

Introduction to Modern Greek Literature

Lecturer: Dr Dimitra Tzanidaki-Kreps

University of Reading, Department of Classics

Exam preparation

Some landmark dates, events and 'questions' for the new state and its 'national literature'

1821: the conventional date of the Greek revolt against the ruling Ottoman Empire

1833: the national identity question: the new Greek kingdom is born (King Otto of Bavaria is the imposed monarch by the Great powers) and with it two crucial 'paradoxes': the new state's western frontier was south of Arta in Epirus and its eastern frontier the southern end of the bay of Volos, so 1st paradox: more Greeks lived **outside the new Greek state**. This gave an instant rise to 'irredentism', ('the Great Idea i.e. the national quest for liberating the totality of Greek land and people, incorporated on Greece's first constitution in 1844 where Greece meant all Greek-speaking parts of the Ottoman Empire). 2nd paradox: the new kingdom relied from its conception on the help of the Great powers while resenting at the same time their imposing limits in Greece's self-determination.

Pre-independence centres of culture:

- The phanariots (higher clergy and bureaucrats), admirers of French culture and lukewarm towards Greek revolution although one of them Rigas, head of patriotic Greek verse had a vision both for political independence and national literature
- The Ionian Islands, which being under Venetian rule since the 13th c. served as a channel through which western developments were filtered to independent Greece and a large number of literary works filtered back to the Greek-speaking world. Antonios Martelaos was the 1st Zakynthian revolutionary poet inspired by the French Revolution to write patriotic verse.
- The Greek Diaspora, essentially consisting of the mercantile middle class from commercial centres outside the Ottoman empire (Odessa, Amsterdam, Paris, London, Vienna, Venice), which was the most closely in touch with western ideas of the late 18th c. and was instrumental (through pressure groups and 'Filiki Etaireia' formed in Odessa in 1814) in laying the intellectual foundations of the new state. Adamantios Korais, son of a Smyrna-born family was among the first Greek intellectuals to envisage the emancipated Greeks in a nation state form defined in terms of its traditions and language. None the less, as the members of this group were mainly Western-

educated they espoused the renaissance-based 'classical' western scholarly perception of Greece following which Greeks were all 'rationalists, humanists, paragons of civic virtue, devoted to fine arts and masters of rhetoric and public speaking'. So Greeks once liberated from the Ottomans were expected to reassume all these virtues. This western perception was, however, an idealized distortion which took no account of the fact that Greece was a tormented yet proud people enslaved for four centuries by the Ottomans, experienced no Renaissance (except in the Ionian islands and in Crete up to 1669) and still surviving linguistically, religiously, traditionally, etc. This western perception had essentially no time for anything Greek 'past the 3rd century B.C.' as vividly and typically displayed by a former French prime Minister, Edouard Herriot, who once was accompanied by Seferis as an office guide in Olympia and as Seferis was trying to interest him in a Christian Basilica he retorted: "I'm not interested in anything past the 3rd c. B.C.". And naturally, the disappointment was mutually experienced: on the one hand Westerners who came to Greece after her liberation did not find what they thought they would and on the other hand Greece was liberated from the Ottomans and was 'pushed' into wearing this western straightjacket with a ready-made set of socio-political ideas salient in Western Europe wholesale imported in the newly founded state. The latter created quite a crisis in what it means to be Greek. Unlike English, French etc. who take their identity for granted, it was not the same with Greeks. Britain had a good 1000years free from foreign domination or invasions to establish her political, civic, constitutional, cultural, etc. system while Greece spent nearly half of this time being enslaved. As we have seen a great task for most of the authors examined was to try and define 'Hellenism' in its entire age-old course as an aesthetic and ethical heritage which transcended time and space and in no way was it confined to the Western perception outlined above.

All cultural centres were outside the boundaries of the new state. The vacuum was filled by the Phanariots, defined anew as the descendants of the 18th elite of Constantinople and Danubian principalities. Hence the name of the 1st literary School 'Old Athenian or Phanariot' (1883-80). The leading figures, all under 25 from Constantinople and having fought in Navarino (1827), the decisive battle for Greek Independence, were: Alexandros and Panayotis Soutsos and Alexandros Rizos Rangavis. They set the agenda for Greek Romanticism (with its ideals of health, nobility, cleanliness and on the one hand lyric love-poetry and patriotic themes and on the other hand romantic historical novels as practised by Walter Scott) and its quest for the traditions of a people. Korais was the first to note that although the genre of roman had been an ancient Greek creation, no generic term was available in Greek and thus he proposed the term 'mythistoria' which was modified to

‘mythistorima’ (=a fictional but possible story of suffering written with artistry and mostly in prose)

The language question: This goes hand in hand with the identity question as discussed above since on the eve of Greek independence there was an instant need to establish an acceptable ‘written’ standard linguistic form except that there was no consensus as to what that should be. This is known notoriously as the ‘language question’ which polarized the Greek people, reached its climax at the beginning of the 20th century and was legally resolved in 1976 with an ‘act of parliament’.

Modern Greek is the direct sole descendant of the language which was written and spoken in the Greek peninsula and the islands of the eastern Mediterranean from at least 1300 BC. There were a number of spoken Greek dialects which never however diversified to a point of not being understood. Since the Greek revolt against the Ottomans started from the Peloponnese and the Peloponnese was the first part to be liberated its dialect became the spoken language of Athens when it replaced Nafplion (in 1834) as the capital of the new state although it later incorporated many of the written traits of the Constantinople élite of Phanariots.

As far as the written form of Greek is concerned since antiquity and up to the first half of the 18th century the normal medium was either Attic Greek (as used in classical Athens) or the so-called Koine (=common dialect), a sort of ‘lingua franca’ used in the Eastern Mediterranean following Alexander’s Great conquests. Both these models were becoming obsolete and in the meantime the spoken medium was fast developing too although no written ‘vernacular’ based on current speech was established partly owing to the dismemberment of the Byzantine empire in which Greek was the language of culture and religion. And because written Greek was similar to educated spoken Greek there was no immediate pressure for change in a society with restricted literacy and dominated by the past. The Enlightenment had, however, an undoubted impact on the Greek élites (as defined above). In the West, for example, next to Latin there emerged the Romance languages with established vernaculars. This, of course, was missing in the case of Greek (and the coherence of the eastern Roman Empire from which the Byzantine Empire emerged never allowed for a linguistic diversification as in the West).

When the new state was founded Greek intellectuals wanted to follow other European nation-states with a national language based on contemporary variety and it was then that three schools of thought as far as the national written language emerged: Should it be based on: a) the traditional written language and its in-built prestige, or b) on the spoken language transcribed, or c) on the so-called ‘middle-way’ of Korais, the Smyrna-born and Paris-based classical scholar who proposed that the modern written language should comply with the spoken while espousing the treasures of the ancient language upon which the national self-determination was predicated.

The way to ‘square this circle’ was, in his view, to ‘correct’ or ‘purify’ the spoken linguistic elements that were clearly divorced from the ancient linguistic antecedents, an essentially prescriptive programme. (The preposterous results of applying his proposal was parodied in ‘Korakistika’ (=ravens language) by Iakovos Rizos Neroulos published in 1813 in Vienna, which puns on Korais’ name and has come to mean ‘gibberish’.) Eventually by the end of 19th century there were two ‘camps’, those favouring the spoken language as a basis for the written (**demoticists**) and those who favoured the old written form (**attikistai, archaizers or katharevousianoï**). Diaspora Greeks were mainly progressive while the phanariots and the Danubian principalities Greeks encouraged by the revival of classical learning in Europe tended to be more conservative. The demotic movement boasted pioneers from the Ionian islands such as the author Ioannis Vilaras and the Zakynthian poet Dionysios Solomos, now regarded as Greece’s ‘national poet’ whose ‘Dialogue’ (written in 1824-5) is the earliest theoretical defence of the demoticism, although based in the Ionian islands, Solomos and his followers were perceived as ‘outsiders’.

New controversy arose with Soutsos’ proposals in the 1850s against Korais’ ideas but these were equally prescriptive and did not take into account the native speakers’ intuitions or the practice of writers in earlier periods, so any criticism levelled against Korais’ “middle way” could be levelled against these proposals too.

1881: annexation of Thessaly, the rich agricultural province, which created a greater self-confidence.

With this new self-confidence the language debate reached a climactic point with the publication of Kondos’ linguistic observations concerning the modern language, essentially shifting the balance of Korais to the ancient elements at the expense of the modern ones without going all the way to replace the spoken system with that of the ancient language. Several reactions were demonstrated against this impasse, among which ‘the Idols’ (1893) a support of the spoken language by, surprisingly, the virtuoso katharevousa stylist writer Emmanouil Roidis, but primarily ‘My Journey’ a book by Jean Psycharis, an Odessa-born Greek expatriate who chaired the Ecole des Langues Orientales Vivantes in Paris from 1904.

This was a ‘novel-cum-travelogue’ recounting the author’s long journey from Paris to Constantinople, Chios, Athens and his horrifying experience of the linguistic climate of Athens. His book was a passionate defence of the spoken language which being a ‘regularized demotic’ was not only prescriptive and highly artificial but it also introduced a new political rhetoric to the demotic discourse linking the demotic language with Greece’s national liberation and further prosperity. (Language and fatherland are one and the same’, a conceptual link that takes us straight back to Korais!). ‘Diglossia’ understood as the split between the written and spoken form of

the language ironically entered the picture as a result of Psycharis' book. Again such proposals alienated otherwise sympathetic Greeks who perceived them as an attack to their 'Sprachgefühl' ('the language feeling'). So when in 1901 the Acropolis newspaper started serializing Pallis' translation of the Gospels into demotic, the university students took to the streets led by their professors, public buildings were stormed and eight people died in these riots. In 1903 the staging of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in demotic provoked further classes. However, with both camps predicating their stance upon nationalism and irredentism the question was effectively not one of ends but of means. And naturally there was no single means, no single form of Greek that fulfilled all functions of a written language and both 'camps' were trapped in seeking to establish such an unattainable state of affairs rather than drawing on the diversity of the Greek tradition which could have allowed several written registers to exist serving different stylistic purposes. This was in fact what happened in the end as in any case a standard linguistic form could never have arisen as a result of individual theorists of either school and it had to be the result of natural processes of compromise between the rich arrays of Greek linguistic traditions.

Further polarization and politicization of the language question was introduced with 'Our social question' a kind of Greek socialist manifesto published by G. Skliros in 1907 essentially causing a rift in the demotist camp between the more traditional nationalist members and those that saw the language reform as part of a wider political and social program. Aside from that the first demotic-based secondary school for girls was founded in Volos in 1908 by Delmouzos, a leading member of the Educational Society along with Glinos, the leading Marxist demoticist and Manolis Triantafyllidis whose demotic grammar in 1941 provided a solid point of reference for many generations of the Greek education system.

Venizelos' government sanctioned the use of demotic in the 7-12 age group, a reform denounced following Venizelos' defeat in 1920 and in the chaos ensued by the Asia Minor Disaster. From now on the language question becomes intertwined with the Left-Right split and the party-politics that dominated Greek national life up until the mid 1970s with demotic signifying a left-wing political allegiance and *katharevousa* political conservatism. Paradoxically the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-41) did more for demotic commissioning the Triantafyllidis' Grammar in 1941, a year also known for the so-called 'Trial of the Accents' against professor Ioannis Kakridis, a top classical scholar teaching at the 'progressive' Thessaloniki university, who not only printed one of his lectures in demotic but also without the traditional accents and breathing marks.

The language question was finalized after the military dictatorship in 1974. An educational act of parliament passed by George Papandreou's government in April 1976 brought the issue to an official end effectively based on a compromise closer to the spirit of Korais than that of Psycharis' 'radical' demoticism. In practice there had been developed already a

standardization in the speech of the educated classes and many authors had already been breaking down the boundaries of diglossia, as masterly exemplified by Taksis' *Third Wedding Wreath*. Contemporary writers were experimenting with Greece's rich and diverse linguistic potential offering a variety of styles to suit all spoken and written communicative situations. As Beaton aptly points out Cavafy is a master of annulling the boundaries between the Greek of the Hellenistic Diaspora of two thousand years before and the written style of the daily commerce. His poem 'Caisarion' as we saw ends with the word 'polykaisarioi' (=too many Caesars) found in Plutarch and being itself a pun on the Homeric rare word 'polykoiranoi'. "It is a part of Cavafy's achievement to provide a context in which this item of linguistic archaeology can be perfectly comprehensible to a modern reader. (Beaton 1998)

1912-13: two Balkan wars with Turkey and Bulgaria respectively which further extended Greece's frontiers to almost its current territory and secured Crete (independent since the 1870s) and most of the northern Aegean islands.

1st World War: the Cretan-born arch-parliamentarian Eleftherios Venizelos pushed Greece into alliance with the Entente in return for further territorial gains, which led to the national schism with Venizelos' provisional government in Thessaloniki opposing the Athens-based official government, a situation that resulted in the King's self-exile in 1917.

1919: the Asia Minor campaign. Venizelos committed troops to the occupation of Smyrna but failed to carry the electorate with him in the general election of 1920.

1922: the Asia Minor Catastrophe: His successors ordered troops in the enclave around Smyrna on to the offensive so as to secure Constantinople and Western Anatolia but owing to their limited resources, low morale because of the schism and fast-changing realities of Great Power diplomacy (financial antagonism between France-England, increasing cooperation between Soviet Union and Kemalic Turkey and the 'need' to 'westernize' Turkey as a means of containing Bolshevik ideas) made the Greek military and political position unsustainable. Mustafa Kemal later known as Atatürk successfully counter-attacked in August 1922. Smyrna was devastated by fire in the 1st week of September after an orgy of looting and killing all Christian parts while the foreign warships observed strict neutrality. 800000 died and 1,7 millions of destitute refugees arrived in Greece. This national disaster brought an end to the Great Idea and set the scene for the political, social and cultural situation in Greece in the 20th c.

1924: the Left-Right rift is official! Following the 1922 disaster and the execution of the six top political-military leaders Monarchy was replaced

with a republic via a plebiscite and in 1928, after a series of short-lived civilian and military governments Venizelos returned to power.

Culturally:

- Two trends: inward- and outward-looking. The former is characterised by an interest in identifying and describing areas of Greek life uncontaminated by western ideas (evocation of the traditional rural life in tandem with the newly emerging science of folklore study by the pioneer Nikos Politis in the 1870s). The latter looked abroad, especially France, experimenting with the anti-romantic 'French Parnacism' movement (Nikos Kambas and especially Kostis Palamas, who translated Zola's 'Nana' in 1879 and made the case for naturalism=realism of life in the raw). Most significant literary achievements, however, are to be found in the cross-currents of these apparently opposing trends (Vizyenos, Papadiamantis, Karkavitsas, Palamas all exploit the modern trends to explore their indigenous culture).
- Folkloric realism or 'ethography'= a detailed description of a small rural traditional community in its physical setting taken in reality only just as a springboard for explorations outside either the folkloric or the realist material narrowly understood.
- Literary press: Estia, a sober ardent proponent of folklore studies and hosting a competition for a short-story with Greek subject, and Rabagas, a political-satirical newspaper.
- Rehabilitation of the long Byzantine period in the 5-volume history of Greece by Konstantinos Paparigopoulos seeking to re-establish Greece's historical continuity.

1944-1949: Greek Civil War

1967-1974: Colonels' dictatorship

Some useful narrative notions:

- Point of view - Focalization:** 1) *external* (typical of the cinema or at the opening of a long novel, the narrator is an eye-witness outsider to the story who expresses no opinion whatsoever, 2) *internal*, i.e. a story narrated from the perspective of the narrator who is also one of the pivotal characters, so s/he only reveals what s/he knows and it is possible that other characters also show their own different point of view. When the narrator only shows one point of view (monologue, see for example Ioannou's works) this type of focalization is called 'constant' whereas when the story is shown from various and varying points of view we have 'changing' internal focalization (Compare the changing point of view of the narrator in 'My Mother's Sin' as he gradually attains a deeper understanding of his mother's behaviour versus the unchanged 'Mother's' perspective. Finally when the same event within

the narrative is shown from different points of view we talk of 'multiple' or multi-vocal internal focalization, 3) zero focalization or non-focalized narrative, typical of the omni-present and omni-scient 3rd person narrator of the traditional novel.

- Narrated monologue or free indirect speech** (first appeared in the realist roman of the 19th c. e.g. Flaubert): in Greek fiction Vizyenos was the 1st to use it (also used by Cavafy in poetry) and combined it with the internal focalization as explained above. 'The only journey of his life' is a typical example.
- Voice:** who talks? Whether the author is not only the narrator but also the protagonist of the narrative or a non-important character or totally uninvolved in the story (split: child-adult in proportion to two memory levels, 'polyphony')
- Time:** *story time*: the time in which the narrative events take place – *narration time* (pseudo time): the time needed to read the printed pages of the story. 'My Mother's Sin' is the shortest in terms of pages but spans through a period of no less 28 years, while 'The only journey of his life' is a longer novel that tells the shortest story time (2 days). *The real 'historical' time* perceived linearly (5 levels in the former: before his birth, childhood, abroad, return, Constantinople). Relevant are also: *Flash backs (analepsis or anachronism)*: a) see the narration after the protagonist's long time abroad, b) the mother's first sin at the story time is presented after her second sin (preferential treatment of Annio and her vocalised desire to have her boys 'taken by god' to save her) at the narrative time level. This anachronism shows us that the 1st person narrator's initial perception has been formed on the basis of a fallacy.
- plot** (suspense, enigma already posed by the title),
- linguistic form** (diglossia: demotic dialogues with local dialectical expressions and a warm, elegant katharevousa usually reserved for the descriptive, static parts),

The question of poetry: For Cavafy an antidote to decay (Melancholy of Jason...) and a way of redeeming the losers of 'conventional official historical truth' (Kaisarion). For Ritsos poetry is this wonderful 'dizziness', full of coral and pearls and treasures of shipwrecked vessels, unexpected encounters, a confirmation of eternity, a certain respite, a certain smile of immortality, a happiness, an intoxication, inspiration even'. Like Cavafy, Ritsos too sees poetry as a worthy, redeeming, and renewing pursuit that even in 'drowning' offers this confirmation of an eternity. Seferis saw poetry as a profound means of communication between people of comparable sensibilities and quests and as a means of revisiting mythology to address perennial and contemporary concerns. Finally, for Elytis poetry is a revelatory medium rather than a literary form per se, a wild assertion of eternal youth, oneness and goodness of the world, a declaration of revolt

against angst and despair, a statement of joy, vitality personally and cosmically.

The question of Hellenism:

Elytis restored the image of Greece as a synthesis and ceaseless assimilation of archaic, Byzantine and folk linguistic and cultural elements cantered on the Aegean for thousands of years, an image thus considerably different from the one imposed by Western scholars brought up in the Renaissance-based classical perception of Greece. His poetry set out to ‘rediscover’ and ‘reclaim’ the senses, the soul, the imagination, the lost spiritual ‘cosmos’ (out of which post-Ottoman Greeks had been forced, having to fit in the ‘Western straitjacket’). For Elytis, Greece ‘this small world the great’ is a ‘certain sensitivity’ more characteristic of eastern people (Karagiozi, village handicrafts, old stone-carvings, wall-painting, Athonite monasteries, folk dances) and throughout antiquity oriental values were assimilated at the ‘omphalos’ of the Aegean, a crossroads between the East and the West for thousand of years.

Seferis’ life mission was to become a Greek poet, writing in Greek and claiming back for Modern Hellenes the creative flame that their distant ancestors had once bequeathed to the world. The Venizelist, irredentist Seferis with his Anatolia upbringing never forgot that the Greek language and culture, for centuries before the 1922 had spread throughout the Balkans, the eastern Mediterranean and much of the Middle East. As opposed to the narrow ‘biologically, territorially’ defined Greekness, he coined the term ‘Greek Hellenism’ (which as opposed to the European Hellenism of western thinking) did not denote an abstract entity but a clearly defined meaning as the totality of the Greek people throughout history. By using the adjective Greek he meant the repatriation to Greece of the ancient legacy that had become appropriated in the West.

Cavafy too saw Hellenism as a kingship which derives from a shared language and tradition, an aesthetic and ethical accumulated and accumulating heritage that knows no boundaries in space or time and was disseminated through a long historical trajectory.