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From the subject of the crisis to the subject in crisis: Middle voice on Greek walls

ABSTRACT

*As a grammatical mode in which the subject remains inside the action, the middle voice has been said to unsettle binary distinctions between active/passive, or perpetrator/victim. This article revisits theorizations of the middle voice by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra and others, and explores its potential in fostering alternative accounts of the contemporary Greek subject against the backdrop of popular discourses on the Greek 'crisis'. The middle voice takes centre-stage in a currently popular Greek wall-writing featuring the word *vasanizomai* ('I am in torment') – a wall-writing that also plays an instrumental role in the recent novella by Sotiris Dimitriou *Konta stin koilia/Close to the belly* (2014). In the face of hegemonic discourses that narrativize the Greek crisis as *krisis* (judgement and distinction) between perpetrators and victims, *vasanizomai* signals a different kind of crisis: it unsettles dominant accounts of the Greek subject that either hold Greek people responsible for the crisis (e.g., the stereotype of the 'lazy Greek') or cast them as disempowered victims of a political system or of uncontrollable global forces. By enabling an agency grounded in the subject's publicly shared vulnerability, *vasanizomai* de-centres the notion of the liberal 'willing' subject but also of the subject as fully determined by ideology. While a middle voice discourse harbours political pitfalls, the article lays out the conditions under which it could constitute a critical tool, able to accommodate voices of dispossessed individuals.*

KEYWORDS

middle voice
Greek crisis
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vasanizomai
alternative
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agency
street art
Sotiris Dimitriou

In his recently published novella *Konta stin koilia/Close to the belly* (2014), Sotiris Dimitriou unravels the landscape of the crisis-stricken Greek nation and sketches a dystopian future in tragicomic colours. From the novella's first pages, the practice of finger-pointing – assigning blame for the crisis – features as the citizens' primary obsession. A vicious circle of blame-transfer from one party to another is set in motion. 'When the country went bankrupt our partner countries kept pointing the finger at us; their fingers stiffened', the narrator notes (Dimitriou 2014: 8).¹ Thus,

We started, then, baffled, to point at one another.

'This one is to blame', 'and this one, and this one, and that one, and the other one there in the corner'.

(2014: 8)

Then, while the whole world was pointing at the nation until the country got the 'hiccups' from all the bad-mouthing (Dimitriou 2014: 9), 'the hands of the fellow Greeks' 'shyly started to point at the Northern partners' (Dimitriou 2014: 10). Some Greeks saw the country's denigration by its foreign accusers as proof of the Northerners' envy for the sun-drenched country (Dimitriou 2014: 12). This momentary arrogance was nevertheless succeeded by 'national self-awareness' resulting in a generalized self-ascription of guilt:

'It's my fault, it's my fault' everyone was shouting.

'Please, it is more my fault'.

'No sir, it's my fault'.

The 'it's my fault' was about to turn into a self-destructive movement.

(Dimitriou 2014: 14)

In Dimitriou's story this practice of self-blame is formalized in a series of public tirades by agitators who expose the 'public sins' of various population groups – sins that somehow contributed to the country's demise – extracting people's confessions, laments, and public displays of penitence. In this satirical staging of a secular Judgement Day during which no one is spared – from ministers, state officials, and civil servants to prostitutes, the fake disabled, and the writer himself – the original meaning of the Greek word 'crisis' (*krisis*) is rekindled, in its connotation of judgement, decision, and power of distinguishing (Liddell and Scott 1907: 779). For the Greeks, the concept of crisis, as Reinhart Koselleck notes, was marked by an 'inherent demand for decisions and choices' and 'imposed choices between stark alternatives – right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death' (2006: 358). Considering that in the Greek translation of the Bible *krisis* is also the word for the Last Judgement, 'crisis' in Dimitriou's story comes down to judging the guilty and separating them from the innocent – although nobody's innocence remains uncontested in the book.

Since the Greek debt crisis broke out in 2009, finger-pointing and debates about the causes of the crisis have dominated international and Greek media and public rhetoric. Popular narratives may disagree on the identity of the guilty. But despite their differing *krisis*, these narratives produce accounts of the crisis-stricken Greeks that tend to either hold them responsible for the crisis or, to a lesser extent, portray them as passive victims of a corrupt political system or of neo-liberal economic forces beyond their control.

The starting point of Dimitriou's novella is a well-known wall-writing in Greece, featuring the verb *βασανίζομαι* (*vasanizomai*). No accurate translation of the verb can be given in English. 'I suffer', 'I torture/torment myself' or 'I am (being) tortured/tormented' are possible but partial translations. The verb denotes intense and continuous suffering, in which mental and physical pain often enhance each other. 'I am in torment' comes the closest to the verb's meaning. The noun *vasanos* in ancient Greek, from which *vasanizomai* derives, was a touchstone for testing the purity of precious metals. By extension, it signified a trial for testing the authenticity of something, but also an interrogation, often through torture, aimed at reaching the truth. Eventually *vasanos* came to denote torture or (psychic) torment (Stamatakos 1949: 210). Suffering and truth-seeking are thus conjoined in the verb's origins, haunting its contemporary uses.

The novella's opening lines sketch the wide dissemination of *vasanizomai* in the country since the crisis:

The word '*vasanizomai*' appeared on the walls soon after the country's demise started. Fast as the wind, it filled the whole city. In Ilioupoli, on neo-classical buildings in Exarcheia, on concrete fences in Metaxourgeio, in Piraeus, in Salamina. It came to be used as a location marker.

'I pass by Agioi Anargyroi, then by the National Bank, on *vasanizomai* I make a right turn and I arrive at school' a little kid would say to the related question.

(Dimitriou 2014: 50)

By now most city-dwellers in Greece know *vasanizomai*. Since I first noticed it on a wall in Thessaloniki in 2011, I started seeing it everywhere, and the

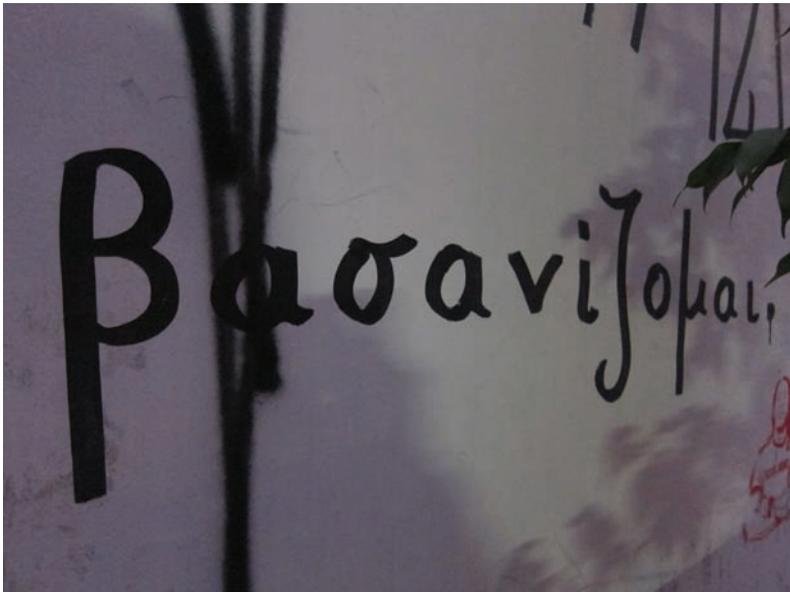


Figure 1: Romvis street, Athens, 2014. Photograph by author.



Figure 2: Stadiou street, Athens, 2014. Photograph by author.

writing held me in thrall. *Vasanimizomai*, I found out, has been popping up in Thessaloniki, Athens, Veroia, and other cities, on the walls or staircases of buildings, on public monuments, in parks, on benches and garbage containers, on windows of bankrupt businesses, in overt and hidden locations. Although different versions of it circulate, it is usually written with distinctive



Figure 3: Egnatia street, Thessaloniki, 2014. Photograph by Angela Boletsi.

addresser (the verb's 'I') is also the one affected by the action: i.e., the one in torment. This is typical for middle voice constructions, in which the subject remains inside the action and is affected by it. The 'I' is thus involved in the designated process, but the agent causing the suffering remains ambiguous: it could either be the subject itself – i.e., 'I am tormenting myself' – or an undefined agent – i.e., 'I am (being) tormented' by someone external to the subject. In the former reading, the subject would be responsible for the tormenting, while in the latter reading the subject appears to be the victim of an external agent/tormentor. Both readings are concurrently accommodated by the middle voice. In this ambiguity lies the difficulty of translating *vasanizomai* in English.

Ambiguity, precarious agency, and a bracketing of the cause of the action typify *vasanizomai* as a middle voice construction. In the face of current hegemonic discourses that narrativize the crisis as judgement and distinction between victims and perpetrators, *vasanizomai* signals a different kind of crisis: it unsettles dominant accounts of the Greek subject and notions of subjectivity and agency that these accounts reproduce. This article probes the presuppositions of popular discourses on the Greek crisis and explores the potential of the middle voice in fostering alternative accounts of the Greek self in this context. In *vasanizomai*, the middle voice helps envision subjectivities that resist the binary distinctions of current hegemonic discourses – particularly those of active versus passive, innocence versus guilt, mastery versus victimhood. In this wall-writing, the middle voice enables a notion of agency that de-centres the liberal 'willing' subject but also the subject as passive and finalized by discourse and ideology. Employing the middle voice in this context does not come without political pitfalls, which stem from the difficulty of constructing strong positions of responsibility through a discourse in the middle voice. While I address these risks, I delineate some conditions under which the middle voice could operate as a productive critical tool, able to accommodate voices of dispossessed individuals.

THE SUBJECT IN THE RHETORIC OF CRISIS

Popular discourses that co-shape our understanding of the 'Greek crisis' may vary and clash with each other. They tend, however, to draw from conventional accounts of subjectivity: the humanist notion of the willing, self-sufficient, self-defining subject or, less predominantly, that of a subject fully regulated by social or historical forces outside her control.

The stereotype of the lazy, unreliable, corrupt Greek, for example – widely popular in western European countries since 2009 and frequently contrasted with the stereotype of the hard-working, tax-paying Western European – is premised on the former notion of the autonomous subject, responsible for their destiny. This stereotype partakes in a moralizing narrative that is often evoked as a justification for austerity politics in Greece. In 'corporate media', David Graeber notes, the Greek crisis is often portrayed as a 'revolt of spoiled children' stubbornly resisting the discipline they need (2011: 229). Consequently, in the words of Costas Douzinas, '(economic) punishment must match moral laxity' (2010: 289): the Greeks must undergo punishment for their misconduct. In this popular narrative, according to Graeber, debt becomes 'the rational measure of fiscal morality' (2011: 229). In other words, 'a nation in debt must have done something wrong, just as a nation with surpluses must be doing something right' (2011: 229). The underlying

suggestion is that if Greeks were to change their faulty character and habits they would drag themselves out of the mess they have created.

The moral framing of the economic crisis was intensified during the negotiations between Greece's left-wing Syriza-led government and the European Union from February to July 2015. Sadia Abbas, for example, traces a moralizing narrative in the mainstream media's casting of the behaviour and appearance of Greek Syriza politicians – notably, the former Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras – as improper, defiant and breaking with decorum. This portrayal complements the projection of EU finances as a type of home economics: 'the repetition of clichés of fiscal rectitude and household thrift are part of the moral economy of a neo-liberalism that manipulates people into thinking that nations can be run like households' and that 'if everyone just behaved with propriety and thrift, life would be better' (Abbas 2015: n.p.). To Abbas, the tendency to blame the crisis on individual politicians or nations is a way of bypassing the 'larger systemic tendencies and codes' that underlie the crisis. Moral narratives of the crisis have been popular, she argues, precisely because they offer people 'the illusion of agency' and of 'some control over the fiscal realities that govern their lives', while such control is dramatically waning (Abbas 2014: n.p.).

In domestic political rhetoric in Greece, statements such as the legendary one by Theodoros Pangalos in the Greek Parliament on 29 September 2010, '*Mazi ta fagame!*' ('We ate it all together' (i.e., all Greeks are responsible for the country's debt), sustain a comparable discourse that holds Greek citizens almost individually accountable for their – and the country's – plight. When it comes to envisioning *solutions* to the crisis, in Greek media and popular rhetoric the individual is again often projected as the agent responsible for *exiting* the crisis. Initiatives aimed at boosting entrepreneurship among young Greeks have multiplied during the crisis. Such initiatives issued by institutions, corporations and other agents in the private sector project individual entrepreneurship as the antidote to the corrupt, faulty mentality deemed responsible for the country's financial demise. The several innovation contests that took place in Greece in the last few years suggest that creative minds with an entrepreneurial mentality are the key to a better future (Vamiedakis 2014: 4). 'Follow your dreams. Build a new Greece. Make Innovation Work. Yes you can', we read in the motto of the 'Make Innovation Work' (MIV) business plan competition, first launched in 2011 by the American-Hellenic Chamber of Commerce and the Athens Exchange Group.⁵ Creating a 'better Greece' appears to be dependent on individuals with forward-thinking minds – not on a radical restructuring of society and its institutions. This new ideology, committed to turning ideas into marketable products and services, is acquiring hegemonic status globally and is promoted as the way to break with the past and build a better future (Vamiedakis 2014: 9).

The public attention to volunteer work and individual initiatives in TV shows such as '*Iroes anamesa mas!*' ('Heroes among us' on ANT1 TV, injected with a heavy dose of sentimentalism, can be viewed in similar terms. I am by no means questioning the praise many of these initiatives deserve. I contend, however, that in the representation of such initiatives the transfer of responsibility to individuals rather than the state or official organs of power usually rests on the liberal discourse of the willing subject, which sometimes forestalls an understanding of the crisis as a complex political problem. The same tendency can be traced in popular TV series such as '*Piso sto spiti!*' ('Back home'

5. For the latest MIV competition see <http://miw.amcham.gr/en/contest>.

6. My references to the TV-shows 'Heroes among us' and 'Back home' are respectively inspired by the talks of co-panelists Vasiliki Papageorgiou and Georgia Aitaki at the EENS (European Society for Modern Greek Studies) conference in September 2014 in Thessaloniki.
7. Douzinas, for example, distinguishes two types of accounts for the causes of the crisis: the first one focuses on the failure of the 'neo-liberal economic model of the last 20 years' which 'has brought the whole of Europe to its knees', while the second holds the Greek state and the profligacy of the ruling parties and economic elites responsible for the crisis (2010: 288). A third type of account conflates the weaknesses of the Greek state with a certain mentality of the Greek people as a whole, holding the latter as responsible as the state for the country's situation.

(MEGA channel, 2011–2013), which domesticize the crisis and ascribe the failure to transcend the 'Greek tragedy' to the incapacity of Greeks to overcome their bad habits.⁶

As processes of global finance escape the control of citizens and nation states, the belief that individuals can determine their fate is hard to sustain. But if conscious will has been trumped by financial capitalism, whence the insistence on the vocabulary of the will in accounts of the crisis? Although the question requires extensive analysis, suffice it to say that sustaining the narrative of the autonomous subject is essential in processes of subject(ivat)ion of (western) citizens. As Peter McLaren argues, modes of subjectivity shaped in 'the postmodern scene' tend to 'give individuals the illusion of free choice while masking the means by which the parameters that define such choices have been constituted by the social and material practices of consumer capitalist culture' (2002: 73). Capitalism depends on this illusion: it needs us to believe that we 'can invent and reinvent ourselves at will' (Abbas 2015: n.p.). Sustaining the illusion of free will not only creates avid consumers but allows the forces of finance to continue their elusive workings uninhibited, while responsibility and blame for the material effects of these forces are ascribed to individuals, nations or cultures and their 'bad habits'. Meanwhile, this vocabulary helps sustain the illusion that citizens' voices matter in the political field and that their future is in their hands. This is, no doubt, ideology at its most effective.

Despite the popularity of narratives about the crisis that draw from the notion of a free-willed subject, accounts of the Greek subject as a helpless victim of structural forces – either the weaknesses of the Eurozone and its economic model, or, generally, the destructive forces of neo-liberal capitalism – also circulate.⁷ Such approaches often rely on versions of (neo)-Marxist or post-structuralist theory. Some find their conceptual basis in a 'Marxian' framework, in which subjectivity is identified 'with social collectivities essentialized (if only in the final "determination") by class origins, antagonisms, and teleologies' (Pecora 1991: 206). Other approaches follow directions in (post)structuralist theory that view subjects as produced by discourse or ideology, unable to transform the social 'texts' in which they are inscribed. In Peter McLaren's strident phrasing, some of the latter approaches reflect 'the tendency of some succulent bourgeois post-structuralists to dissolve agency, and their claim that we are always already produced and finalized as subjects within discourse' (2002: 73).

Neo-conservative critics commonly accuse left thinkers of advocating a passive notion of subjectivity that eschews responsibility. In an article in *The Spectator*, Douglas Murray, for example, traces a trend in recently published left-wing books to view 'human beings in democracies not as people with free will and unimaginable potential, but as inanimate beings to whom things are done. If you have over-borrowed, then some mean lender made you borrow. If you are an individual, a loan company will have been to blame; if you are a nation, then the fault is Germany's' (2015: n.p.). Contrary to Murray's homogenized treatment of current left-wing thought as expressing what he calls a 'unified world-view', it should be noted that many strands in post-structuralist and neo-Marxist theory emphatically assert the subject's potency to affect the discursive practices that constitute her, and thus foreground agency, albeit an agency divorced from the idea of the autonomous subject. The latter approach typifies Judith Butler's work, which is concerned with non-sovereign accounts of agency. Although Butler does not, to my knowledge, employ the notion of

the middle voice, her approach to subjectivity will be instrumental in this article's exploration of subjectivity and agency through the middle voice.

Debates on what caused the Greek crisis often tap into the aforementioned accounts of the subject as either the cause of their plight due to bad conduct or the victim of external, structural forces.⁸ Relating the crisis to structural forces, of course, does not necessarily presuppose a disempowered subject. In accounts of the crisis from the Left, it is often the 'people' who are called to form alliances that could overturn this situation. Costas Lapavistas, for example, views the debt crisis as the outcome of structural events related to the German domination of the Eurozone and the financial crisis that started in 2007, but locates the possibility for political change in a new social alliance by 'working people' who should be the 'natural leader' in this effort (Lapavistas et al. 2010: 294, 297).

Although the latter accounts of subjectivity surely have a presence in the public and especially in academic spheres, the former account, which favours the vocabulary of the will, predominates in mainstream rhetoric and media. My hypothesis is that dominant accounts of the crisis and the Greek subject, even when they defend opposed positions, often rest on the aforementioned notions of the subject and on binaries along the lines of perpetrator/victim and active/passive. Such discourses are unable to accommodate different accounts of the (Greek) self, emerging through the recent re-arrangement of the political and economic landscape. As the need for alternative accounts arises, the grammar of the middle voice could play a significant role therein.

THEORIZING THE MIDDLE VOICE

The middle voice may have disappeared as a distinct grammatical category in modern languages, but middle voice constructions are still functional in many languages. Theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Hayden White, and Dominick LaCapra conceptualized a discursive analogue of the middle voice, exploring its theoretical potential in relation to active and passive constructions. The theoretical debate on the middle voice took off with Barthes' 1970 essay 'To write: An intransitive verb?', in which he used the notion of the middle voice to conceptualize the scene of modern writing. Barthes relied on Émile Benveniste's study of the middle voice. In 1950, Benveniste argued that the triple division in ancient Greek between passive/middle/active was premised on an earlier distinction between active and middle, with the passive voice being just a modality of the middle voice. The basis for this distinction was the relation between the subject and the process designated by the verb: in the active, the process is accomplished outside the subject, while in the middle, the subject is inside the process (Benveniste 1971: 148; Pecora 1991: 210).

In post-structuralist thought, particularly in Barthes, Derrida, and White, the middle voice denotes an area of undecidability that resists binary oppositions, such as those between transitive and intransitive or active and passive (LaCapra 2001: 20). In Derrida, the middle voice is inextricable from his notion of *différance*: it is the operation repressed by the opposition of the active and the passive voice, and, by extension, the in-between that any conceptual binary represses:

in the usage of our language the ending *-ance* remains undecided *between* the active and the passive. And we will see why that which lets

8. See, for example, the different positions developed in Lapavistas et al. (2010).

9. For this function in Modern Greek, see Vassilaki (1988) and Manney (2000: 22–23), and in ancient Greek, Gonda (1960); Chantraine (1963). These studies are discussed in Manney.
10. While in Modern Greek there is a formal distinction between active and passive voice, the ‘morphological categories (voice) do not always coincide with the semantic categories (diathesis)’ (Mackridge in Manney 2000: 3). Regarding the middle voice, things are even more complex, since there are virtually no exclusive morphological markers for this category in the verbal system of Modern Greek (Manney 2000: 2).
11. Vernant disagrees with Barthes that this evolution that led to the disappearance of the middle voice is currently being undone by a reintroduction of the middle voice in modern writing.

itself be designated *différance* is neither simply active nor simply passive, announcing or rather recalling something like, the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, an operation that cannot be conceived either as passion or as the action of a subject on an object, or on the basis of the categories of agent or patient, neither on the basis of nor moving toward any of these terms. For the middle voice, a certain non-transitivity, may be what philosophy, at its outset, distributed into an active and a passive voice, thereby constituting itself by means of this repression.

(Derrida 1982: 9)

If western metaphysics has repressed the grammar of the middle voice by redistributing it into active and passive constructions, theorists like Derrida have tried to resuscitate it as a theoretical and, indeed, political concept. As LaCapra writes, ‘[t]he middle voice would thus be the “in-between” voice of undecidability and the unavailability or radical ambivalence of clear-cut oppositions’ (2001: 20).

Through its affinity with *différance*, in Derrida the middle voice becomes an operation that disrupts the logocentrism of western metaphysics and the idea of an autonomous subject at the origin of speech. This raises the question of agency: if the middle voice hinders a clear-cut assignation of passive or active roles, where does agency in speech lie, and who is responsible for words or actions?

The issue of agency finds itself at the epicentre of any account of the middle voice, be it in linguistics or theory. In Benveniste’s account of the middle voice, Pecora observes, ‘the crucial grammatical issue is *where* agency is located with reference to process’ (1991: 211). In the middle voice, Benveniste writes, ‘the subject is the center as well as the agent of the process, he achieves something which is being achieved in him’ (Benveniste 1971: 149; Pecora 1991: 211). Not all linguists, however, endorse this emphasis on the subject as agent in the middle voice. Many argue that both in ancient and Modern Greek the main function of middle inflected verbs is encoding an ‘agentless’ or ‘anticausative event’.⁹ According to Linda Manney, the inflectional middle voice in Modern Greek tends to ‘encode absence or attenuation of agency’ (2000: 22).¹⁰ Moreover, the primary meaning of the Indo-European middle voice, Gonda claims, was to render an ‘event which occurs with respect to, rather than *because of*, the entity encoded as subject’, and thus an event that usually does not result ‘from the subject’s volitional effort’ and involves ‘a non-agent subject’ (Gonda presented in Manney 2000: 23, emphasis added). The subject, in other words, is affected by the event, but is not necessarily the agent causing it.

Although the above accounts pertain to agency as a grammatical category, their extrapolation to philosophical accounts of agency and subjectivity is not far-fetched. In his critical response to Barthes’ account of the middle voice, Jean-Pierre Vernant relates the disappearance of the middle voice in the West with the evolution in western thinking of ‘the idea of the human subject as agent, the source of actions, creating them, assuming them, carrying responsibility for them’. This ‘vocabulary of the will’, the idea of an ‘agent being the source of his action’ is missing from ancient Indo-European languages that use the middle voice (Vernant quoted in LaCapra 2001: 28).¹¹ Consequently, we may speculate that modern linguists interpret the *obscuring* of the agent in middle-voice constructions as *absence* of agency, because they subscribe to

a dominant western notion of agency as the intentional action of a willing subject. Countering this account of agency, I contend that the middle voice in *vasanizomai* negotiates another form of agency: one that challenges the western idea of the subject as the origin and cause of her actions.

12. My translation from Greek. At <http://olaveria.blogspot.nl/2012/05/graffiti.html>.

VASANIZOMAI: MIDDLE VOICE, AGENCY, AND THE BODY

The function of the middle voice is crucial for unravelling the intervention *vasanizomai* performs. The indeterminacy of the agent in middle voice constructions underscores the event itself rather than the agent responsible for it (cf. Manney 2000: 22). In *vasanizomai*, this means that emphasis is put on the torment, not on its source. However, the message is neither self-addressed nor uncommunicative. The torment expressed through the verb enters the public sphere through its dissemination in cities and on the Internet. A blogger from Veroia writes about *vasanizomai*:

Nobody knows for sure who is behind this, nor what its initial concept was. Now, however, we suspect that it exists in order to remind us that we are not suffering alone. It's there in order to divide our insecurities, our sorrows, our guilt, our disappointments into a million pieces, so that we each get one of these pieces and breathe, even for that short moment when we face it!¹²

What is highlighted here is the sharing of the suffering rather than the original intention behind this speech act. The public sharing of suffering projects the *vulnerability* of the subject – not mastery or self-sufficiency – as a basis for community-building. Private and public are ingenuously conjoined. On the one hand, the intransitive verb and the first person singular individualize and privatize the suffering. On the other hand, the experience is made public through the dissemination of the wall-writing, suggesting that private suffering is also collective. The city, radically transformed by run-down buildings and deserted businesses, as well as its inhabitants, live in torment.

In contemporary biopolitics the personal is of course always political. But as neo-liberal forms of governance assume increasing control over citizens' bodies, *vasanizomai* projects the vulnerability of the body as a locus of resistance. As a *pars pro toto* for a collective body, the 'I' of the verb prevents individual torment from being silenced by technocratic forms of governance. Without glorifying the suffering, this wall-writing foregrounds a persisting body in the face of the abstract, disembodied forces of late capitalism, which make bodies expendable through exploitation, poverty, and other conditions of precarity (cf. Athanasiou in Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 146).

The sharing of the suffering through this wall-writing is not a sign of defeat or self-pity. It constitutes a political event that claims the subject's vulnerability as a basis for relational forms of subjectivity. In underscoring vulnerability in conceptions of subjectivity, I am taking my cue from Judith Butler's work. In *Precarious Life*, Butler proposes the recognition of human vulnerability as a condition for reimagining the possibility of community (2004: 20). If we accept that we are not masters of ourselves but tied to others, we can conceive the self as 'in community, impressed upon by others, impinging upon them as well, and in ways that are not fully in my control or clearly predictable' (2004: 27). This acknowledgment entails a de-centering of the autonomous subject. Grief, loss, and suffering are conditions that expose

our vulnerability to others as well as other people's vulnerability to us, and therefore operate as catalysts for this critique of the autonomous self. 'What grief displays', Butler writes, 'is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us [...] in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control' (2004: 23).

The laconicism through which *vasanizomai* spells and spills out suffering captures the vulnerability of subjects as a consequence of the crisis, but also, significantly, as a possible basis for a different community. The verb's present tense projects not only the ongoing suffering, but also the subjectivities that may emerge from it as in a process of becoming. The wall-writing's affective force, I believe, emanates from this double way in which it performs vulnerability.

Butler puts forward the notion of the 'dispossessed subject' as a challenge to the sovereign, unitary subject. 'Dispossession' has a double meaning. On the one hand, it 'marks the limits of self-sufficiency' and 'establishes us as relational and interdependent beings' (Butler in Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 3). In this sense, dispossession is an ontological condition of not 'owning' oneself, because the self is constructed, as well as undone, by encounters with others. On the other hand, dispossession is a condition of 'enforced deprivation of rights, land, livelihood, desire or modes of belonging' (Athanasiou in Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 5). In Greece today, dispossessed are subjects that have lost their rights, jobs, dignity; impoverished, marginalized people; supernumerary bodies such as illegal migrants, leading spectral lives.

Vasanizomai stages the tension between these two forms of dispossession: it projects the vulnerability of individuals, not only as a shared existential condition, but also as a condition enforced upon crisis-stricken subjects. The middle voice in *vasanizomai*, as a mode that accommodates oppositions without enforcing either/or choices, makes it possible to convey this ambivalence in the notion of dispossession. *Vasanizomai* exposes enforced dispossession, and simultaneously suggests that the vulnerability at the basis of the suffering could yield a form of agency. This agency would not be grounded in the autonomous subject, but in subjects as interdependent beings, 'done' and '(un)done' through their contact with others and their exposure to social practices and economic forces (Athanasiou and Butler 2013: 1, 3).

The ancient Greek *vasanos*, as previously explained, denotes torment as a means of truth-seeking. If *vasanizomai* echoes this practice, it subverts the power dynamics involved in it and the kind of 'truth' it yields. The straightforward power relation between a tormentor torturing the body of an (inferior) other is upset by the alternative form of agency the middle voice enables. The subject of *vasanizomai* is not a disempowered victim: her agency emerges from the (literal) inscription of her vulnerability, as it erupts in public space. Consequently, the 'truth' the torment is supposed to produce may be a multiple, precarious truth – a counterweight to the monologic truth of hegemonic power – emerging through a different account of the (Greek) self: vulnerable, neither a master nor a helpless victim.

VASANIZOMAI AND ITS APPROPRIATIONS

Vasanizomai has been appropriated by different agents to various ends. Its performativity is thus contingent on several factors, including its surroundings, other wall-writings with which it cohabits, the discussions it has sparked on the Internet, and its ludic, parodic, critical or literary appropriations.

Sometimes it figures on walls next to the logo of a commercial brand. Its appearance on the wall of a shop underneath the brand 'Tiger', for instance, forges a link between capitalism, consumerism, and suffering (Figure 4). Undermining the effectiveness of the brand's advertising, it imbues the name 'Tiger' with connotations of (capitalist) aggression. Its frequent appearance on windows of bankrupt, empty shops, as a sombre accompaniment of the notice 'for sale' or 'for rent', transfers the suffering not only to humans but also buildings or shops, as if they were bodies whose vital organs have been removed but are somehow still alive enough to feel pain (Figure 7). Social death, in contrast with physical death, does not put an end to suffering. In several appearances of *vasanizomai* (Figures 3, 5, 6), the writing is either placed as a footnote to other writings or graffiti, or is partially covered by posters or faded out with some of the letters scraped off. In the latter cases (Figure 6), *vasanizomai* functions as a *palimpsest*: the writing can be discerned if one looks through other layers or fills in the missing letters, just as the torment may not be directly visible but is what remains when the advertising posters that have concealed it are removed and culture shows its barbaric face. Walter Benjamin's dictum comes to mind: 'There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism' (1999: 248).

Vasanizomai also appears in repetition on the same surface (Figure 8): written in consecutive symmetrical rows, it recalls the teachers' practice of ordering naughty schoolchildren to write the same sentence repeatedly on the chalkboard.¹³ In this exercise, however, the repetitive writing *constitutes* but also *spells out* the punishment. It thereby enacts the naughty pupils' punishment *and* their disobedience to the teacher's authority: it challenges the sovereign power insofar as it exposes the violence involved in processes of subject(ivat)ion and disciplining. This version of *vasanizomai*, by projecting the

13. This image of *vasanizomai* in repetition can be found at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/telemax/3210377468/>.



Figure 4: Photograph from the Internet, available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/35524174@N04/8473109111>.



Figure 5: K. Palaiologou street, Thessaloniki, 2014. Photograph by Angela Boletsi.



Figure 6: Navarinou square, Thessaloniki, 2014. Photograph by Angela Boletsi.



Figure 7: Thessaloniki. Photograph by author.

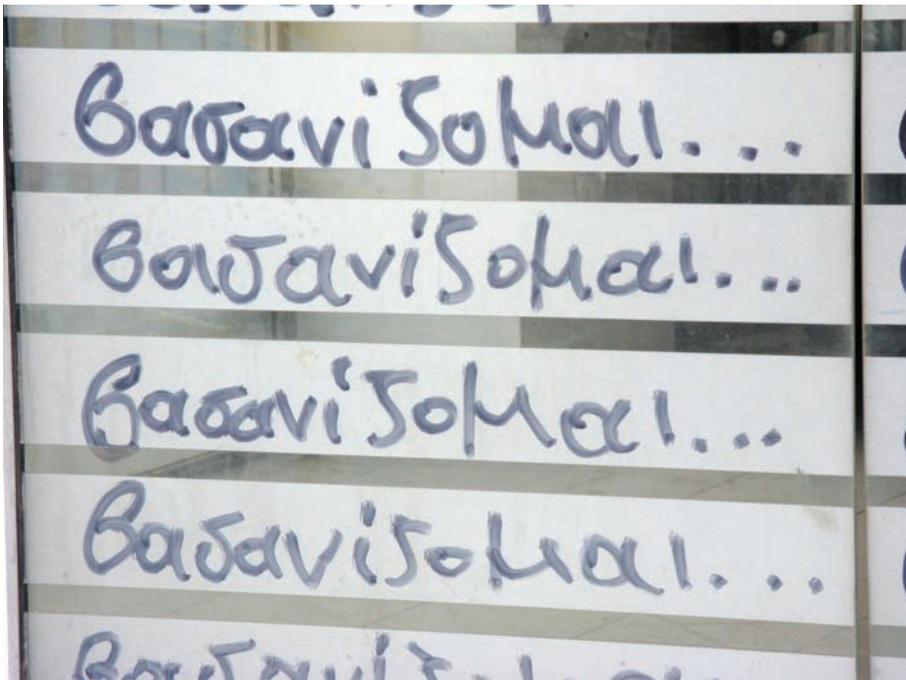


Figure 8: Photograph from the Internet, available at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/telemax/3210377468/>.



Figure 9: Cartoon by G. Kalaitzis, published in *Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 6 February 2013. Reproduced by permission of the artist.



Figure 10: Photograph from the Internet, available at <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/42820657>.



Figure 11: The words 'Chr. Avgi' ('Golden Dawn') can be discerned above vasanizomai. Photograph by author.

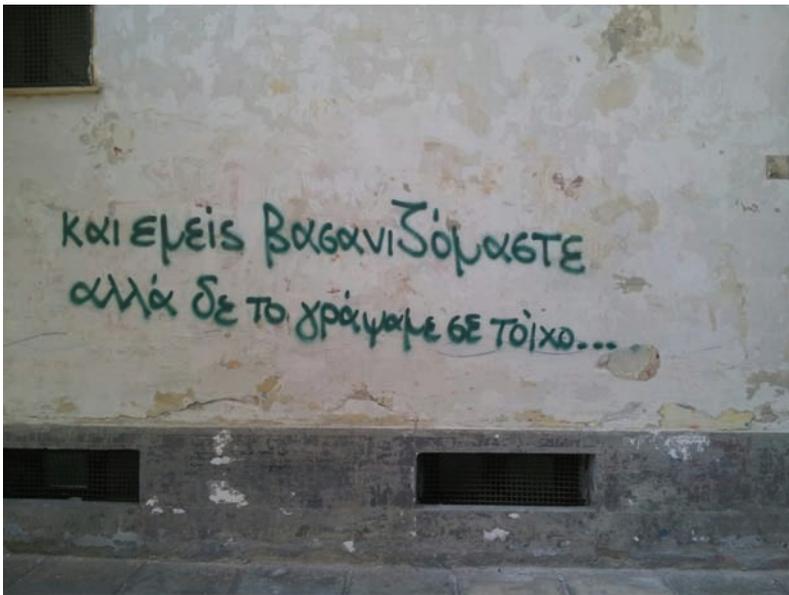


Figure 12: 'We, too, are in torment, but we did not write it on a wall.' Writing on the wall of the Experimental School of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Delmouzou street, Thessaloniki, 2014. Photograph by Angela Boletsi.

torment as a form of punishment, suggests that the agent causing the suffering is outside the subject.

Another appropriation figures in a political cartoon published in the newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* on 6 February 2013 (Figure 9). Cartoon artist Giannis Kalaitzis sketched a dismal cityscape where buildings have barricaded windows and the only human figures on the streets are policemen holding machine-guns. Several walls bear the message 'vasanizoume' (emphasis added) – the same verb as *vasanizomai* but in the active voice and in the first person plural: 'we torture'. Transmuted in the active voice, the verb addresses police brutality and the threat to democracy posed by the Greek police and ruling politicians. Besides policemen, the only other figure in the image is Nikos Dendias, (then) Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection, who is writing 'vasanizoume' on a wall. With the switch from the middle to the active voice, the agent/perpetrator becomes straightforward: the minister (and by extension, the state), who is supposed to protect citizens, ends up terrorizing and torturing them.

Another variation of the writing projects the word 'ζω'/'to live' within *vasanizomai* by misspelling the verb so that it is written differently but pronounced the same: 'Βασανίζωμαι' (Figure 10). Although the verb 'live' is literally surrounded by the rest of the letters, overpowered by the weight of the suffering, it stands out in red, posing perhaps as a faint promise of exiting the state of living in torment.

Vasanizomai often invites a dialogue with adjacent wall-writings, which respond to it or appropriate it for specific ideological purposes. On the wall of an apartment building somebody has written 'Chr. Avgi'/'Golden Dawn' with tiny letters above *vasanizomai* (Figure 11). The suggestion is that the Greek

14. An image of this graffiti with the word *vasanisou* can be found at http://stihaios.blogspot.nl/2012/10/blog-post_941.html.

neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn answers to the suffering of Greek citizens. The Nazi party's popularity is often attributed to the way it exploits the desperation of vulnerable parts of the population by selling a fake sense of empowerment through violence. Vulnerability certainly has no place in this ideology as a basis for community. This appropriation of *vasanizomai* showcases the contradictory purposes to which this performative can be mobilized. The risk is always present that others may try to steer the ambiguity of the middle voice towards an interpretation that serves their agendas: the suggestion that the Golden Dawn is the solution to people's suffering tries to bring the signifying transaction that *vasanizomai* initiates with passers-by to a close. Nevertheless, another reading is conceivable, albeit less obvious: Golden Dawn may not be read as the solution, but as a source and cause of the suffering.

Ludic appropriations of *vasanizomai* abound. I will focus on a parodic adaptation in a piece of stencil graffiti, which, compared with *vasanizomai*, highlights the distinct functions of the middle voice in both cases. The graffiti at hand (Figures 13, 14), which I came across on Kolokotroni street in Athens, features Lefteris Pantazis – a well-known Greek singer of *skyladika/dog music*, a kind of popular Greek music (*laika*) associated with decadent nightclubs and low-quality mass entertainment.¹⁴ The Pantazis-figure is winking and pointing at passers-by with his index fingers. Above his head hangs the word '*vasanisou*': the same verb as *vasanizomai*, in the middle voice, but in the second person singular imperative, yielding something like 'torment yourself'. *Vasanisou* is a famous line by Pantazis during his performances in nightclubs – a line that predates the appearance of *vasanizomai* on Greek walls. With this line, the singer playfully urges his (particularly female) audience to 'suffer'



Figure 13: Stencil graffiti in Athens, featuring popular singer Lefteris Pantazis and his famous line '*vasanisou*'/'torment yourself'. Photograph from the Internet, available at http://stihaios.blogspot.nl/2012/10/blog-post_941.html.



Figure 14: The same stencil graffiti as in Figure 13, in Romvis street, Athens, taken in December 2014, after the word 'vasanisou' had been crossed out with paint. Photograph by author.

('suffer, baby!' or 'torment yourselves, girls!'). His slogan hints at the sweet, lustful torment that his music is supposed to bring about.

As the singer's line is transferred in a different context in the Pantazis-graffiti, the connotation of sensual pleasure turns into a callous message addressed to people suffering from the consequences of the crisis. The way this address is issued, however, is anything but straightforward. In contradistinction to *vasanizomai*, in which the verb's subject is also the tormented one with no external force becoming grammatically explicit, in *vasanisou* there is a distinction between addresser and addressee, enhanced by the imperative. On a literal level, the singer is addressing his fans. But the singer becomes a metaphorical image for power (be it the forces of capitalism, the 'Troika', or the Greek state) ordering citizens to torment themselves. The middle voice in *vasanisou* suggests that the addressees – the sufferers – are not just involved in the designated act, but bringing the torment upon themselves. The ambiguity regarding the agent causing the torment that we saw in *vasanizomai* is dampened in the imperative: the verb can be translated as 'torment yourself!' – an order to the addressee that exonerates the addressing power from any responsibility or guilt.

The graffiti creates a series of ironic contrasts. First, the combination of image (the singer) and word sets up a perverse situation whereby a sovereign power orders subjects to bring torment upon themselves. The sovereign thereby exerts power while evading accountability. Although the sovereign is blatantly present (the singer's figure), the power he exerts cannot be questioned, because it is disguised as self-inflicted violence by his subjects. The interpellated subjects must internalize the sovereign's imperative. In Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation, subject-constitution and the conferral of identity take place through a self-ascription of guilt. In Althusser's famous example, the policeman hails a passerby ('Hey, you there!'), who turns around,

acknowledging this hailing as an ascription of guilt (1984: 48). This interpellative address captures the function of ideology, through which individuals turn into subjects (Althusser 1984: 48–49; Boletsi 2013: 184). In this version of Althusser’s interpellation scene, the addressees of *vasanisou* purchase their subjectivity by subjecting themselves to suffering *and* to the guilt of causing it. The combination of middle-voice and image here makes the workings of hegemonic power graspable by exposing its ‘blaming-the-victim’ logic.

Second, the graffiti’s evocation of the music entertainment known as *skyladika*, involving dancing, flower-throwing, and plate-smashing, complicates its critical force. This evocation links the current suffering of Greeks to the cliché of the fun-loving, unfettered, Zorba-like Greek who prefers to enjoy life rather than work and who cannot be disciplined or controlled. This association taps into the oft-heard view that the idle Greeks are responsible for the country’s crisis, while hard-working Europeans pay the bill. Following this logic, self-inflicted suffering might sound like a reasonable outcome. But the sadistic nature of the imperative *vasanisou*, paired with the devious-looking figure issuing the command, deprives this discourse of its commonsensical semblance. This figure, who can be taken to stand for a kind of sovereign power, sadistically turns the nation’s *jouissance* (the positive connotations of *vasanisou*, alluding to sensual dancing) into the nation’s demise. The sovereign power can conceal its involvement in this demise by suggesting that the excessive nature of this *jouissance* – owing to the undisciplined Greek character – precipitated the nation’s suffering.

By giving sovereign power a face (the singer’s image) and employing the middle voice in a command, the graffiti exposes the above logic as a discursive ruse that effectively exonerates any agents other than the Greek population. However, the evocation of the stereotype of the ‘unrestrained Greek’ may also hint at the anxiety of the sovereign power that its subjects may not comply with its injunction. Thus, this stereotype turns from a justification for austerity politics into a marker of the power’s anxiety: the graffiti invites us to think what could happen if crisis-stricken Greeks would indeed refuse to be disciplined and to follow this interpellative call to self-imposed torment. Remarkably, an act of insubordination has deformed the graffiti itself: the last time I saw the graffiti on Kolokotroni street in December 2014, the verb *vasanisou* had been crossed out by a thick stripe of black paint, with the paint dripping into the image of the singer, forming a kind of cage (see Figure 14). The crossing out of the power’s injunction and the resulting image of a prison cell in which the figure of the sovereign appears trapped, visually overturns the sovereign’s power.

THE RISKS OF THE MIDDLE VOICE

If the idea of the self as the cause of its experiences is a hallmark of autonomous selfhood, the middle voice places this idea on precarious ground. Theorists like Butler consider this questioning of the self’s autonomy as a prerequisite for productive political articulations of the self. As Butler contends, ‘we cannot understand ourselves without in some ways giving up on the notion that the self is the ground and cause of its own experience’ (Butler and Athanasiou 2013: 4). Nevertheless, the debunking of binaries through a discourse in the middle voice, and consequently of notions of subjectivity hinging on such binaries, is not without political risks.

LaCapra finds the middle voice problematic when it privileges a discourse of undecidability and the dissolution of all distinctions. Specifically, LaCapra

is concerned that a middle voice discourse may obliterate distinctions between victims and perpetrators, which are indispensable for working through traumatic events (2001: 21–22).¹⁵ LaCapra alerts to the danger of a ‘rashly generalized middle voice’ that would undo ‘any distinction [...] between victim and perpetrator’ and would thus ‘undercut the problems of agency and responsibility’ (2001: 26). This may result in an undifferentiated treatment of subject positions and a discourse ‘suspicious of will’, which casts ethical considerations irrelevant (2001: 26, 29). He therefore calls for a more careful consideration of ‘the possibilities and limits of the middle voice’ when it comes to agency and ethics, and especially the need to recognize degrees of responsibility in action (2001: 29).

The bracketing of the cause of suffering in *vasanizomai* may indeed yield a blurring of the line between perpetrators and victims, tormentor and tormented. Consequently, the nebulosity of the cause of torment could mimic the ungraspable workings of global capitalism, which make it increasingly hard to pinpoint perpetrators in the global financial crisis and hold them accountable. In this sense, the middle voice could serve neo-liberal capitalism. If we take up LaCapra’s claim that the middle voice precludes strong positions of responsibility, then a middle voice discourse in the contemporary landscape of the crisis could fortify the ability of late capitalism to conceal its violence and evade accountability for its effects.

I contend, however, that the middle voice in *vasanizomai* is more likely to have the reverse function. By foregrounding the tormented bodies of people and the city itself, it associates the systemic violence of neo-liberal capitalism with individual suffering. Even if that link is not established in terms of cause and effect, the materiality of the suffering – and its intrusion in the public sphere of political life (*bios*) – brings systemic violence into the field of visibility.

LaCapra rightly insists on the necessity of differentiating subject positions and not allowing undecidability dissolve all distinctions. However, the middle voice need not have this effect. As LaCapra also concedes, undoing binaries ‘does not automatically entail the blurring of all distinctions’ (2001: 21). By loosening the rigidity of binaries, the middle voice challenges dominant discourses based on either/or choices and inspires a multiplication of subject positions and political choices, when two options – victim or culprit, active or passive – fall short of capturing the complexity of a given situation. *Vasanizomai* problematizes facile attributions of blame in dominant rhetoric (e.g., the idea that Greeks are ‘paying for their sins’) but also the ascription of passive victimhood to Greek subjects.

We should nevertheless distinguish two conditions that enable the middle voice to function as a viable critical tool. First, the middle voice should not be a replacement of, but a supplement to, other uses of language. Only then can it exercise an effective critique of other discursive modes, pointing to their limitations instead of aspiring to replace them by instituting another potentially hegemonic discourse. Second, one should bear in mind that the middle voice does not *necessarily* produce a desired open-endedness or crisis of representation. Therefore, a nuanced exploration of the functions of the middle voice on a case-to-case basis is required. This calls, to borrow LaCapra’s words, for a study of the ‘actual and desirable modulations of the middle voice itself in discourse addressing various, at times very different, topics or others’ (2001: 27).

To the above, I will add a consideration that makes the exploration of the middle voice particularly meaningful in the context of the Greek (and

15. LaCapra criticizes accounts of the middle voice by Barthes, Derrida, and especially White, who proposes the middle voice as a suitable mode of representing the Holocaust and, more generally, modernity (2001: 26).

Eurozone) crisis. When seeking ways to articulate the experience of dispossessed individuals, it could be politically invalidating to depend solely on the notion of a willing, sovereign subject, when precisely the visibility and subject-status of such individuals is at stake. Dispossessed subjects – impoverished people, illegal migrants, unaccounted individuals deprived of their rights or means of livelihood – are often denied the status of the subject. They have no proper part in what Jacques Rancière calls the ‘partition of the sensible’: an ‘implicit law’ that divides up the world and people, determining who and what is excluded or allowed to participate and ‘what is visible and what not’, ‘what can be heard and what cannot’ (2010: 36). These people – ‘those without a part’ (2010: 36) – cannot assert their presence in the social field through grammars hinging on sovereign subjectivity, because those grammars effectuate their social exclusion. When existing categories of subjectivity fall short of accounting for disenfranchised individuals – the numbers of which have exponentially increased since the crisis – then the middle voice could reveal the problematic aspects of the discourse of sovereign subjectivity. It could simultaneously help formulate alternative notions of agency that enable spectral subjects, hovering between visibility and invisibility, to have a voice in the social world.

THE TEMPORALITY OF THE MIDDLE VOICE

The political promise of the middle voice emanates not only from its ambiguity, but also from the kind of temporality it produces. Drawing from Benveniste, White emphatically differentiates the temporality of the active and passive voices from that of the middle voice. While in the active and passive the verb denotes a relation of temporal separation between the beginning and completion of the action, in the middle voice, ‘actions and their effects are conceived to be simultaneous; past and present are integrated rather than dirempted, and the subject and object of the action are in some way conflated’ (White [1992] 2010: 260). Barthes traces this subject/object conflation in modernist writing, in which the writer writes and is simultaneously ‘written’, i.e., constituted, in and by the text. For Barthes, the writing subject in modern writing is not ‘anterior to the process of writing’ (which typifies writing in the ‘active voice’) but ‘contemporary with the writing’ (Barthes in White [1992] 2010: 262). In the discourse of the middle voice, the subject does not pre-exist the act of the verb but is constituted through it.

Vasanizomai, then, becomes an act of subject-constitution. The subject in *vasanizomai* is not only the subject of the Greek crisis, but signals a *crisis of subjectivity* itself. Away from a disembodied Cartesian subject, anterior to, and in control of, language, the ‘I’ here is precarious, relational, physical, and in becoming. The present continuous in the verb encodes a process without a defined beginning and end. The ‘I’ that utters ‘*vasanizomai*’ acts on the world just as this ‘I’ lets the world act upon her.

The small letter with which the wall-writing starts and the ellipsis marks with which it often ends reinforce the open temporality of *vasanizomai*. They stress the continuousness of the suffering, but also the open-endedness of this speech act and of the subject that emerges through it. Without defined beginning and end, the verb draws the future as an open space, not yet filled in. The full stop used in some versions of *vasanizomai* seems to have the opposite function: it holds the viewer in the present as in a deadlock from which no movement forward can be launched. The full stop visually enacts the present

at a standstill and confronts us with the inescapable suffering in the here-and-now. But it also forces the passer-by to pause and relate to this 'now'. As a hurdle in the viewers' way, it makes them stumble and engage in an intensely affective encounter.

Vasanizomai is not the only wall-writing in which the middle voice yields a prolonged present of suffering and simultaneously a promise for a future-to-come. 'Athens burns', a slogan that popped up everywhere in Athens during anti-austerity riots in 2010, is marked by the same equivocality. In this writing too, the middle voice draws attention to the act of burning rather than the agents causing it. Although it seems easy to identify the agents with the rioters, who put banks, cars, and shops on fire, the burning is also a metaphor for the country's large-scale destruction following neo-liberal politics, to which the riots were a reaction. The ambivalence of the message does not only stem from the indeterminacy of the agent but also from the signifying force of the fire, denoting both purposeless destruction but also a cathartic act of discarding bankrupt structures in order to seek a new start from the ashes of the old. The latter reading need not entail a glorification of violence. The dynamism of fire as a signifier not only of destruction but of life itself, stands in stark contrast with societal stagnation and death: the middle voice in this slogan draws attention to the city – Athens – as a dying body that needs to be brought back to life. The middle voice here brackets the human subjects involved in the designated act not in order to disavow responsibility, but in order to address all citizens, without engaging in a finger-pointing of guilty parties. It issues a wake-up call that potentially summons all citizens to act – hopefully, not by violent means.

'Athens might burn', Theodoros Chiotis writes, 'but the creatures and messages it brings forth also seem to be born out of a desire to give voice to new subjectivities' (2015: 163). The middle voice in *vasanizomai* and 'Athens burns' counters the gloomy semantic content of the messages by creating a grammatical and conceptual space for alternative conceptions of the Greek subject, even though the means for the articulation thereof may differ: in the former message, subject-formation seeks its basis in the sharing of suffering and vulnerability, while in the latter, destruction of the old and a new start are implied prerequisites for new subjectivities.

The open temporality in *vasanizomai* makes it vulnerable to various ideological appropriations, even by the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn, as shown previously. This vulnerability in speech is inevitable as utterances disjoined from their originary intentions. Similarly, envisioning subjectivity as an open-ended process premised on vulnerability is a risky stance. But this open-endedness, inscribed in the temporality of the middle voice, holds the promise of a future that is not predetermined by the past and the present: a prospect much needed in crisis-hit Greece and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The middle voice in *vasanizomai* does not circumvent agency or responsibility. It probes the very premises of agency and responsibility in current discourses and negotiates alternative frameworks for their understanding, beyond clear-cut binaries between passive/active, guilty/innocent, powerful/powerless.

With his literary sensibility, Dimitriou perhaps sensed the high stakes in *vasanizomai* when he turned it into the banner of a new era in his novella. He may have discerned the epistemological gap between the middle voice

grammar of *vasanizomai* and the agitators' popular rhetoric during the crisis that uses the active and passive voices to label the guilty and the innocent. Granted, the novella's vision of the post-*vasanizomai* era is hardly optimistic. The wall-writing inaugurates a historical chapter in which people, tired of feeling guilty, evading responsibility or transferring blame, weary of political conflicts, fanaticism, and grand ideals, surrender to a capitalist dystopia. Nevertheless, the foregrounding of *vasanizomai* in Dimitriou's narrative somewhat contradicts the novel's casting of crisis as a time of judgement (*krisis*) based on age-old categories. If *vasanos* is a painful process of truth-seeking, the middle voice in *vasanizomai* points at the possibility of another kind of truth beyond finger-pointing, through new grammars and subjectivities. From Dimitriou's literary imagination to Greek walls, *vasanizomai* projects the need for a grammar that not only represents the crisis, but also causes a crisis in representation and subjectivity in the hope of fostering a different future.

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