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Twisted Beings, Rising Souls, and Falling Objects. On *L'oblique dans le monde grec* by Thibault Girard

Thibault Girard. *L'oblique dans le monde grec. Concept et imagerie*. pp. lv+189, 139 b/w illustrations. 2015. Oxford: Archaeopress. 9-78178491-139-3 paperback £35; e-publication £19.

Concepts such as oblique, vertical or horizontal are so rooted in our daily vocabulary that an explanation of the terms seems superfluous, for these are—or so we think—rather evident and unequivocal words that serve to define a state or a quality. Nevertheless, as the book under review elucidates, the reality is that for ancient Greeks these concepts were not as neatly defined as they are for us today, and that ancient Greek even lacks the words which would unequivocally correspond to our notions of oblique, vertical, and horizontal.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Difficult Words* defines 'oblique' as 'neither parallel nor at right angles to a specified or implied line; slanting'.¹ Oblique is then a relational concept, it depends on the vertical and the horizontal to exist; without them, an oblique position cannot be conceived. The concept of oblique is also intimately bound with one of the foremost problems of Art History from the Renaissance onwards: the representation of depth, i.e. perspective.² Nevertheless, the third dimension was seldom explored by the Greeks, and was sometimes even consciously abolished in vase-painting. The oblique was therefore not used to convey any sense of depth in Greek art but found a very different expression: it was employed to represent both rest and intense motion.

While the problem of space in Greek art, in particular the exploration of perspective has been extensively studied in modern scholarship,³ the use of the oblique as a means to convey rest and motion had not been widely explored before. This book therefore fills a gap and should be placed within the framework of other modern attempts to look at various compositional elements of images and their expressive qualities,

such as Luschey's *Rechts und Links*,⁴ or Morard's *Horizontalité et verticalité*.⁵

The book

L'oblique dans le monde grec is an unrevised French doctoral dissertation, which shows in the way it is written and in the very structure of the work, with the usual and characteristic flaws, but it is a valuable contribution to a subject that has been underexplored in modern scholarship. Its main aim is clearly set: to explore how the concept of 'oblique' was understood, explicitly and implicitly, in the ancient Greek world. For that aim, the author takes us on a journey through written and figurative sources, which show different but complementary perspectives on the ancient Greek's apprehension of this concept.

The work is structured in two parts. The first explores the 'oblique' in ancient written sources, while the second brings our attention to material culture, and addresses examples of oblique representations in statuary and vase painting. The author's *rationale* behind his selection of sources for his aim is clear, and comes back to Nietzsche, insofar he 'a révélé que des structures linguistiques et grammaticales similaires donnaient naissance à des systèmes philosophiques apparentés' (p. 3).

First Part

The first part (*L'oblique dans la pensée grecque*, pp. 5–47) provides a good survey of the written sources in search of terms which could betray the existence of a concept of oblique in ancient Greece, as well as of the related terms 'vertical' and 'horizontal', to which the oblique is undoubtedly linked, as mentioned above. The main sources for this part are philosophers, astronomers, mathematicians, geographers, physicians, tragic authors, and poets. Some passages in this part are not easy to follow for the non-specialist in the subjects under discussion (astronomy, philosophy, geometry), and it requires a certain amount of re-reading to fully understand the implications of the text, but specialists would undoubtedly find it of great interest. Chapter I (*Prolégomènes. La table des opposés 'fondamentaux' et Homère*, pp. 7–1) introduces the subject and pauses in Homer (pp. 8–11), who did not know the concept of oblique but who expresses it in a very illuminating way by means of the participle κεκλιμένος, which implies that something is leaning on something else; this notion will have some correspondence in visual sources (eg. onlookers leaning on staffs in

¹ Hobson 2004: 300.

² E.g. Wölfflin 1915; Panofsky 1927; Gombrich 1972: 254–256; Gombrich 1972: 129–149; Arnheim 1982.

³ E.g. Rostovtzeff 1919: 144–163; Six 1920: 180–189; Pfuhl 1923; White 1956; Richter 1970; Stansbury-O'Donnell 1989: 203–215 and 1990: 213–235; Tobin 1990: 14–41; Bol 2003; Boardman 2005: 63–72. Cf. also the publications of the members of the German excellence cluster 'TOPOI' on pictorial space (www.topoi.org).

⁴ Luschey 2002. The book returns to Luschey's 1956 'Habilitation' manuscript.

⁵ Morard 2009.

Athenian vase painting, among others). Chapter II (*Macrocosme et microcosme. Des présocratiques à Proclus*, pp. 13–19) discusses the major role that the oblique plays in the cosmology of the Ionian philosophers, paying special attention to the oblique motion of the celestial bodies, and to the obliquity of the ecliptic, as well as the existence of a similar motion in the more humane sphere of the soul which, in antiquity, was conceived in the image and likeness of the cosmos. His analysis reveals the fundamental role of the oblique for the existence of life on Earth, since it is precisely the obliquity of the ecliptic that is behind the existence and alternation of seasons and all that this entails, i.e. ultimately, the very survival of the human species. In Chapter III (*La théorie des atomes. Épicure et Lucrèce*, pp. 21–23) the author looks at the basic building blocks of matter, the atoms, and wonders if an oblique motion can be established for them, too, which does not seem to be the case. In Chapter IV (*L'oblique des vents*, pp. 25–28) we move from the atoms to the winds, which do follow an oblique trajectory. The next chapter, number V, focuses on Strabo (pp. 29–31). The Greek geographer is the first who uses the adjective λοξός to convey the idea of an oblique line (p. 31), a concept he reaches by the practical application of geography, and which closely resembles the modern understanding of the term. The study of the *Corpus Hippocrateum* in Chapter IV (*Hippocrate et les médecins grecs*, pp. 33–36) is enlightening with regard to the concept of oblique, as the term is used multiple times to describe organs, parts of the body and attitudes, from the vaginal orifice (which is λοξός) to the placement of a bandage on a wound. Some passages of the *Corpus* even offer a glimpse into a rather modern concept: the opposition between oblique/slanting and straight (p. 34), two opposites which are not among those listed by Pythagoras in his famous 'Table of Opposites' known to us through Aristotle (Aristot. *Meta.* I 5, 985 b 23ff) which is discussed earlier in Chapter I. Chapter VII (*Les Tragiques et les poètes hellénistiques*, pp. 37–41) explores the concept in the tragic authors and the Hellenistic poets, none of whom provides much useful evidence for the purpose of the present study. One case has called our attention though, that of the 'oblique gods', which we will explore in some detail below. In the last chapter of this part, Chapter VIII (*Le rayon et le miroir: la vision d'Euclide*, pp. 43–46) addresses Euclid's two optics treatises to conclude that although the oblique was not explicitly present in his works, the notion of it was implicit (p. 43). Nevertheless, it will not be until the publication of Vitruvius' *De architectura* when the principles of vision start to be applied to visual arts.⁶

Second Part

A *Trait d'Union* (p. 47) where the author reflects on the similar conception of 'writing' and 'drawing' in ancient Greek, both expressed with the same verb, γράφω, serves as a transition to the second part, *L'oblique dans l'art grec* (pp. 49–149), devoted to the study of the concept of oblique and its representation in Greek art.

Chapter IX (*La notion d'oblique dans l'art*, pp. 51–66), the first of part II, explores the notion of the oblique in Greek art, in particular, in that it relates to what, to our eyes, would be its most obvious presentation in this medium: depth, one of art history's *Grundbegriffe*.⁷ But the Greeks did not explore perspective in the same way that Renaissance artists did centuries later, which is particularly true in the case of vase-painting. In fact, the use of the oblique in Greek art is perfectly conveyed in Girard's fortunate expression 'l'oblique existe à l'intérieur d'un cadre bidimensionnel' (p. 51). Greek painters resorted to the superposition of planes and, in a more limited way, to foreshortening, to create some illusion of depth. There are very few examples of vase paintings which can be understood as deliberately trying to represent actual depth, as the author correctly indicates for the case of the turning chariot (p. 53), and even then, and with the exception of the amphora in Munich, Antikensammlung 1391 (figure 3, BAPD 302239), depth is achieved by the superposition of planes not by the actual oblique presentation of the elements. Overall, notwithstanding some examples of architectural elements represented in vase painting by means of oblique lines (figures 4–6), its use to project a third dimension is very limited. But this does not mean that the oblique was not used at all in Greek art, much to the contrary, as Girard's book demonstrates, Greek painters and sculptors made extensive use of it but with a different aim: not as a means to convey depth to the scene but as the way to express, paradoxically, both rest and motion (p. 63). From the Archaic period onwards, horizontals and verticals progressively give way to diagonals. The starting point is the relief *pythos* from Mykonos (figures 15a-b, pp. 62–63) and it was widely and soon accepted into Attic art, although not so much in Peloponnesian art, and by the classical period, it already featured in the composition as an important graphic element (p. 63). The famous krater by the Niobid Painter (BAPD 206954) and the influence of the paintings of Polygnotos of Thasos on the painters of the Kerameikos is the obligatory reference here.⁸

⁶ The sense of sight, more specifically, how ancient Greeks and Romans 'see' is giving rise to a great deal of interest from scholars and is becoming a major subject of study in Britain. The recent volume *Sight and the Ancient Senses*, edited by Michael Squire

(Routledge, 2016) approaches vision from a range of different thematic angles, the first thorough introduction to the concept of 'seeing' in ancient philosophy, science, literature, rhetoric, and art.

⁷ Wölfflin 1915: 80–133.

⁸ Cf. the Beazley Archive Pottery Database Record 206954 for a

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The remaining two chapters of this part are devoted to the detailed analysis of each of the two modes of expression of the oblique as defined before.

Chapter X (*Oblique en mouvement*, pp. 67–101) addresses the use of the oblique to express movement. Girard goes back to Gombrich,⁹ (p. 67), to explain the connection between the oblique and the incomplete view of the object represented, that relates to its representation in terms of movement. It is precisely the mental process of re-composition required of the viewer that amplifies the effect of movement. The implications of this idea become clear by looking at the example chosen by Girard and Gombrich: the bronze copy of the Discobolus in Munich (inv. number 3012, figure 27). The case study chosen to illustrate all the possibilities of the oblique in a dynamic composition is the frieze of the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus (353–350 BC) with an Amazonomachy running along its four sides, each of them created by one of four Greek sculptors (Leochares, Bryaxis, Scopas of Paros, and Timotheus). This is an excellent case study because although the Mausoleum itself and its iconography has been extensively studied in the past,¹⁰ the compositional aspects of the frieze and very particularly, the sticking predominance of diagonals, has been largely overlooked. The main finding of this section is that the oblique was a conscious and concrete choice by the artist which serves to dynamize the composition and to provide intensity and speed to the scene. This is also emphasized by the extensive use of empty space around the figures and enabled by the rectangular and open shape of the frieze itself. The case study to address the use of the oblique in closed compositions are the metopes of the temple of Zeus of Olympia (pp. 77–86), which offer the whole range of compositional possibilities of the oblique within the tightly closed and square space of a metope. Girard finds in the Olympian metopes a similar use of the oblique than in the open form of the Halicarnassus frieze but the materiality of the support imposes itself to a greater extent in Olympia, losing the composition in terms of dynamism and power in favour of balance and symmetry (p. 83). The next section of this chapter looks at the use of the oblique to represent the flight of a given figure in a scene, and in particular at instances of oblique ascensions to the otherworld, such as that of Heracles (to which we will return later). The interesting case of the falling objects is addressed afterwards (on this, see also below).

Chapter XI (*Oblique en repos*, pp. 101–149) is devoted to the second of the possibilities offered by the oblique in ancient Greek visual arts: the representation of rest (as different to immobility). The chapter addresses the fundamental difference in the conception of rest and immobility between us and the ancient Greeks, for which immobility meant vertical or horizontal but never, for example, a figure in *contrapposto*, and reviews instances of the use of the oblique to mean rest, from the so-called mourning Athena and the ubiquitous draped onlookers leaning on staffs in Athenian vase painting,¹¹ to seated figures in ‘V compositions’ of Exekias’ Ajax and Achilles type. A review of static objects in an oblique position in vase painting (pp. 125–148) completes the chapter. Next, *Les descriptions antiques d’œuvres d’art* (pp. 149–154) focuses on the *ekphrasis* of works of art,¹² with the aim of putting together words and images and that serves as a conclusion to the whole volume. A list of abbreviations, bibliography, index of ancient authors, index of collections, and a list of illustrations and photography credits complete the volume.

Twisted Beings

In ancient Greek, the adjectives λοξός and σκολιός are used by the tragic authors on several occasions with the sense (not always pejorative) of ‘ambiguous’, ‘confusing’, ‘crooked’ (p. 39). This is one of the attributes accorded to Apollo on the grounds of his ambiguous oracles but also because of his oblique motion in the zodiac.¹³ In this sense, it is not surprising that there is an association between the god with an animal which moves in a πλαγιως or oblique way: the snake.¹⁴ This animal features widely in connection with different divinities in the ancient world, sometimes as an attribute, but also as a hierophany, theophany or epiphany, without being in itself a ‘symbol’ of any one good. Its relation with Apollo is ancient and comes back to the moment when the Olympian god killed Python and took possession of the Delphic oracle stepping on generations of Earth-related divinities.¹⁵ The crooked motion of snakes is just an external feature of the complex character of an animal which was regarded as highly mysterious in Antiquity and whose behavior and elemental biological characteristics gave origin to a wide range of myths, superstitions and beliefs involving snakes. Serpents were regarded

bibliography list on the Niobid Painter krater (<http://www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/pottery/default.htm>)

⁹ Gombrich 1964: 293–306.

¹⁰ Lippold 1950; Waywell 1978; Jutland Archaeological Society (1981–); Fuchs 1983³: 452; Boardman 1998; Cook 2005; Lucchese 2009.

¹¹ On this, the essential reference, which has been omitted by the author, is Stansbury-O’Donnell 2006.

¹² This part could have been expanded with the inclusion and discussion, when relevant, of some recent scholarship, such as Elsner 2002: 1–18; Elsner 2004: 157–186; Squire 2013: 97–140; Squire 2013: 157–91.

¹³ Hdt. I 91; Aesch. *Eu* 19.

¹⁴ Nicander, *Theriaka* 258–281 (referring to the Cerastes snake, which moves like a ship). Gow and Scholfield 1997.

¹⁵ Aesch. *Eum.* I; Eur. *Ifigenia Tauris* 1245ff.

as mediators between earth and heavens, gods and mortals, which is also a characteristic feature of other ‘oblique’ beings, such as Hermes, who, as Girard puts it, ‘se glisse obliquement par la fermeture de la porte’ (pp. 40–41). As it could not be otherwise taking into account the major role of snakes in Greek thought, they also feature abundantly in ancient Greek visual culture. Although represented in many ways, one of the default poses is the oblique position, either on shields, in the hands of the Erinyes, on Patroclus’ funerary mound, or springing from a warrior’s shield or helmet to attack an enemy, to mention just a few. These observations fit quite nicely with the idea pointed out by David Matthey in his PhD and mentioned by Girard,¹⁶ whereby the diagonal ‘est fréquemment utilisée comme un moyen de figurer une connexion entre les niveaux cosmiques supérieur ou inférieur’. This is also the movement that some heroes—or their souls—take in their accession to Olympus.

Rising Souls

Such is the case with regards to Heracles’ ascension to Olympus on a chariot, which Girard discusses in the book and to which we would like to add a couple of remarks.¹⁷ There is a group of vases which concentrate in the last decades of the 5th century which show pretty elaborate scenes of Heracles’ journey to Olympus by air and which include the hero’s funerary pyre and fairly lively figures at different levels. This is a late iconographical development that starts to appear in Athenian and South Italian vase painting around the year 420 BC, and marks a break with the previous iconographical tradition. Three vases are remarkable: New York, MET 52.11.18 (BAPD 14714), Sant’ Agata de’ Goti, Mustilli (BAPD 260021), and Munich, Antikensammlung 2630 (BAPD 215719). The chariot crosses the skies in an oblique motion towards the left. This iconography is limited to a couple of well accomplished vases and it soon adopts a simpler form: the chariot driven by Nike, marching to the left, sometimes led by Hermes, and carrying Heracles. Even in this simpler form and within the constraints imposed by the reduced pictorial field of vases, mainly kraters, the oblique flight is suggested. A nice example is the bell krater by the Painter of London F64 in the Jatta Museum (BAPD 260020), where the wheels of the chariot are only half visible as they emerge from behind the pattern of stopped meanders. The position is even more marked in the amphora of Panathenaic shape by the Talos Painter (BAPD 41697), where Heracles himself has adopted

the oblique position that we have linked with the typical dismount gesture of the *apobates* elsewhere.¹⁸ Finally, as meaningful as the diagonal ascension reveals itself in these scenes and in many others where Nike, Eros, or even Zeus abducting Ganymede fly obliquely, also the motion of the chariot to the left adds to the scene, as it serves to nuance Heracles’ trip to Olympus as a ‘return home’. Indeed, as Luschey’s study demonstrated,¹⁹ the movement to the left in Greek art is that of the return home, the return from the battlefield and that of the return of the hero. After a life of struggles and having proved his worth, Heracles returns to the place where he belonged as the very capable son of Zeus and the mortal Alcmena.

Falling Objects

In parallel with the diagonal ascension, Greek art offers many instances of the movement in the opposite direction: the fall of objects in an oblique trajectory. Modern scholarship holds as one of its key tenets that images on vases are not snapshots of real life but cultural constructs which make use of a well-thought language to reflect societal values and beliefs.²⁰ In this light, the representation of objects is a rather interesting phenomenon; the varied but also somehow limited catalogue of objects with marked semiotic potential in Athenian vase painting offers a promising field of research.²¹ Objects of various kinds appear suspended in the field of images, resting on the ground, in the hands of the figures or slipping from them. In Athenian vase painting objects start to fall in the transition from the late Archaic to the early Classical period; they are represented suspended in the air next to the figures, falling in an oblique position. Girard draws a parallel with 20th century cartoons and understands them as time markers, ‘marqueur(s) temporel(s) de l’instantanéité’ (p. 99). Falling objects, then, introduce us to the subject of temporality in vase painting, which has been extensively studied from the point of view of narration, that is at a syntactic level,²² but not so much from the optic of the individual elements ‘time markers’, i.e. at a semantic level.²³

Girard’s view of falling objects as time markers is plausible but a look at other recent bibliography on the subject will serve to expand and nuance this interpretation, and ultimately to reinforce it, too. As plausible as the function of falling objects as temporal markers might be, when they feature in the so-called

¹⁶ Matthey 2009.

¹⁷ On Heracles’ ascension to Olympus in Athenian vase painting and the relationship of the motif with the iconography of the *apobates* race, and the meaning of chariot scenes of Athenian kraters exported abroad, cf. Rodríguez Pérez 2014: 59–74.

¹⁸ Rodríguez Pérez 2014: 70–73.

¹⁹ Luschey 2002: 30.

²⁰ Barringer 2001: 2.

²¹ On objects related to women and to the male Athenian citizen in vase painting, cf. Rodríguez Pérez 2015: 71–86.

²² On the modes on narration, see Stansbury-O’Donnell 1999: 1–18, with bibliography.

²³ On the ‘times’ of an image, see recently: Stähli 2003: 240–264.

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pursuit scenes, they might have a meaning other than (or beyond) marking temporality. Nina Strawczynski has argued for a different understanding:²⁴ according to her, the falling object, usually a sword (Menelaus pursuing Helen) in pursuit scenes does not seem to indicate a particular temporality, a particular instant in a narration, but identifies the figure who was holding the object and points to his status, a status which would be jeopardized in the erotic pursuit; the loss of an object reveals then the vulnerability of the 'dispossessed person'. The pursuit scenes to which she is referring are those starting with an amphora by the Berlin Painter in Vienna, dated around 470 BC (BAPD 201909), in which falling objects, according to Wannagat's mind, lack the dramatic qualities of earlier representations.²⁵ Indeed, he addresses early instances of falling objects in the first two quarters of the 5th century, a time when, according to his observations, falling objects do not merely serve to introduce a temporal reference in an image but they fulfil a more complex narrative function. Their fall is an answer to a triggering power and functions as crystallization point of an on-going action. More precisely, falling objects allude to a transformation, a turning point, which, and this is of the outmost importance, is unforeseeable and therefore dramatically nuanced.²⁶ It is not only the temporality that matters, but also the dramatic aspects of the unexpected event. In this way, he interprets the falling of the sword in the early scenes of Menelaos and Helen stemming from the circles of Onesimos, Makron, and others, as the dramatic indicator of Menelaos' unexpected change of opinion regarding the fate of his adulterous wife, as a result of the epiphany of Eros and Aphrodite—he will spare her life. It is the consequence of a distressing experience and a sudden and unsuspected fright, as the analysis of Wannagat's two other case studies (Circe slipping the cup in front of Odysseus, and Heracles and Busiris' frightened people) serve to illuminate.²⁷

But regardless of the different narrative functions which falling objects adopt in the individual stories in which they are involved, when approached from the point of view of the narrative of time, one aspect prevails among the others: their function as markers of an instance of change, a transition from one stage to the other. This change might be from hate to love, power to impotence, calm to unrest, or life to death. Another case of falling objects discussed by Wannagat is illuminating: the instance of objects slipping from the hands of their warrior owners in the moment of death.²⁸ As life abandons them, both Kyknos on a krater by Euphronios (BAPD 7501) and the dying

warriors of the east pediment of the temple of Aphaia at Aegina release their weapons, which, powerless, are about to fall to the ground. They are marking the most meaningful transition in life, the one which leads to death, they are a visual representation of the blurry instant of a metamorphosis, markers of a betwixt and between state. Their fall in oblique resemble Icarus' descent and serves to suggest 'l'action passée, présente et future, instantanément'.²⁹

The rather short and somehow rushed concluding chapter produces some confusion in the reader, which is left wanting for more. Furthermore, the neat separation of the two parts, written sources and iconography, as well as the lack of cross-references between them is not entirely satisfactory. To our mind, an intertwined narrative would have helped the author fulfill his aims better, but this would have required an undoubtedly time consuming revision of the PhD manuscript to make it more suitable for publication, which would have delayed considerably the publication of the book. Nevertheless, the volume is well produced and edited, and the presentation of images is very satisfactory. It includes 139 b/w photographs, of excellent quality and resolution, and very decent size, conveniently interspersed within the narrative. Despite its nature as a largely unedited dissertation, *L'oblique dans le monde grec* is a fine book which sheds light on the always surprising nature of Greek art and civilization, in particular when contrasted with modern assumptions on similar subjects, and provides an intelligent approach to a largely unexplored topic. It offers a number of interesting ideas that will undoubtedly help nuance our understanding of Greek visual culture, and it will be appreciated by anyone with an interest in the formal aspects of Greek art and their semiotic potential. Girard's book will be a welcome addition to University libraries and libraries of archaeological institutes concerned with the study of ancient art.

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²⁴ Strawczynski 2003: 28–45.

²⁵ Wannagat 2003: 73.

²⁶ Wannagat 2003: 63–65.

²⁷ Wannagat 2003: 65–73.

²⁸ Wannagat 2003: 61–54.

²⁹ Girard 2015: 99.

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