea”, questions the extent to which the sea is unjust and cruel; instead, the sea punishes sailors who greedily extract its resources and rewards the kindness of a sailor who affectionately places a fish he found on the land into the water, by making him immortal. In the “The Justice of the Sea” the ocean also has independent agency and judgment, but instead of punishing or rewarding humans for how they treat *it*, as in “The Frigates”, it punishes them for how they treat each other by crushing the ship a group of sailors who do not save other sailors from a storm. In “Kavomalias” the sea and the weather are controlled by a system of justice, but the sea is controlled by a punitive supernatural power instead of having independence and agency. The nuanced co-existence of contradictory and complementary representations of the sea prompts the readers to embrace the complexity and uncertainty of understanding the ocean, and makes us hesitant to take any singular view of the sea as an absolute, definitive reflection of the sea.

Polyphonic Narrative Structure

This creates a sense of mystery and wonder surrounding the sea, which is reinforced by the polyphonic narrative structure of *Tales from the Prow*. Karkavitsas portrays sailors’ varying perceptions of the sea, rather than the sea itself, and it is through these perspectives that an image of the sea is gradually constructed. Any claims made about the sea are clearly attributed to a character who participates, witnesses or narrates the events of the plot. A claim about the nature of the sea voiced by a third-person omniscient narrator, or one that is attributed to the author himself, carries with it an assumption of authority, whereas a claim conveyed by a single character lacks absolute authority and remains more open to reflection. In “The Sea”, “Breadwinner”, “The Vindicator”, “The Captain”, “The Bad Omen”, “The Gorgon”, “Shipwrecks”, “Telonia”, “The Yousouri”, “The Underworld”, “The Unlucky” and “Teasing”, the speaker is a first-person narrator who either participates in the events of the plot or witnesses them. In other short stories the systematic use of frame narrative further underscores individual characters’ limited, personal perspective on the sea. In many short stories a crewmember of the ship recounts a story to defend a claim about the sea, such as Barba-Kalioaras’ claim that the sea has an independent system of justice in “The Justice of the Sea” or Chourhoulas’ claim that the winds and storms in the area of Kavomalias are caused by goblins in “Kavomalias”. In “The Sponge-divers”

the narrator's mother tells the framed story of a fratricide, which constitutes the short story's main plot, to prevent her son from becoming a sponge-diver, and in "Divine Vision" Kostas Axiotis narrates to other crewmembers Madonna's dream on the night she gave birth to Jesus to pass the time on a cold night on the ship. The consistent use of framed narrative further underscores the limited personal viewpoint through which the sea is presented, since the reader's attention is drawn to the character who recounts the story and the circumstances under which the narration occurs, especially when other crewmembers dispute the framed narrator's remarks. Therefore, there is no short story that makes a definitive claim about the nature of the sea; what is portrayed is merely a *perception* of the sea. The accumulation of these different perceptions of the sea moves away from a simplistic single, consistent view of the sea and synthesizes a complex, varied picture of it that retains a sense of wonder and mystery for the ocean.

Conclusion

Therefore, Karkavitsas develops a re-enchanting approach to nature through the scientifically informed, multi-faceted outlook on terrestrial nature in *Travels* and the complex multi-vocal representation of the sea as mysterious in *Tales from the Prow*. Re-enchantment has significant ethical potential for our ecological practices, which can be further explored in following research.

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