

Fragments of Greek Desire

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‘As you can see from the hour of my writing, I have been burning the midnight oil poring over the contents of a large packet which K [Krebs] gave me at our farewell dinner last night – no, night before last rather, the 24th. As you guessed, quite correctly, in your letter of October 11, which arrived the day after I posted my last letter to you, K’s secret work does involve the poet Ananios of Kleitor – in the form of work sheets and papers, including photocopies of what appear to be scholia and commentaries in Greek, towards an edition of his extant poems’

That is an extract from a letter of 26 October 1951 addressed by Jonathan Barker to Sir Michael Sewter-Lowden, and republished in George Economou’s *Ananios of Kleitor*. And now we are gathering to celebrate the donation of these same ‘work sheets and papers’ to the University of Michigan’s papyrology section. Even among Michigan’s prestigious and invaluable collection, however, these papers will be quite unique. Ananios of Kleitor is George Economou’s invention. This book, which purports to be a translation of and commentary on Ananios and his ancient commentators, together with an edition of the letters of the key players in Ananios’ 20th-century revival, is in fact a disguised work of fiction. As in Vladimir Nabokov’s 1962 *Pale Fire* – which purports to be an edition of a 999-line poem by the fictional poet John Shade – the pleasure emerges from the partially submerged biographical narratives of the poem’s commentators, and the play between those narratives and the elliptical poetry itself.

There was, in antiquity, a real Ananios, a writer of iambic verse, from Ionia, and probably dating to the sixth century BCE. The real Ananios seems to be, loosely, the model for the fictitious one (despite the various animadversions of figures in the book that the two ‘should not be confused’, e.g. 37). Economou’s fourth-century BCE Ananios mentions fish, cabbage and figs (refers to ‘speckled perch’ in the river of his hometown, Kleitor (in mainland Arcadia); ‘after she plays the flute for me, I’ll devour my anchovy’; ‘old friend, I’ll bring a cabbage for the pot’; ‘if the priestess can tie a fig branch around his neck’ / ‘divine figs for all’). The real Ananios also mentions these foodstuffs. Athenaeus’ 3-c CE *Deipnosophists* – to which we’ll return – is the source for most of the fragments. One fragment gives us ‘in spring the chromius is best, in winter the anthias; but of all fine delicacies the shrimp served on a fig-leaf is best ...’ (282b). Figs seem to have loomed large (but we always need to make allowances for Ath’s predilection for citing food literature): ‘If one should lock up within the house much gold, a few figs, and two or three men, he would discover how much better than gold figs are.’ (78f) Cabbage, too, was a theme. According to Athenaeus, Ananios was one of four ancient poets to use the oath ‘by the cabbage!’ (*krambê*, 370b). (In fact, the phrase ‘by the cabbage!’ emerges in the course of Economou’s book too, hidden away in a late-antique commentary, p.33). That these three foods (and only them) also appear in Ananios of Kleitor is a cue to the alert to

read him intertextually, against the backdrop of the Ionian Ananios. Two other points cry out. First, the original Ananios seems to have had a reputation for hedonism. Athenaeus associates him with ‘the life of pleasure’. Athenaeus also comments – this is my second point – that ‘he remains so obscure as far as reputation goes’ (511c-d). This ‘obscurity’ was, no doubt, the stimulus for Economou’s creation.

A final point of connection between the fictitious and the ancient Ananioi: Economou’s is heavily quoted by one ‘Theonaeus’, in his *Games for dinnertime*. Theonaeus is a near-anagram of Athenaeus, the major source for the real Ananios. Athenaeus wrote a work called the *Deipnosophistae* or ‘sophists at supper’; Theonaeus’ work, we learn, was called *Deipnopaideiai*. In fact, *Deipnopaideiai* would mean not ‘Games for dinnertime’ but ‘Civilised instruction at dinnertime’. Is Economou playing tricks on us here? Is *paideia* (education, civilisation) just an equivalent to *paidia* (joking)? If so, that would be a wonderful cipher for a book that is poised between a loving tribute to classical scholarship and a satire (sometimes gentle, sometimes brutal) on the way that our professors mistreat their heritage, their responsibilities, and each other.

But Economou’s Ananios is much more than a retooling of the ancient Ananios, the poet of fish, cabbage and figs. He is, primarily, an author of erotica:

Let go of me my song / and swoop into the hearts / of men Love has singed / and darkened their brightest days (2) Or the fragmentary poem 3: ‘I will give as good [/ by Aphrodite [/ / Either way / and kiss behind the [/ Again / till it melts [/] turn this [/ And again [/ your mouth [/ Love’s mother [/ on our knees [/ breathing each

Poems like these mimic the tropes of ancient Greek erotic poetry, as instanced in (for example) Sappho and Anacreon – the kind of material, indeed, that Economou has translated in other works. Elsewhere however we see traces of more gutsy obscenity:

] a pro from Corinth
A honey-voiced [
Who rides me like a pony [
Aphrodite the Dark [
On her billy-goat [
A philosopher would say it’s [] h<uman>

The port town of Corinth was indeed famous for its prostitutes. The reference to ‘riding me like a pony’ might be a partial allusion to Anacreon’s famous poem about the ‘Thracian filly’ (Thracian filly, why do you look me askance / and persistently flee me, thinking me lacking in wisdom? / Be sure, I could put the bit on you well, and holding the reins turn you around the limits of the course / But as it is, you graze in meadows and play, skipping lightly; / for you lack any clever rider, experienced on horseback.) But it is more likely looking towards the obscene erotica dealing with the ‘horse position’. Elsewhere in the book, one of Ananios’ 20th-century commentators connects this passage with Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*, and ‘the common word for the sexual position of the woman on top and astride of the man’. Economou may have also intended a subtler reference to the poem on the theme of ‘horse-riding’ prostitutes (362) by the early Hellenistic poet Machon – who hailed from Corinth, just like the ‘pro’.

Let's pause on the eroticism. I've titled this talk 'Fragments of Greek desire', because the play between desire and fragmentariness is central to Ananios. This connection is a theme of much literary critical reflection. Roland Barthes in *The pleasure of the text* compares the experience of reading an 'open' text with watching a strip-tease, where the eroticism is (he claims) generated by the dialectic between concealment and revelation. The stripper doesn't show everything; she offers *flashes*, provocative absences that charge the viewer with supplying the rest through fantasy and imagination. Similarly, for Barthes, it is in the literary text's *failure* to divulge the full picture that its eroticism is constituted. Texts give us not pellucid windows onto a fictitious world, but partial, gappy glimpses.

Economou is not the first writer to note that the fragmentariness of certain texts adds to the textual eroticism that Barthes has described. In the criticism of ancient poetry, it is particularly Sappho that has attracted this kind of reading. Page duBois' 1995 book *Sappho is burning*, notably, discusses the 'aesthetics of the fragment', arguing that the lacunae in Sappho's poetry as we have it only enhance the themes of yearning and the sensation of absence (both of which are combined in the Greek word *pothos*) that are omnipresent in Sappho's own writing. When we read a fragmentary poet, we feel all the more keenly the desire to project, to restore, to supplement, to return the resistant poem to its wholeness.

Economou has noticed this, and plays brilliantly on the theme. One of the book's most loathsome figures (but not the *most* loathsome) is Sir Michael Sewtor-Lowden, whom we have already mentioned. Sewtor-Lowden is an arrogant plagiarist, whose academic strategy consists primarily in appropriating the credit for the work done by others. One of his publications, we learn, is a short note in the *Review of Classical Studies* of 1953, in which he publishes a series of supplements to Ananios' text. What is striking about this is how Sewtor-Lowden transforms gentle innuendo into aggressive obscenity:

[Who's to blame? I fell for] a pro from Corinth,
A honey-voiced, expensive, [smooth-shaven cunt]
Who rides me like a pony [in a race that she has to win].

Sewtor-Lowden's desire to supplement the fragmentary text is born of an acquisitive, sexist possessiveness. And, indeed, his inability to control his urges comes to the fore later in the book. I don't want to spoil the plot for those who haven't yet read it, but it will be enough to say that the professor's 'zipper problem' (to quote a phrase used of a former US president) turns out to play a central role in the narrative.

Ananios' ancient commentators also struggle with sexuality, particularly his Christian readers. The most hilarious example is one Kosmas Logothetes (whose surname means something like 'the placer of words' – perhaps a hint towards his own strategies of intervention into Ananios' text, which we shall see shortly). Logothetes, writing in the 6th century CE, guiltily cites Ananios for his use of rhetorical figures, as though the formal features could be discussed in isolation from the erotic content. But he does note the eroticism, and worries about the risk to his moral status and that of his readers:

‘We find *antonomasia* in a poem by Ananios when he addresses a friend not by his name but in this way:

Come here my fish-mad-man and girl-crazy-guy

We learn later that it is his friend, Chrysosastros, whom he addresses as *opsomanis* and *gynaikomanis*, but we learn nothing of spiritual value from such as this, which serves merely to provide us with examples of rhetorical practice for, with the help of the Holy Spirit, our better use.’

A more pertinent example:

‘If you seek an example of *homoiosis*, you may find it, at peril of your immortal soul, in the first of two lines, which Ananios meant to insert into the middle of a poem, worse even than his, by Rufinos, famous for his supposed judging in beauty contests over the private parts of loose women:

Melite’s can be played like Hermes’ lyre

What Ananios says may be done with what lies between Melite’s thighs in the next verse, it is my sacred obligation to keep to myself’.

Here, Logothetes claims that Ananios wished to insert the couplet into the middle of a poem by Rufinus. Literary history is being mangled here, incidentally, and no doubt deliberately: Rufinus, whose name is Latin, is a poet of the imperial era, 1st century CE or later; Ananios is supposed to be 4th-century BCE, and so of course can’t have interfered with Rufinus’ poems. But that isn’t the point. What we have here is a *mise-en-abyme* of textual corruption. Logothetes is reframing and excerpting Ananios, who is rewriting Rufinus. What is more, once again we see here the strong emphasis on sexuality. ‘Inserting verses’ into a poem about women’s genitalia has obvious resonances. The line ‘Melite’s can be played like Hermes’ lyre’ also suggests a self-reflexivity: Hermes’ lyre is a musical instrument, which nudges us towards thinking of a correlation between poetry and sex, between the lyre and the woman’s body.

Even more fun is the eleventh-century visionary hermit Theophanes, nicknamed the ‘mad monk of Morea’. In one passage, Theophanes discusses his temptation by demons, whom he associates with Corinth and female sexuality (the connection with Ananios is no doubt the ‘pro from Corinth’ that we have seen earlier). There is also a preoccupation with fish, which the ancients themselves sometimes associated with illicit sexuality (Economou cites James Davidson’s *Courtesans and fishcakes* among his sources at the end of the book). Here goes:

‘But he, the Father of this holy hermitage, cried out to the vile fish-eating demon, I have seen Ananias, I have known Ananias, Ananias you are not. [An echo of Lloyd Bentsen’s words to Dan Quayle: ‘Senator, I served with Jack Kennedy, I knew Jack Kennedy, Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine. Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy.’] Unless you be he whose heart Satan filled to lie to the Holy Ghost. Still some will fail to see this in times to come, though I have the power to write your true name, for all its falseness, with a simple wave of my hand through the air, which I now do, transforming alpha into omicron and shifting the fall of the acute to the antepenult.

[I'll come back to this] After he had done this, Theophanes made haste to drink from the cup and partake of the table of the Lord. Thus did I cleanse my soul of its contamination by that hypocrite poet Ananios through communion with my Savior and cleared the damning taste of his fishy [nb!] verses from my lips. Therefore, my brethren, you will no longer keep hold of those books that I know you pore over secretly in your cells, gripping pleasure in your loins from the exquisite sting of their letters in your eyes and their siren ringing in your ears, and surrender them all unto me for your safekeeping from their mad dog bite [a reference, it seems, to a poem of Ananios, and the 'shockingly cold water from Alyssos ... that cures the mad dog's bite', p.30], against which no waters prevail but only the sacrament I alone am empowered to dispense here, lest you turn by such reckless reading into fleshy fishes and find yourselves quite suddenly and irrevocably surprised by your fins'.

The 'reckless reading' [recalling the 'reckless love' of a 2-word fragment of Ananios: p. 26] that Theophanes has in mind here is, clearly, both celebrated and condemned at once. Partly because of the schizophrenic characterisation of Theophanes himself. This is a stern moralist who wants his fellow monks to 'surrender ... unto me' the books of Ananios: we're left wondering *why* Theophanes wants these books. Is it really 'for safekeeping'? Or for personal use? Modern readers, practised at reading through the sexual hypocrisy of Christian moralists, will inevitably supply their own suspicions, particularly given Theophanes' overprotestations and his itchily oversensual description of the 'pleasure in your loins from the exquisite sting of their letters in your eyes and their siren ringing in your ears'. But compounding this sense of suspected hypocrisy is a narratorial strategy. We readers know, of course, that Theophanes is Economou's construct. So even if Theophanes is warning us against reckless readings of Ananios, Economou has taken the opportunity to allow his character to capture such interpretative strategies, and hence to enable them and make them possible. Very few of Economou's own readers will be able to identify with the position that Theophanes stakes out; so we are in effect forced into the position of reckless readers, exploring this text with our desire.

The desire-inducing fragmentariness, indeed, pervades the entire book, not just the poems of Ananios. The narrative of the poet's rediscovery gradually unfurls amid hints and misdirection, most of all in the twentieth-century correspondence, which is lovingly 'reproduced' here. Like the book in general, the arrangement of these letters is riotously non-linear: having acquired (he claims) the letters in an achronological order from Barker's widow, the author found that his 'temptation to reverse their hysteron-proteron order ... was discouraged both by Mrs. Barker' and by an enigmatic poetic frontispiece of Barker's on the theme of temporality (p. 42). In fact, even the reversed order is after a while discombobulated: after 17 October 1951, the letters begin without warning to revert to forward chronology. At one level, of course, this is a plot device, a way of knowingly retarding the flow of information so that the story reaches a climax in the last letter. But it also plays to the book's central theme, the interconnectedness of fragments of existence, particularly across time. Jumbled letters, papyrus fragments, excerpts from larger books, the academic edition designed for 'consultation': these should in principle butcher the narrative, but Ananios' text turns out to be possessed of a strange ability to transcend time. History repeats itself – comically, tragically, unpredictably. At one point at the end of an inconspicuously dull biographical endnote, the narrator spasmodically switches into philosophical mode, and comes up with what looks like a *vademecum* for the whole book:

We have been spilled into an enormous chamber wherein life continuously echoes art and art life, resounding through volumes of ironies bound in a plenitude of tongues. Some hear nothing. Others strive to link their strains to fulfilling termini in the cosmic din, transforming and modulating them into a manner of music, or the illusion thereof. (p. 89)

Is this the key to reading *Ananios of Kleitor*? But it looks so much like another brilliant parody of intellectual pretension ... Noone uses words like 'wherein', 'termini' or 'thereof'. A phrase like 'resounding through volumes of ironies' makes a certain kind of sense, but its clumsy mixed metaphor sounds like so much bad academic prose. But even so, the transhistorical polyphony of *Ananios of Kleitor* does seem to be captured in the reference to the 'plenitude of tongues' (itself perhaps a multivocal phrase, echoing the famous second preface of the *Iliad*: I couldn't name all the masses 'not even if I had ten tongues and ten mouths and an unbreakable voice, and the heart inside me were of bronze').

Another form of polyphony is created by the fiction of literary discovery – what classical scholars tend to call 'pseudo-documentarism', i.e. the narration of the story of the discovery of the text that we are reading. Let's recall the passage with which we began, in which Sewtor-Lowden refers to the 'large packet which K [Krebs] gave me at our farewell dinner last night ... K's secret work does involved the poet Ananios of Clitor – in the form of work sheets and papers, including photocopies of what appear to be scholia and commentaries in Greek, towards an edition of his extant poems' This device is of course most familiar to modern readers from Eco's *The name of the rose*, which purports to be a discovered memoir. This ironic play between documentarism, which authenticates literature by anchoring it in reality, and fiction, which precisely subverts that authentication, adds to both the polyphonic play and the eroticisation of intellectual hermeneutics.

There are, however, numerous ancient examples too. Perhaps the most exciting ones come in Antonius Diogenes' extravagant fantasy *The wonders beyond Thule* (perhaps 2nd century CE; it does not survive complete) and, also from the Roman imperial era, the anonymous *Journal of Dictys of Crete*. In the *Wonders beyond Thule*, we learn that when Alexander the Great captured the Lebanese city of Tyre in 332 BCE, one of his soldiers found a tomb outside the city. Alongside the coffins was a cypress chest, which turned out to contain a marvellous novelistic account of adventure, magic and love, much of it set beyond the mysterious north-Atlantic island of Thule (Iceland?). In *Dictys of Crete*, we hear that 67 CE a mighty earthquake shook the island of Crete, exposing an underground cavern near Cnossus; in that cavern was a precious text, written in 'Phoenician letters'. The manuscript eventually ended up in the hands of the emperor Nero, who summoned his experts to decode it. Amazingly, it turned out to be the journal of one Dictys, a participant in the Trojan War. Dictys then gives us the 'true' story of the Trojan War, The tactic can in fact be widely paralleled for Trojan War literature (e.g. Dio Chrysostom, 11th oration: visit to Egypt, true story inscribed on stelae. Subverted by Herodotean precedent.)

The *mise-en-scène* for Ananios' rediscovery is not the siege of a Lebanese city or a Cretan earthquake, but the occupation of Greece during the Second World War. The narrative centres on Krebs' complicity in Nazi war crimes in Greece, and Sewtor-

Lowden's appropriation of Krebs' work from Barker and deliberate marginalisation of the latter. Economou's narrator, playing the unworldly, rationalist classicist to perfection, sides with Krebs against the shameless plagiarist Sewtor-Lowden. But the latter's last letter to Krebs reveals a different figure, denouncing his friend for his 'powerful desire to rewrite history' (p. 77), which encompasses both his account of Nazi executions in Greece and his famous work of a battle outside Corinth in 393 BCE. (This, it gradually transpires, is heavily steered by Carl von Clausewitz' theories of total warfare, which were favoured by the Third Reich.) Note the phrasing: 'powerful *desire*'. Desire is everywhere in *Ananios of Kleitor*. Krebs is as desirous a reader as anyone, even if his desire is twisted away from eroticism towards terrifying Nazi mythologies. But in this final we also return to desire in its more familiar sense, as the sex lives of these loathsome professors turn out to have unforeseen consequences. I shan't give the details of the shocking plot twist that ensues; like Kosmas Logothetes, I shall treat it as my sacred duty to conceal it. But you need to know that Sewtor-Lowden and Krebs are shown to be linked by erotic desire. They are, in the former's words, linked by a 'fraternal bond ... so worried and frayed by events beyond our control that it amazes by its refusal to break' (p. 77). Divided by history and ethics, they nonetheless share more than they initially knew. As young men, both travelled to Greece in search of the world of lyric poetry, a land of beauty, exquisite poetry and sex without consequence. Both in course betray themselves in the most loathsome ways, and find themselves enmeshed in a 'tragic chain of events' (p. 80) – the switch of genre is telling. Sewtor-Lowden's last sentence is 'Through all of this, have we not ... been terribly Greek?' The polysemous adverb 'terribly' is, of course, vigorously ironic.

The fragmentary *Ananios of Kleitor* is an almost-blank screen onto which others project their own fantasies, with the same rapacity that their compatriot soldiers and tourists approach the people of modern Greece. Krebs (as plagiarised by Sewtor-Lowden) reconstructs the fragmentary poems, so that they become more his poems than *Ananios*', and reflect particularly his own repressed sexual urges for 'a pro from Corinth'. *Ananios of Kleitor* thus practically *is* *Anastas Krebs*. This kind of play with names and naming is a running theme throughout. First, there is the constantly invoked risk of confusion with the other *Ananios*, who actually exists (four of his fragments survive in *Athenaeus*). It gets worse. Mad monk *Theophanes* is so excitedly shocked by *Ananios* that he insists on distinguishing him from the pious, Biblical *Ananias*, and proposes instead to transform 'alpha into omicron' (p. 36). There is nothing to help the reader here, but we have to conclude that this makes him 'Onanias' - or 'wanker'. 'Ananios' of course also suggests 'anon' (as in the 'Anonymous Alexandrian', his earliest extant commentator). Both his name and his toponym also invite all sorts of obscene cerebrations (never google 'Clitor', the Latinised form of the town's name).

So, *Ananios* turns out to be an imaginary object of desire, endlessly recreated by his later readers. The author-narrator is no exception. In a well-concealed endnote, he breaks off from a discussion of the ancient and modern topography of Arcadia, and in particular the local legend of *Apollo's* rape of *Daphne*: 'By curious coincidence, this translator's maternal progenitors, the *Ananiadai*, made their home the village of *Dafni*, named for that ancient girl-become-laurel-tree' (p. 102). 'Ananiadai' means 'descendants of *Ananios*', although it is a weird and archaic way of putting it. Is his mother from a line of nymphs, or priestesses? What *is* his own investment in the

story? There are no answers, of course: this kind of casually veiled allusivity is characteristic of the book as a whole. But what we do learn is that all readers' own narratives seem to end up converging on Ananios.

So the fragmentariness of texts – Ananios' text, but also that of his receivers, including Economou itself – ends up being interdependent with the desire to complete texts, to possess them and own them. Reading fragments becomes an exercise in desirousness, of a disturbingly dark form. Theft, plagiarism, abuse of women, imperialist militarism: all of these turn out to be figures for the appropriative desire that texts stimulate in us.

Let us return, finally, to Ananios himself. The last papyrus fragment consists of three four words, set on three lacunose lines:

]awe[
]none[
]oh, yes[

These words invite so much. 'Awe' – at what, and felt by whom? Awe is always focalised, it always represents someone's perspective, someone's subjectivity, in the face of extraordinary events. But we are left in the dark. The second word is 'none', a marker of absence. When we reach the third line, 'oh yes', we feel ourselves (not for the only time in this book) at the mercy of the translator, since the phrase is ambiguous in English. As Stanley Fish would say, there is no way of adjudicating between these readings: we need to let the multiple possibilities resonate. Poems – all poems, but especially fragmentary ones – create spaces for readers to fill. Does this perhaps represent the 'oh, yes' of someone who has just remembered something? (As in 'oh yes, I remember what I was going to say'.) Or the cry of orgasm? That would fit the aura of eroticism that pervades the whole collection. But ultimately I prefer – and this, of course, is just a function of my own desire – to see the mysteriously, playfully evocative words of this poem as functioning together. 'none' and 'oh yes' mark negativity and positivity, absence and presence, under the sign of awe. And this, ultimately, is what the book is about: the wonder of reading poetry, of shuttling between nothing and something.*

* George Economou points out another, paronomastic interpretation: 'awe / none / oh yes' phonetically mimics the poet's name.