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MODERNISM IN GREEK LITERATURE (1910-1940)

HERO HOKWERDA

One issue which may arise in a discussion of “Modernism in literature” is the relationship between artistic Modernism and modernity – the modern era – in general. If we take modernity to mean the whole of modern society and culture as it has emerged from the tradition of humanism, the Renaissance and – in particular – the Enlightenment, we may say that in poets such as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot artistic Modernism is to some extent at odds with modernity.

In the case of Greek literature Modernism certainly cannot be seen as separate from the development of modernity. A Greek Enlightenment did appear in the Greek world from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, and it was in fact this development which led to the 1821 War of Independence and the Greek state established in 1829. Nevertheless, in Greece, where the process of modernization – Westernization – is still ongoing even today, there are still traces of the pre-modern situation; in Greek society and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries elements of “belated modernity” can be identified,¹ and a certain nostalgia for the pre-modern past is not uncommon.

¹ See Gregory Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature*, Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1991.

Historical background²

In the centuries between the end of the Byzantine empire (1453) and 1821 most of the Greek world was part of the Ottoman empire and was dominated by the Turks. Most areas which were initially in the hands of the Venetians or other “Franks” were later conquered by the Turks (Cyprus in 1570, Crete in 1669); after that little more came of significant first steps towards a Greek Renaissance culture (particularly in Crete and at an earlier stage also in Cyprus). This means that as a whole the Greek world did not have a Renaissance in the Western European sense.

It was not until the “Greek Enlightenment”, which appeared around 1750 and was supported by the flourishing Greek merchant and middle class of the time, that the Greek world really started to build solid ties with Western European tradition. The Greek Revolution of 1821 and the state which resulted from it in 1829 were products of the Enlightenment – not only of the Greek Enlightenment, but also of the European Enlightenment, by means of Philhellenism. The dominant trend during the construction of the Greek state after 1830 was to adopt the national, political, social and cultural models of Western Europe, a trend which has culminated in recent years in Greece’s entry into the EU and participation in the euro zone.

This development pertained to the Greek state, but in 1830 this was only a small and for a long time rather provincial area; the largest part of the Greek world was still outside it, and this was certainly true of the Greek merchant and middle classes. It was not until after the Balkan Wars (1912-13, with the annexation of northern Greece and Crete in particular) and after the Asia Minor Disaster and the ensuing population exchange between Greece and Turkey (1922-23) that Greece more or less gained its present shape and that the Greater Greek world and “Greater Greece” ideologies came to an end. In Greece the modern, liberal middle class did not really break through in the political arena until the emergence of the great liberal politician Eleftherios Venizelos, who

² This section about the historical background is based on the introductory chapter “The Greek discussion about their own tradition, identity and ideology” (in Dutch) in my dissertation *Tussen verleden en Toekomst: Nieuwgriekse traditie en ideologie in het werk van de Griekse prozaschrijver Dimitris Chatzís (1913-1981)*, Groningen: Styx, 1991 (summarized in Hero Hokwerda, “The Ideological Role of the Countryside and the City in Dimitris Chatzís’s Literary Work”, in *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 2 [1992], 213-25).

came to power in 1910 and played a leading role in politics until the mid-1930s.

After 1923 years of political chaos and a rising Communist movement followed, until in 1936 Parliament was sidelined by the “moderate Fascist” general and politician Ioannis Metaxas. Dictator Metaxas was not massively popular at that time until the successful war he led in late 1940 against the Italian invader. In April-May 1941 the Greeks proved to be no match for the Germans. During the occupation an extensive and successful resistance and partisan movement evolved, with the Communists playing a leading role. During and just after the occupation there were already preludes to the civil war which was to break out in full force later, from 1946-1949. The internal political divisions of the Metaxas era and the Civil War would come to a head one more time in the Colonels’ dictatorship of 1967-1974.

From the national schism of 1915 to the end of the Colonels’ dictatorship in 1974 Greek history was one long succession of disasters, conflicts, civil wars, dictatorships and other chaotic political circumstances. It can safely be said that it was not until after 1974 that the political situation was stabilized and normalized and the Greek middle class was able to develop and prosper on a permanent basis in a liberal democracy modelled on the West, at present in the framework of the European Union.

If we say that the history of modern Greece is one of gradual integration into and adaptation to European tradition (however faltering that process may have been), then we must add at once that this development was not without opposition. Although the roots of the Western liberal-democratic tradition are often traced back – in Greece itself as well – to ancient Greece, not all Greeks regard this tradition as authentically Greek; instead, some Greeks see it as an alien import which is being forced on the country.

These dissenting voices stress what is usually summed up as Greece’s “Eastern” side. People who take this perspective go back to the Byzantine era, which – after Antiquity – is regarded as the second great stage of Greek culture and whose most important heritage in the Greek world today is Orthodoxy; they regard this Byzantine-Orthodox tradition as a Christian transformation of classical Greek heritage, which implies that modern Greece has direct ties with Antiquity and is not dependent for such ties on the indirect route via the West. This view of ancient

Greek heritage – which often goes hand in hand with anti-Western sentiments – is completely different in nature from that of those who see the liberal-democratic tradition as a modern embodiment of the ancient tradition and precisely for that reason seek to join forces with the “Graecized” West.

Closer in time is Greek folk culture, which had its heyday in the Ottoman (Turkish) period, so that in the “Eastern” view of Greek culture that period is not necessarily regarded as purely negative. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that this traditional – pre-modern – popular culture was definitively superseded by a Greek urban middle-class culture, which is undeniably more Western-oriented.

Until 1923 the Eastern side of Greek society and culture had a clearly geographical component, since a considerable number of Greeks – in fact for a long time the majority, particularly those of the middle and merchant classes – still lived in the Greater Greek world outside Greece, not only in the Ottoman empire (Constantinople, Smyrna) and in the Balkans, but also in cities such as Alexandria (Cavafy). Any discourse about the Eastern side of Greek culture after 1923 is by definition more abstract in character and can only pertain to inner values.

When Orthodoxy and Greek folk culture are referred to here as distinct entities, it should be borne in mind that the two are strongly interwoven and in fact practically inseparable. However, when the Eastern side is highlighted, in some cases it is the religious, Orthodox tradition that is highlighted, and in other cases popular culture in a more general, secular sense.

Modern Greek literature and Modernism

According to the commonly accepted periodization of Modern Greek literature,³ around 1880 the Classicism and Romanticism of the “Athenian School”, whose representatives wrote mainly in Katharevousa (an archaic form of written Greek), came to an end. The next group to become prominent was the Generation of the 1880s, both in poetry (the “New Athenian School”, with Parnassianism, Symbolism and Neo-

³ For general information about modern Greek literature between 1880 and 1940, see Roderick Beaton, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 64-198, and Linos Politis, *Geschichte der Neugriechischen Literatur*, Cologne: Romiosini, 1984, 152-262 (older edition: *A History of Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973, 150-268).

Romanticism) and in prose (with “ethography”, that is literary depictions of traditional life and customs). After 1880 Greek literature was more and more frequently written in demotic Greek (the spoken vernacular). However, demoticism as a movement was broader; although it was in fact an urban, middle-class (the same word, “*astikó*”, in Greek) movement, it aimed to build on traditional folk culture in general – a culture which was in fact mainly rural.

According to the commonly accepted division, these literary schools were eventually succeeded by the Generation of the 1930s, which brought innovation to both poetry and prose through several movements. A lengthy essay titled *Free Spirit* by Yorgos Theotokas, published in 1929, is regarded as the manifesto which marked the beginning of the new literature. In the following years Theotokas himself proved to be a leading novelist, playwright, critic and in general an intellectual representing the new generation. Theotokas wanted literature to focus less on the communal and more on the individual and to become less realistic and regionalist. The main target of his criticism was folkloric ethnography: in the best liberal tradition, his essay advocates intellectual freedom and an open, cosmopolitan spirit.⁴

Although it is clear that an important shift took place in Greek literature around 1930, there was no watershed; in fact, it is better to take the period from 1925-1935 as the time of the shift, and even then some authors or works anticipated the new trends at an even earlier stage, while others continued to conform to older patterns with some success at a later stage.

Poetry – general

The most important trends in Greek poetry after 1880 were first Parnassianism and then Symbolism. For a long time the predominant figure was Kostis Palamas (1859-1943). Palamas himself succeeded in surpassing the poetic trends he had absorbed from Europe in a number of grand, visionary cycles and single poems (1900-1910); sometimes he experimented in these with freer forms of verse, but even then he continued to build on Symbolist views of poetry, as a poet-prophet.

In the first three decades of the twentieth century a group of Symbolist and Neo-Romantic poets flourished “in the heavy shadow” of Pala-

⁴ See Peter Mackridge, “European Influences in the Greek Novel during the 1930s”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 1 (1985), 4-5.

mas. Their work is represented in an important anthology called *Sotto Voce* (*Chamili foní*). The work of poets such as Romos Filyras (1888-1942) and – in particular – Kostas Karyotakis (1896-1928) contain elements which push against the boundaries of traditional poetry – “this is no longer a song”, writes Karyotakis of himself – but modern poetry did not break through in Greece until after 1930.

The visionary Palamas of the grand poems also had successors after 1910 – in the first place Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951), who was more concerned with lyrical expression than with intellectual reflection; he saw Antiquity, Byzantium and Orthodoxy, and later Greek popular culture as a synchronous whole and tried to capture this mystical, ahistorical unity and continuity in his poetry, aspiring to lead his people as a prophet. In the 1910s he wrote free verse for a while, but in his poems dating from the 1930s – which are among his best – he returned to conventional forms. Then there was the “bard of communism”, Kostas Varnalis (1884-1974), who experimented with conventional forms but stayed within them. Finally we have the unique Nikos Kazantzakis (1883-1957), particularly in his huge work *Odyssey*, which he himself regarded as his principal work – he saw his later novels, through which he became world famous, as being of secondary importance. The work of all three contains elements which prefigure modern poetry, but all three, with their aspirations of “seership” and/or conventional forms, were still mainly building on traditional poetry. In his way of thinking – a personal assimilation of the ideas of thinkers such as Nietzsche and Bergson – Kazantzakis was perhaps the most Modernistic, but in language and form his monumental *Odyssey* is based too much on popular tradition to be regarded as Modernist; the term is more applicable to his essay-manifesto *The Saviours of God* (1927), the philosophical basis on which he elaborated in his literary work (*Odyssey* and novels).

Movements such as Dadaism, Expressionism and Italian or Russian Futurism made virtually no appearance in Greek literature.

The only significant Greek poet before 1930 who can be said to have written modern or even Modernist poetry is Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933), a poet of the Greater Greek world (the Greek colony of the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria). He had also started out as a Romantic and Symbolist poet, writing in cold and archaic Katharevousa, but around 1900 he began to leave this behind, and by 1911 he had found his own poetic voice (see below). He was inclined to dis-

miss the Greek poetry of Greece itself in his times as “all Romanticism”; at one point, when asked, he said that the giant Palamas was “the second best Greek poet”. Although there are certainly links between Cavafy and his own era,⁵ he is usually treated in relation to and as a forerunner of the Greek Generation of the '30s.

In 1935, when Palamas' last volume was published, two other volumes also appeared: *Mithistória* (the Greek word for “novel”, but it also suggests “Mythical Story”) by George Seferis (1900-1971) and *Ypsikáminos* (*Blast Furnace*) by Andreas Embirikos (1901-1975), representing breakthroughs of Modernism (as it would later be called) and Surrealism respectively in poetry. *Ypsikáminos* in particular provoked a great deal of aversion and scorn among both the public and critics, and in some cases Seferis' poetry – which was modern and by no means easy – was put in the same bracket, because initially not everyone saw the difference.

At the time a third great poet of the creatively rich Greek Generation of the '30s, Odysseas Elytis (1911-1996), apparently already had a clearer appreciation of the boundary between Surrealism and modern poetry. After a period of experimenting with surrealistic poems – none of which have survived – he began to feel the need to apply more reflection and cultivation to his poetic inspirations and products. He abandoned Surrealism in its pure form, but continued to speak of it with a certain affection, because it had liberated his expressive capacities and helped him find his own voice as a poet; he was a great admirer of the poetry of Eluard (whose name is incorporated in the pseudonym Elytis). For that matter, Embirikos himself did not push Surrealism to such extremes in his subsequent work; however, Embirikos, who was also a psychoanalyst, always remained faithful to Surrealism in his views, with a strong emphasis on dreams and sexuality. In 1938 another surrealist poet followed in his footsteps: the individualistic, more revolutionary Nikos Engonopoulos (also a painter) with his first volume *Do Not Talk to the Driver*, and in 1943 Nikos Gatsos, who wrote a volume of poetry, *Amorgós* (he also wrote many song lyrics). It can therefore be said that Greek poetry had its own Surrealist movement. It was not directly associated with the Communist movement (in the 1930s French Surrealism had also increasingly separated itself from Communism), but with its

⁵ See Beaton, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, 91-94.

emphasis on liberating the individual from moral and sexual strictures and other authoritarian and repressive mindsets and frameworks, ultimately it did have a utopian and revolutionary message.

In Greek literature the term “avant-garde” – in Greek *protoporia*, from *protopóros* meaning “pioneer” – is associated with the Communist movement of the 1930s. This movement had an important cultural and literary magazine called *New Pioneers*. As we have seen, the Greek surrealists had no direct ties with the Communist movement, and in turn the Communists had a deep distrust of such free, innovative movements in art. In 1934 the Greek Communist party aligned itself with Moscow’s new views on literature. In the Greek case this led not only to social realism becoming the standard, but also – in poetry – to a tendency to seek connections with Greek folk poetry from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. Communists fighting for the cause identified with the klephts of that same period; literally, the word “klepht” means robber, but the klephts were seen as “social bandits” and honoured as freedom fighters. This populist orientation towards earlier centuries, often linked to an aversion to experimental, cosmopolitan art, seems rather incompatible with the term “avant-garde”, but not all writers and poets stuck to the rules. In his cycle of poems *Epitaphios* (1936), Yannis Ritsos (1909–1989), the best-known Communist poet of the 1930s and later, drew on folk poetry in both imagery and form. This was certainly successful, but *Epitaphios* is really a special case; in the rest of his work – apart from work that was activist in the limited sense, as Ritsos always remained a loyal party member – Ritsos did in fact subscribe to contemporary movements such as Surrealism and Modernism (for example in his incorporation of ancient mythological elements), but always with a certain penchant for traditional Greek folk culture.

The most outstanding poet of true Greek Modernism is George Seferis. A recent overview of Modernism in Greek poetry discusses all forms of modern (non-traditional) twentieth-century poetry: in a chapter about Seferis and his innovations, the author refers to “Anglo-Saxon Modernism”.⁶ (Seferis had in fact been preceded by Takis Papatsonis, who published a translation of T.S. Eliot in 1933; with his interest in the Latin

⁶ Aléxandros Argyríou, “Modernism in Greek literature: starting-points, origins and its duration” (in Greek), in *Μοντερνισμός: η ώρα της αποτίμησης; Σειρά διαλέξεων*, Athens: Moraitis School, 1996, 270.

Mass, Dante and Claudel, and his strongly allusive and difficult poetry, Papatsonis had much in common with Seferis.)

Seferis' *Mithistórima* (1935) is a fragmentary cycle of twenty-four rhapsodies in free verse, like snippets of an epic that can no longer be written, a Greek *Waste Land* and *Ulysses* in one — the epic of a modern Greek's odyssey or quest. The broken tradition of the classical Greek past within the modern present constantly reappears in his poems, without any trace of ancestor worship or other rhetoric, but rather as a contrast and a burden to be carried. Seferis likes to use the mythical method: time after time the poet is both himself and Odysseus (or Jason, since the cycle also contains allusions to the voyage of the Argonauts). An additional element is that the poet frequently speaks of his struggle with poetry itself.

The completely distinctive Greek voice of Seferis' poetry is often — and rightly — stressed. However, the fact remains that Seferis drew some of his inspiration from T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, some of whose work he had translated; he also knew Eliot personally. The first poetry Seferis published, such as the collection *Turning Point* (*Strofí*) dating from 1931, actually had more affinity with the *poésie pure* of Mallarmé and Valéry. In the late 1920s he had also attempted to write a Modernist novel, incorporating passages from his diaries (in itself a Modernist approach). Seferis reworked the first draft of this novel in 1954 and eventually it was published posthumously as *Six Nights on the Acropolis* (*Éxí níctes stin Akrópoli*, 1974).⁷ Seferis gained a reputation not only as a poet, but also on account of his many essays (see also below), mainly on topics relating to poetry or literature in general. Eventually three volumes of *Essays* (*Dhokimés*, [1944] 1974-92) were published. There is also a series of diaries (both literary and non-literary), and in recent years collections of Seferis' letters have been published (and further publications are planned).

Poetry – Constantine P. Cavafy

Because in Cavafy (1863-1933) Greece had a poet who can be regarded as one of the first modern poets, or perhaps as a forerunner of Modern-

⁷ See Nadia Charalambidou, "Seferis's *Six Nights on the Acropolis*: A Modernist Tale?", in *Greek Modernism and Beyond*, ed. Demetres Tziovas, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997, 163-76.

ism in the narrower sense, he will represent poetry in the triad of authors and works discussed separately here.

In 1930 the best-known modern Greek poet said of himself:

Cavafy in my opinion is an ultra-modern poet, a poet of future generations. In addition to his historical, psychological, and philosophical worth, the fastidiousness of his style, which at times verges on the laconic, his measured enthusiasm, which arouses mental excitement, his correct syntax (the consequence of an aristocratic disposition), his subtle irony, are elements that generations of the future will enjoy even more⁸

Modern (even “ultra-modern”) maybe, but Modernist as well? Austerity, measure, intellectual emotion, lack of affectation, irony – these qualities may certainly point in that direction. In the first place irony, the most essential characteristic of Cavafy’s language. The word “mask” is often used in this context, and Seferis refers to Cavafy as a “Protean” figure (Proteus also lived near Alexandria). Moreover, Cavafy’s irony gradually matured, becoming less didactic, more atmospheric and philosophical, without solutions. The increasingly explicit homosexual character of his poetry can also be regarded as a modern element; or his use of titles, without which some poems would become incomprehensible; or the way he works with memories rather than experiences in his poems, sometimes also thematizing the memory.

But there is more. If the depersonalization of a poem – meaning that the poet separates the poem from the poet’s own direct, personal emotion and constructs the poem in such a way that the emotion in question is objectively evoked in the reader – is an essential characteristic of Modernist poetry, then many of Cavafy’s poems meet that criterion. To begin with, this applies to many of his historical poems, in which he hides what he wants to express in an individual or event from the past (and that individual or event is often also imaginary).

Even more important is the way Cavafy sometimes makes himself invisible, in poems in which at the most he gives an account of an event, with dialogues and all, as an objective narrator, but otherwise stays out of the picture completely. An example is “Young Men of Sidon” (1920), in which two positions are played out, but it remains unclear which of

⁸ See Beaton, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, 95.

the two is that of Cavafy himself (if one of the two positions is his own). The pinnacle of this approach is in poems which lack all narration and only present people talking to each other, in dramatized scenes. This is largely the case in the early poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" (1904), but we might assume that the final lines – "And now, what's going to happen to us without barbarians? They were, those people, a kind of solution" – are a comment by the poet. The finest example of a staged poem in which the poet himself does not appear at all must surely be Cavafy's last, "On the Outskirts of Antioch" (1933), in which the Christians of that city rant and rave against Julian the Apostate and the heathens. The Christians are speaking, but that does not mean that their position is presented as the right one: in fact, their rage against Julian casts them in an unfavourable light. If Cavafy's own point of view is to be distilled from such poems, then it is not by identifying him with one of the two voices, but by asking oneself why Cavafy finds it so important to present this particular issue from these two perspectives to us in this way. But the poem itself says nothing about this; at the most, the fact that the poet turns the spotlight on these two voices in the poem might say something about the poet – but what? As far as reading the poem itself is concerned, this is irrelevant; the only thing that matters is the reader's response to the poem as it stands.

Other examples of early Modernist poems by Cavafy are "Ithaca" (1911), because of the figure of Odysseus who was to inspire so many Modernists, and the idea that the journey that results from having a destination is more important than arriving at that destination; "Long Ago" (1914), which evokes the fragmentary nature of memories; "In the Month of Athyr" (1917), in which the beautiful young man who must once have been living reality only lives on in an ancient inscription, which is deciphered with difficulty by the "I" in the poem, which then results in a poem (this poem by Cavafy) which finally has to be deciphered by the reader (a five-stage rocket from reality to the reader's experience); and "Darius" (1920), in which the process of poetic creation and historical reality are beautifully interwoven and are thematized in their interaction with each other.

The poem "Waiting for the Barbarians" is relevant here also because of its content: the voices in the poem are those of people from "civilization", for which apparently the "barbarians" might have been a solution, at least "a kind of solution" – but to what problem exactly? Nothing is

said about that, but it is clear that doubts are being expressed here about civilization, which has become inescapable. Unlike Pentzakis (see below), Cavafy does not turn away from Western culture, and unlike Seferis he is not engaged in a search for authenticity, but the notion of barbarians as a solution for civilization suggests an almost Modernist dissatisfaction with modern culture.

Fiction – general

The prevailing picture – certainly as presented by the Generation of the '30s themselves, particularly by Yorgos Theotokas in his 1929 manifesto, *Free Spirit* – is that until 1930 prose writing consisted of ethnography (depictions of life and customs), after which the Generation of the '30s introduced a new era in Greek fiction: the era of the modern middle-class or urban novel (*astikó mithistórima*).

The ambiguity of the Greek term *astikó*, which means both middle-class and urban, is not without significance. Until far into the twentieth century middle-class culture in Greece was found mainly in the cities and there was a stark contrast between city life and rural life which could easily be seen as a contrast between the Western culture of the elite versus Greece's own Eastern folk culture. People who use the term "folk culture" (*laikós politismós*) often tend to forget that that culture belonged not so much to ordinary people as to the rural elite. Greek tendencies towards populism – *laikismós* – cannot be viewed in isolation from these ambiguities.

The term "ethnography" is primarily associated with sketches of traditional life from the Greek countryside, usually in the form of short stories in a realistic style. It was with this populist intention that the genre arose between 1880 and 1890, in connection with an attempt to achieve a new national revival based on the language and culture of the people – a movement which, it must be said, was embraced mainly by the rising middle class of the time. In subsequent decades the spectrum of what is generally considered to be ethnography became wider and deeper, for example tending towards naturalism, or with a stronger personal, psychological or social (early Socialist) thrust. Much ethnography in the narrower sense has not withstood the test of time; it is precisely the authors who went beyond the limitations of ethnography that still appeal to the modern reader (Vizyinos, Papadiamandis, Theotokis, etc.), but they are actually the least characteristic of the

genre they have come to represent. Moreover, after 1930 the term gained negative connotations: authors were – and are – not happy if a critic identified ethnographic elements in their work.

Another way in which the ethnographic genre was broadened was that gradually more was written about life in the Greek cities, not only in short stories but also in novellas and novels. Then the question arises what the difference is between this kind of urban ethnographical novel (from before 1930, and if such fiction can still be referred to in this way) and the urban-middle-class novel of the Generation of the '30s. If the term still has any distinctive meaning, the difference would have to be that Greek ethnography dating from before 1930, within the older realist tradition (sometimes in the naturalist sense), tended to concentrate on the collective lives of certain groups in Greek society (usually lower-class groups, to which the authors almost by definition did not belong, or no longer belonged), whereas after 1930 novelists focused more on individuals and their individual consciousness (individuals from the middle class, to which they themselves certainly belonged) and were more open to innovations of form in line with more modern thinkers and authors in other countries (such as Bergson, Gide, Alain Fournier, Proust, Woolf, Huxley, Joyce, Mann and Zweig).

There are also authors who are more difficult to categorize. Perhaps a term like “bourgeois ethnography” can be used for Gregoris Xenopoulos, who produced a stream of novels from 1900 onwards. Hatzopoulos' Symbolist novel *Autumn* (1917) can also be seen as a precursor of the introverted Modernist novel. And in the 1920s – a time when all fiction is generally assumed to have still been ethnography – the work of Demosthenes Voutyras, which was largely urban with Socialist tendencies, had Modernist traits: this author was long unappreciated, perhaps precisely for that reason. These traits include the evocation of moods and frames of mind rather than realistic narrative, an elliptical narrative style with an open beginning and end, free association and random memories; in a recent republication he is even compared with Proust, though Voutyras seems to have invented this style himself and does not have Proust's breadth of depiction.

Modern Greek fiction dating from after 1930 also varies widely; it can immediately be sub-divided into a number of different streams, most of which were concentrated in Athens.

The first group, some of whose works date from before 1930, consists of Doukas, Myrivilis and Venezis (all from Asia Minor and the neighbouring island of Lesbos), who wrote about often horrific and inhumane experiences of the First World War, the Asia Minor campaign, the Asia Minor disaster, and life as a prisoner of war. Their work is realistic, sometimes lyrical, but also has certain Modernist elements. At the same time it is marked by nostalgia for the perfect (Eastern-Greek rural) world which had been lost, and by doubts about the ideal of civilization of the Western Greek world in which they had ended up after 1923. However, in their mentality and ideals these authors did not completely turn away from the Western world, unlike Fotis Kondoglou, who came from the same region. This author and painter became more and more ferocious in his opposition to everything Western and aspired to the antithesis: he wanted Greece to re-graft itself into its own Eastern Greek tradition of popular culture and pure Orthodoxy. Kondoglou, a powerful writer and a born storyteller with a lively imagination, cannot be classified as an ethnographer, but his work is certainly not modern fiction either.

Another group is that of the urban realists, who wrote mainly after 1930. Along with Theotokas they distanced themselves from the photographic realism of ethnography and concentrated on fiction – albeit in most cases realistic fiction – about urban life, mainly in Athens, but also in other Greek or foreign cities, and about modern society with its social and ideological issues. These writers introduced the modern middle-class novel in Greece, thus modernizing Greek fiction. The only writer among them who went further and came close to Modernist fiction-writing was Kosmas Politis (a pseudonym; in itself it is an ordinary Greek name, but the author associated it with the word “cosmopolitan”), particularly with *Eroica*,⁹ a novel – perhaps the best of the whole Generation of the '30s – which remains within the boundaries of realism, but in which the perspective switches without warning between the adult narrator and the little boy he once was; the fact that the narrator and the little boy are the same person only becomes clear some way into the book.

A truly Modernist novel of the stature of Joyce, Proust, Svevo or Mann did not appear in Greek literature in the pre-war years. Howev-

⁹ Mackridge, “European Influences in the Greek Novel during the 1930s”, 11 and 15.

er, attempts in that direction were made in the early 1930s and the first Modernist novel dates from 1938 (Pentzikis, see below). It is striking that the really Modernist experiments of those years were concentrated in the northern Greek capital of Thessaloniki¹⁰ (which had only been part of Greece since 1912), where it was not until the 1930s that a literary life of any significance evolved. Unless it is only mentioned in passing, this “School of Thessaloniki” is usually treated as a separate stream, in addition to the Generation of the ’30s.

The focal point of the literary innovations in Thessaloniki was the periodical *Macedonian Days* (founded in 1932), to which the four authors of the “School of Thessaloniki” contributed: Alkiviadis Yannopoulos (partly influenced by Italian Futurism), Yiorgos Delios (searching for unity in himself through writing), Stelios Xefloudas (experimental, almost solipsistic, self-analysing prose, without any action) and the idiosyncratic writer Nikos Gavriil Pentzikis (the only one in the group who became more widely and permanently known). They also translated work by authors including Joyce, Malraux, Mann, Pirandello, Proust and Woolf for the periodical. The fiction written by the “School of Thessaloniki” authors is not set in the countryside of ethnography, and only very indirectly in the city; it unfolds mainly in the mind of the writer (“narrator”) and on the paper on which he is writing his novel, with ostensibly uncontrolled thought processes which may take the form of interior monologue, stream of consciousness, etc. In their work these writers rebel against the traditional conventions of fiction and aspire to construct an alternative reality-in-words on paper.

Fiction – Nikos Gavriil Pentzikis

For fiction, I have chosen Nikos Gavriil Pentzikis (1908-1993) as an example, because his novel *The Dead Man and the Resurrection* is the first truly Modernist Greek novel and moreover because it is in Pentzikis’ work in particular that the relationship between Modernism and modernity makes itself keenly felt.

With his novel *Andreas Dimakoudis* (1935) Pentzikis was already the most modern of the four novelists of the “School of Thessaloniki”, but he only became truly Modernist in *The Dead Man and the Resurrection*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8 and 13.

(*O pethaménos ke i anástasi*), which was published in 1944 but dated 1938 by the author at the end of the book.

This novel is about the author's efforts to write his novel and begins with three different attempts. It is supposed to be about a young man who commits suicide out of unrequited love, but the author (the one in the book) does not want to conform to the conventions of a traditional novel. He goes into all sorts of things in detail, freely associates enthusiastically, and occasionally remembers that he is supposed to be writing a novel about a young man who is going to commit suicide; we are also constantly reminded that this is not a real young man, but just a character. When this character finally commits suicide about halfway through the book, the fictional author can start on his real task: resurrecting his character from the dead. This leads to another long monologue, which occupies the second half of the book. His character is resurrected in a new world, which the author creates like a god by naming its component parts: mainly elements of the Greek landscape and traditional village life and of Thessaloniki, the city of his birth, in language drawn from the Orthodox tradition and oral folk literature. The book ends with a dream dreamt by his maternal grandmother: a church is hidden beneath the family house and that house has to be demolished to reveal it. In this book Pentzikis himself demolishes the traditional novel and returns to a religious awareness that can be found in the Orthodox scriptures and in oral folklore, which is associated in passing with the female line. The family home – his father's or forefathers' home (*πατρικό σπίτι*) – alludes to the male line. The house of masculine realism, logic, rationality must be removed to make room for the church buried beneath it – the house of religion and folklore (presented as feminine), forming one strongly interwoven tradition.

In this novel Pentzikis presents his absolute antithesis between Greece's own (Orthodox and folkloric) tradition and the foreign imported tradition of Renaissance and Enlightenment: this antithesis was to be the sustaining theme of all his subsequent work (both prose and poetry). Moreover, this work became increasingly Modernist in nature; interior monologue was stretched to its utmost limits, and logic and syntactic cohesion are often abandoned. In his language he likes to draw from the literary treasures of the Church fathers and of Byzantine chronographers and hagiographers, and his entire *oeuvre* testifies to a great love of detail, facts, the concrete. *Knowledge of Things* (*Pragmatognosía*) dating from

1950 is regarded as the best example of his very personal, idiosyncratic and powerful work.¹¹

(I have a vivid personal memory of meeting this author [and painter] in the late 1970s, when he was no longer young and seemed rather eccentric: when he asked where I came from and I said the Netherlands, he launched into a tirade against Western Europe with its Renaissance and Enlightenment as though I were personally responsible for that movement and all the evil that had arisen from it – after which this lover of concrete details went on to talk about the northern Dutch village of Bourtange, which features in one of his books.)

With regard to Pentzikis we can safely say that his literary Modernism is combined with – and even reaches its acme in – a complete rejection of modernity in the general sense. Pentzikis' work is very different from that of Fotis Kondoglou, whose work is built up around the same antithesis and whose language also draws on folkloric tradition; but in Kondoglou's work there is not a trace of Modernist experiment.

Greekness – essays

Modernist drama did not come into its own in Greece until well after the Second World War, and therefore does not come within the scope of this article.¹² Instead I will discuss "Greekness" (*ellinikótita*), because the Greek Generation of the '30s is often associated with searches for Greek identity. Such quests were not new in themselves, but after 1922 they gained a new dimension. This topic also provides an opportunity to discuss one essay as an example of the genre – a genre which was popular among authors of the Generation of the '30s and played an important role, as it did in Modernism in general (also in the form of "essayistic fiction", Musil).

Greekness. Since the beginning of independence, notions of identity in Greece had been associated with irredentist claims on the Greek world outside Greece; it was felt that neighbouring areas with significant Greek populations should be added to the Greek state (the "Greater Greece" ideology, or "Great Idea" [*Megáli idéa*]). After the Asia Minor disaster

¹¹ For Pentzikis' *Pragmatognosía*, see Eleni Yannakakis, "Fragmentation of Consciousness in Pentzikis's *Pragmatognosía*", in *Greek Modernism and Beyond*, 151-62.

¹² For the essay as the literary genre associated pre-eminently with Greek modernism, see Demetres Tziovas, "Mapping out Greek Literary Modernism", in *ibid.*, 25.

of 1922 and the subsequent population exchange of 1923 the borders of Greece had been more or less fixed and there were no longer significant Greek population groups outside those borders (disregarding the case of Cyprus). Greater Greece ideologies were no longer possible; the country had to lick its wounds and take in one and a half million new Greeks – the refugees – and integrate them into its own society. Moreover, a new ideological orientation was needed; it was not until the 1930s that this process got well under way, and the literary Generation of the '30s played a major role in it.

In that period there were very few truly Communist or Fascist writers of Greek prose, but the new ideological orientation could go in three directions: towards the older liberal-democratic centre, towards the Socialist left (Communism had been on the rise from the late 1920s onwards) or towards the conservative right (with more extreme elements in the Fascist-inclined regime of Metaxas). All three were connected with ideas about “Greekness”, which now had to focus on more abstract, inner values. Conservatives were more inclined to emphasize unity with both Antiquity and Byzantine Greece, as different manifestations of one “Greek spirit” (“*ellinikó pnévma*”) and to have an aversion to Eastern elements. For example, Metaxas tried to eliminate the very Eastern-sounding Aman songs because they were too Turkish; interestingly, in Turkey itself Atatürk did the same thing because this music was not in line with his plans for Westernization. The Communists, particularly after 1934, emphasized the historical link between their own struggle and that of the Greek people before and during the War of Independence of 1821-1829 (which they preferred to see not as a middle-class revolution, but only as a peasant revolution), while the liberal middle class became increasingly interested in the Greek Enlightenment as a first step towards modernization of the Greek world and a preparation for the Greek War of Independence (which they saw much more as a middle-class movement).

Clearly this is a schematic framework: in practice it is not always so simple to classify ideological orientations and all kinds of ostensibly confusing and sometimes contradictory combinations exist. One of these confusing factors is populism: the tendency to cling to the older Greek folk culture, perceived as being more distinctively Greek, which was an expression of the pre-modern era and therefore not really compatible with movements or conceptual frameworks which advocated moderniza-

tion. Nevertheless, it was (and is) precisely among Greek leftists that such populist tendencies are to be found.

Another distinction is important in connection with Greekness: it can be Hellenocentric (ethnocentric), emphasizing the purity and superiority of a distinctively Greek culture, to which alien (whether Eastern or Western) elements are seen as a threat; or it may entail a search for a distinctively Greek culture, but with the aim of finding a genuinely Greek voice that can make itself heard in the larger whole of universal Western culture, which is perceived not as a threat but as something that distinctive Greek voice must interact with and in turn enrich. There is a tendency to dismiss the entire Generation of the '30s as Hellenocentric, but this certainly does not do justice to the work of Seferis; on the other hand, the poet (and essayist) Elytis does have Hellenocentric inclinations.

George Seferis

As an example of the genre, I have chosen not Theotokas' *Free Spirit*, which while it does advocate modernization of Greek prose does not get as far as what we now mean by Modernism in the narrower sense, but Seferis' essay "A Greek – Makriyannis" (1943). This also provides an opportunity to ensure that Seferis, the Greek Modernist *par excellence*, who really cannot be omitted here, is represented. Moreover, this essay also addresses the relationship between Modernism and modernity, though in a different way than Pentzikis' work.

With *Mithistórima* (meaning "Mythical Story" or "Novel", 1935) and his following collections George Seferis had established his reputation as a poet, in the tradition of the Modernist Anglophone school of Eliot and Pound. The first of his many essays also date from those years; they too are often very much in keeping with the artistic thinking of Eliot and Pound. One such essay is "A Greek – Makriyannis", originally a lecture given for Greeks in Alexandria and Cairo (during the Second World War the Greek government and army had retreated to Egypt).

During the Greek War of Independence Makriyannis (1797-1864), a man of humble origins, had reached the rank of General. After the war, although more or less illiterate (at least without any formal schooling), he wanted to record the events for future generations, and therefore started to write memoirs, first about the War of Independence, but later also about the subsequent years; in 1843 he was involved as a leader in the

revolt intended to force the king to establish a Constitution. His *Memoirs* resurfaced in the early twentieth century, and they were very popular among the Generation of the '30s (and are still popular today), often in the framework of populist and Hellenocentric searches for a Greek identity; the Naïve folk artist Theophilos, about whom Seferis also wrote (also – in passing – in this essay), was venerated in a similar way.

So was Seferis a populist and Hellenocentrist? He is quite often seen that way, and it is even sometimes assumed that there is a contradiction between this return to the roots and Seferis' Modernism and obvious affiliation with Western culture;¹³ moreover, such Hellenocentric inclinations are considered to be hardly surprising in an essay written in the middle of the war and for that particular audience. But it is not as simple as that; in fact, there is a striking absence of patriotist rhetoric in Seferis' essay. Rather, the poet rejects "Greekness" as an aesthetic criterion and the reason he admired Makriyannis was for his completely personalized written style and voice, as an expression of a collective oral unity to which he still belonged. In the case of Makriyannis this personal style and voice must have been the result of a struggle with the words, of constructing his text word by word, and for the reader it is also a process of deciphering – particularly in view of Makriyannis' handwriting. Moreover, Makriyannis' style and voice are free of any sentimentality, and his memoirs are the testimony of a real man.¹⁴

In other words, Seferis does not admire Makriyannis for folkloric reasons, but as a proto-Modernist – a model for the Modernism he himself favours. Just as Seferis' admiration for the Naïve folk painter Theophilos (1868-1934) should be seen in the light of Western European Modernists' interest in Naïve artists, his admiration for Makriyannis, who was unlettered, but educated in the true sense of the word, is in keeping with the quests of Modernists in general to find texts which in their authenticity, wisdom and expressiveness are a personal expression of an organic collectivity and have not been adulterated by organized education and by the collectivity of the rapidly expanding mass culture –

¹³ As is shown, and challenged, by Nasos Vayenas, "Hellenocentrism and the Literary Generation of the Thirties", in *ibid.*, 43-48.

¹⁴ On Seferis' essay about Makriyannis, see Nasos Vayenás, "The 'hellenocentrism' of Seferis" and Takis Kagialis, "The Makriyannis of Seferis" (both in Greek), in Nasos Vayenás, Takis Kagialis and Michalis Pieris, *Μοντερνισμός και Ελληνικότητα*, Heraclion: Panepistimiakés Ekdósís Kritis, 1997, 25-29 and 31-64.

so abhorred by Modernists – of the middle class and bourgeoisie. It is comparable with Yeats' interest in ancient Irish and Celtic epics and myths, but is also reminiscent of Eliot and Pound, who searched for such forms of authenticity beyond their own local backgrounds; seen in this light, such quests for authenticity can also be linked to exoticist tendencies, which do not look back in time to a culture's own history, but search in other areas, which are – or are presumed to be – culturally outside the scope of general Western culture.

Seferis' admiration for Makriyannis (and Theophilos) was not the product of a Hellenocentric search for his own roots, but a direct result of his Modernism; it was related to similar tendencies in Anglophone Modernism. The question of the relationship between literary and artistic Modernism and modernity in the general sense still arises with respect to Seferis – but it pertains to Modernism in general.

Conclusion

The three great poets of the Generation of the '30s, Seferis, Elytis and Ritsos, defined the character of Greek poetry for decades. Seferis and Elytis also gained international recognition, winning the Nobel Prize in 1963 and 1979; Ritsos had to make do with the Lenin Prize. In particular, Seferis' Greek Anglo-Saxon Modernism exerted a dominant influence on subsequent generations of poets; one example – there are countless others – is Takis Sinopoulos. A surrealist branch of poetry has also survived since the war, in the tradition of two other great poets of the Generation of the '30s, Embirikos and Engonopoulos: certainly Papaditsas and Ektor Kaknavatos are examples, and Miltos Sachtouris is perhaps another.

In Thessaloniki authors continued to write Modernist fiction after the Second World War, although to an increasing extent the city itself – with its distinctive Byzantine and Eastern Greek background – became the protagonist. Fiction in Thessaloniki became increasingly realistic, whereas in Athens, where fiction had been modernized in the 1930s, but not yet in the Modernist sense, authors started to experiment more and more in the direction of Modernism. I would like to mention one special case here: the novel *The Third Wedding* (1962) by the Athenian Kostas Tachtsis, who was born and raised in Thessaloniki. This novel is actually one long monologue by the protagonist-narrator – an external monologue – containing not only flashbacks, flashforwards, etc. of the narrator

herself, but also inbuilt monologues by the other actual protagonist: a kind of vocalized verbal stream of consciousness which the author – by his own account – hoped would make him the Greek Joyce.

In much post-war Greek literature the theme of “Greekness” continues to play a role, explicitly or implicitly; often authors are keenly engaged with Greek identity and Greek history, since 1950 particularly with that of the 1940s – the occupation, resistance and civil war. After the Colonels’ dictatorship (1967-1974) a new populist wave appeared; it was not until the 1980s and ’90s that the national culture seemed to be taken more as a matter of course and personal themes began to gain the upper hand in literature. This could indicate a transition from “belated modernity” to true modernity,¹⁵ as we also saw in Greek social and political life in the late twentieth century.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Jusdanis, *Belated Modernity and Aesthetic Culture: Inventing National Literature*, 163.

¹⁶ This article has been translated from the Dutch by Margaret Kofod.