

An Essay

“Oh man, fuck you and your essays!” shouts Makis the Bouldou, nearly exploding from his seat. He’s furious at his 11th grade teacher, Melissanthi Something or Other and her choice of the essay topic. He realizes that it won’t be long before his inspiration is utterly drained.

Who is this? Makis the Bouldou. Go figure.

Makis the Bouldou. Twelve years a student – and counting. Six year in Elementary, four years in Middle School, and now two additional years, stuck in the 11th grade. A fixture; classmate of two populations. Comingling with the young and old alike.

Makis the Bouldou. Makis from Asimakis. Last name unknown. *Who needs it anyway?*

Everybody knows him by his nickname. Big like a mountain. Two hundred and sixty five pounds, six feet and three inches barefooted. With an arching (but not quite hunched) back. His head like Bucephalus. Curly hair. Curls black like coal, lustrous, and shiny bright. Dark skinned. With a scruffy face, beard a week old. Almost always out of sorts. His look is grim, his eyebrows touch, and right now his lips are pursed in agitation. The essay topic only fuels his ever-present sense of agitation. He scratches the hairs on his chest with his right hand (they reach all the way to his chin), and with his left he scratches his head. He’s searching desperately for inspiration, gesticulating feverishly, but it just isn’t happening.

He always sits on the front row. Alone. His classmates don’t fit at the same desk, but it wouldn’t matter if they did, his teachers wouldn’t allow the association due to his propensity for cursing. “He is a poster-child anti-example of good behavior and a bad influence on the rest of the class”, as they many times noted.

Today is the first day of the final exams and theoretically, it’s an easy day with an easy subject. Today it’s an Essay day. Today, along with Makis the Bouldou, 12 generations of students write an Essay.

The Essay of the nineties is like the deionized water that housewives use for their steam presses and irons. The deionized water is odorless, colorless, and it doesn’t leave any mineral build up or other solids on the resistors of the electric appliances. And the Essay follows suit. It ought to be equally odorless, colorless... harmless. At the same time it ought to be exemplar, meaning that not only does it have to be digestible, but it must also be pithy; pertinent and vague, generalizable, but to the point. It shouldn’t express any personal opinion but at the same time it has to suggest something neoteric.

Watch out. Watch out! Under no circumstances should the modern Essay suggest whether the author is male or female. And most importantly it shouldn't be contrary to the established pedagogy of the National Ministry of Education, based on the Holy Analytical Program. It is crucially important that the stylus of the student not to provoke the negative energies of the Assessor. From this point of view, the modern Essay has much in common with the standard, homogenized yogurt produced from goats. It is well known that it comes from goats but we don't need to know the goats by name. *Goats with a name?* So the Wise Men who compose the Analytical Program of Studies for the Greek National Ministry of Education and Religion (which a couple of decades later seem neither National nor Religious) do their best to encourage students (all student of "this country of ours") to write in the spirit of mass production. Speaking of which, the phrase "*this country of ours [maybe leave this in Greek]*" and the more eloquent "*I have the feeling [maybe leave this in Greek]*", accompanied by a pompous, almost imperceptible raising of the chin, the exact moment, the absolute exact moment (not a moment sooner or later mind you) that the lower jaw extends beyond the upper jaw for a mere second, are the favorites of some Sourdoi¹ senators. And they will succeed in their efforts to turn students into mere factory workers mass-producing Essays like machinery and they, the Sourdoi senators, they could even become the Ministers of Justice by virtue of their successful subjugation.

A little while ago, while in the courtyard, Makis the Bouldou experienced a terrible stress about this exam. Not because he is compelled to swallow his groundbreaking views or otherwise suppress his genius. He simply worries that the moment an essay topic is enunciated, his imagination will lock and his argumentative reasoning will disappear. He worries that the two mandatory hours in class will oppress him and that the paper in front of him will remain as white as snow. *As snow? In the middle of the summer?* Figuratively speaking...

His classmates try to encourage him, but in vain:

"Come on now Makis, what's the big deal, can't you just bullshit your way through?"
"You sons of bitches, what do you think I'm talking about? I can't even bullshit. I have even taken an aspirin like my old man suggested, "for clarity", but I have also had some chocolate like suggested. And my momma sent me to tutoring hoping that I'd arrive on the other end of 11th grade."

The bell rings. It's time for the first-floor students to get into their classrooms, and Makis the Bouldou has a knot in his throat from all the stress. He coughs and he hawks so intensely that one thinks he'll vomit.

"Why are you coughing man?" asks Michalis Delta, he's buddies with Hans the German shepherd.

“Leave me alone, Miselino. It’s stress”, he answers.

The kids align and, “Face!” a PE command for still posture, eyes locked forward, and alternatively “Attention! Rest! Align!” PE instructor Kasma (aspiring to the position of co-principal next year) gives the commands blindly, but finally concedes the podium to the Principal.

“Mr. Principal, the microphone is all yours”, he says wiping the drool from his lips, the way one might when rising from a deep sleep (*haftas*², as Maki’s grandpa used to say). Mr. Principal alternates his deodorant between “Bac” and “Mum Perfume Spray.” Today he wears a polyester short-sleeve shirt – with a capital S embroidered. It includes a hidden button of unidentified color [how can you describe the color of a hidden button]. *Is it olive? Is it light blue?* Who knows. The Shirt – with a capital S - has a pocket to the left to accommodate his comb, eyeglasses case and bus pass trio. To Mr. Principal, the school is a dedicatory civil service. Mr. Principal is not just going to work, he doesn’t even go to the School. He goes to Service. Mr. Principal is committed. The Service is a duty, an obligation, a Must. Even She (the service) has some particular happy moments, sometimes to the point of a moderate cheer. One of those cheer moments is the year-end Exam. Since a cheer is not complete without good and clean clothes, you need a tie, hence, Mr. Principal is wearing his beautiful, branchy one with the birds and the flowers; the same one he wears during the school celebrations for the Politechnio³, the 28th of October 1940⁴, and the 25th of March 1821⁵, inside the all-time classic striped vest of his striped suit. He hawks too.

“You’re coughing? Why are you coughing Mr. Principal? It’s from the stress, eh?” the PE instructor Kasma speculates, covering the microphone with his palm to imprison the sound and continuing to drool.

“God bless you, God bless you for your concern, there, the phlegm from smoking, the dried lugie from the winter colds, it doesn’t take long. Fuck it”, he reassures him and grabs the microphone. He checks it with his finger to make sure it’s working, more particularly he hits it with his right index finger, the same way the boatswain in a ship hits it before he exclaims that “*passengers to Mykonos, I repeat, passengers to Mykonos are kindly requested to proceed to exit number One*” as if there is a second one. Mr. Principal looks left and right and “Let’s Pray!” he commands, with a feeling of duty and prestige deriving from his Administrative position. The praying is a contract job filled from the beginning of the school year to the end by Roula – Roula from Zaharoula -, the Roula with the eggplant-shaped (Italian eggplants not Japanese) – boobs.

“Let’s get in there, write our essays, and get this tyranny over with!” indignantly add the twins Nasos and Neoklis who stand in line behind Makis the Bouldou. Nasos holds a black, thick hair in his hand. He holds it with his right thumb and index finger and he stretches it by passing

continuously, ever so continuously, nonstop, over it with his left thumb and index finger, like a rosary.

“Is this from stress too?” Makis asks indifferently.

“What, the hair? No, from my balls”, answers Neoklis, indifferently too.

The Great Steersman of the school unit picks up the microphone once again after the prayer. He doesn't hit it this time, the sound check only happens once, and “Go to your classrooms” he says inspiringly and being more relaxed now, he extends his right arm for a few seconds, while with the left one he gestures a mountza⁶ towards the ground, like the whirling Dervish of the Bektasi battalion before communion, or like the statue of Kemal Ataturk on his horse, pointing to the west.

Ms. Melissanthi Something or Other is waiting in the classroom, standing, not seating at her desk. Something is her maiden name. Other is her family name. A Philosophy graduate of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. She is a Philologist, meaning the one who loves Speech. She abstains from teaching during the present school year - which is almost at an end – while on pregnancy leave, then on maternity leave, on sick leave, later on administrative leave, and any kind of leave possible until the school year ends. She has curly hair like Sofia Sakorafa, the Greek Olympic Javelin Champion, with a multi-colored crocheted purse, Indian dresses (very ugly), and pronounces the subject of the essay slowly and clearly, painfully so; irritating Makis the Bouldou, who is already plagued by his nerves.

The phrasing is stark, sharp and austere; similar to the political messages of KKE⁷ against EU, NATO at the festival organized by KNE⁸ every September:

“Describe in a clear and limited way a winter day which you'll never forget. Explain the reasons why this day is unforgettable.”

“Damn you, you stupid woman, what kind of a subject is this in the middle of the summer?” spits out Makis the Bouldou. But at some point during tutoring he learned that the answer to a question, all the data, is in the pronunciation. Hence, the student has to pronounce carefully, over and over again, to analyze it, to make it his own, to brake it into sections, and there he will find his answers. Let's see, he says.

“When you say *in a limited way*, exactly how limited do you mean Mrs.?” asked Roula charmingly, – Roula from Zaharoula -, the Roula with the eggplant (Italian eggplant not Japanese) – shaped boobs.

“Three pages at the most, sweetie”, answers back in a sweet, syrupy voice, Melissanthi Something or Other.

“So you don’t have to grade papers for a long time, you old, ugly woman”, Makis sucked his anger in and continued to the next sentence, the one that started with the verb *explain* to the second-person imperative.

“*Explain*”, so she only needs causes, the motives like they taught us in the tutoring lessons, so there must be a cause-effect relation”, Makis continues with his Pythagorean thinking, “and where is the effect? There it is, spread out in front of us, “...why this day is unforgettable...”, that’s a fucking awesome way of thinking. She must have studied Literature in Germany, obviously not a Protestant, this larva is a fucking Calvinist”, Makis the Bouldou concludes.

He is tormented in vain, because suddenly Makis the Bouldou raises his head, takes a deepest breath, a smirk appears on his tan previously pale face, no, he won’t be needing an aspirin or a chocolate, at least not for today.

“You stupid Melissanthi Something or Other, I’ll tear you apart, and because of me you won’t be teaching next year also, because you’ll be knocked up again, I know the subject, I have it, I play it on my fingers and I put it in the Principal’s little pocket”.

And he leans and starts writing with a right wrist somersault on the white like snow paper, impetuous, without a break, right off the reel. Half an hour later Makis the Bouldou hasn’t raised his head. Within the hour he asks for a second pen because his pen’s ink is over. In an hour and a half he’s looking at his watch to see how much time he has left. His classmates, who were trying to encourage him before, have already given their papers, and now they are out and wonder:

“You guys, he was pulling our leg, most probably this subject was an SOS subject at his tutoring class” they think’ within the next two mandatory hours the desks empty, three hours is the limit they can stay in the class, at two and a half hours most of the kids are in the playground singing verses in an iambic pentameter of the bleachers:

*“Give him a paper,
give him all papers,
that’s what he do
Makis the Bouldou”.*

Makis can hear everything through the open windows and he smiles. He doesn’t have time for all these right now. He checks how many blank pages he has left. At three hours minus a few minutes, the reputable Literature graduate, the radiance of the philosophical world of Loafing Melissanthi Something or Other entrains the classroom where Makis the Bouldou is, holding all the essays from the other four classes, approximately a hundred and twenty essays on hand and, looking at Makis the Bouldou still writing, she bites her lips and she’s thinking that

this son of a bitch will consume her whole weekend to make remarks dash corrections dash stylistic features, she was planning on whipping out at least thirty of them on the bus on her way back home.