

Western and Oriental Worlds of Literature and Modern Greek Literature

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**Maro Kalantzopoulou,**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Western and Oriental Worlds of Literature and Modern Greek Literature" Maro Kalantzopoulou explores the extent to which modern Greek literature can be seen as linked to Western and Oriental literary cultures. She discusses examples of literary phenomena featuring Western influences, as well as works which are linked in different ways to Southeastern Europe in general, the Ottoman world, and Oriental literary cultures. Kalantzopoulou's claim is that scholarship tends to associate modern Greek literature with Western literary cultures and dismisses non-Western contributions and influences. Kalantzopoulou suggests that by acknowledging the historical situatedness of such assumptions and by examining modern Greek literature on different time- and space scales, the relation of modern Greek with Western and Oriental literary cultures could be assessed more productively.

## Maro KALANTZOPOULOU

### Western and Oriental Worlds of Literature and Modern Greek Literature

Commenting on principles which conditioned research in Greek literature, C.Th. Dimaras wrote that "We knew ... that our education was part of a wider network, not only in terms of time, being linked to antiquity, but also in terms of space, being linked to the Western world" (*Ελληνικός* 504; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). Dimaras located the roots of modern Greek literature in folklore in order to prove that "the ancients live forever" assuming that it evolved through the Byzantine romance and that it survived by breaking "out of the ruins" of "Greece in which the Turks had set foot," a period when there were some "signs of joy" then going through "a century of endeavors" until the "birth of a new world" characterized by the "predominance of the Western element" and finally by the work of "the giants" and "the war of independence and its direct consequences" (Dimaras, *A History* ix). The account provided by Dimaras of the history of modern Greek literature reflects the basic postulate of the Greek national narrative according to which modern Greek culture is based on the heritage of antiquity to which the Byzantine period was annexed in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Ottoman imperial center is seen as an agent of obscurantism and anti-modernity and the period of Ottoman domination is considered a deviation from the principal national scheme. In this context, any contact of the Greek with non-Western, Ottoman, Oriental, or Southeast European literatures is largely considered insignificant.

Although modern Greek literature has been presented as being linked to the West rather than the East, various literary phenomena seem to suggest contacts between Greek and non-Western literatures. During the periods of Byzantine and Ottoman domination, one can find, among others, examples of heroic and epic poetry from the ninth and tenth centuries among which the most important are the Akritic songs and the romance of *Digenis Akritis*, historiographic and theological works by Byzantine authors containing passages on Islam, Arabs, or on Bulgars, Slavs, and other Southeast European peoples, as well as a tradition of folk poetry which is to an important extent common to the peoples of the region. Further, one can find numerous translations and adaptations of Oriental works such as *Syntipas*, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, *Stephanites and Ichnelates*, the *Arabian Nights*, the stories of *Nasreddin Hodja* which gained popularity and continued to be published until at least the end of the nineteenth century. Despite the presence of these texts, scholars insist that the contribution of non-Western literary cultures to the evolution of modern Greek literature has been minor and stressed the role of Western models and the translation of works by Western, especially Italian and French, authors of the Renaissance, the Baroque, and the Enlightenment in the development of the most prominent examples of modern Greek literature, namely the medieval romance, the literature of Renaissance Crete, and the nineteenth-century poetry of the Heptanese school.

By the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, there was a conscious effort on the part of intellectual elites — initially among authors of the Greek diaspora — to stress the ties between modern and ancient Greek literature. Adamantios Korais, the most prominent figure of the Greek Enlightenment, undertook to demonstrate that the modern novel has its roots in the romance of the Greek hellenistic period (see Tziovas, "Anó" 10-12) and this aspect of continuity was of particular importance to the emergence of the modern Greek novel in the nineteenth century: "In our Greek [culture] there still is no name [by which to refer to it], and [as] it is not fair to use the barbaric name of romance [*romanon*] for a genre that the Europeans received from the Greeks, we have to find an appropriate name for it" (Korais, "Πιστολό" 16). The first modern Greek novels were published in the first half of the nineteenth century with their authors and plots invoking either the heritage of the ancient Greek novel or works by Western writers: "As far as the genre ... is concerned, few texts by ancient Greek [authors] have survived to date; on the other hand, no original book of this genre has been written in our spoken language, despite the fact that it has first been introduced by Greeks, as it is extensively discussed by the glorious Korais" (Pitsipios, "Ῥομάν" 34). Referring to the importance of the novel as a genre to be developed by Greek writers and commenting on the venture he took by publishing in 1834, Panayotis Soutsos wrote in the preface of his book that "the

greatest writers, poets, and philosophers were the authors of novels; Rousseau in France, Walter Scott in England, Goethe in Germany, Foscolo in Italy, and Cooper in the free America" (□ Λέανδρος i). And focusing on the normative role that Western writers may have had in his own work, Soutsos notes that "one may discredit us [by saying that] we imitated Foscolo's Jacopo Ortis, or Goethe's Werther as these books are at the disposal of readers, they can speak in our favor" (□ Λέανδρος iv).

The first modern Greek novels — written by Panayotis Soutsos and Alexandros Soutsos in 1834 and 1835 respectively — feature a romantic plot and Western influences which have an openly political concern and are particularly transparent in the case of Panayotis's novel written in epistolary form. Both novels are dominated by the voices of two main characters, which invoke the ancient past, the heirs of which are said to be the modern Greeks and who are incited to fight against the political regime that has been established after the Greek war of independence. These novels are the fictional equivalent of an intellectual tradition that developed the above-mentioned scheme of the Greek national culture. In terms of an ethnosymbolist approach to nationalism, this scheme can be analyzed as an ethnic and perennialist national project based on the idea of continuity of the nation from antiquity to modern times. However, even from this point of view, if "usually, there has been some ethnic basis for the construction of modern nations," this could possibly be no more than "some dim memories and elements of culture and alleged ancestry, which it is hoped to revive" (Smith 17). If then, for a tradition that went back to the Greek Enlightenment, modern Greek culture was tied to the achievements of Greek antiquity, this assumption could be seen as historically conditioned as a result of processes that took place in a specific social, political, and intellectual context. In terms of a modernist approach, "historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity, either by semi-fiction ... or by forgery" (Hobsbawm 7). In this sense, the idea of continuity between antiquity and the modern Greek culture is part of an invented tradition, a construct of a specific narrative, a product of "exercises in social engineering" (Hobsbawm 13).

While the ahistorical, perennial idea of continuity between ancient and modern Greek cultures was to be criticized by approaches focusing on the historical situatedness and the constructed character of such assumptions, the conscious efforts of the intellectual elites of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did however result in the configuration of a certain literary tradition that was based on these ideas. The intellectual life of the independent Greek state was dominated by the leaders of what is conventionally called Athenian romanticism, that is, literature produced within the limits of the independent Greek state and mostly in Athens including authors who published in Istanbul and elsewhere. The representatives of Athenian romanticism composed romantic poems written in a kind of *καθαρεύουσα* (meaning "puristic": a conservative form of Modern Greek language, making use of archaic elements and conceived of as a compromise between the Ancient Greek and the vernacular of the time), which became increasingly archaic in the second half of the nineteenth century and featuring the influence of Western poets such as Byron, Lamartine, and Béranger and of various kinds of prose writing while having the control over the literary institutions of the time. Today, these developments are largely seen as having no particular literary value and have only recently been addressed by scholars of modern Greek literature (see, e.g., Nagy and Stavrakopoulou). Partially in parallel with this tradition, however, and beyond the limits of the Greek state, the Ionian Islands — which had for centuries been under Venetian rule before going through a short Napoleonic and then British period and finally becoming part of the independent Greek state several decades after its constitution — are the center of one of the most important manifestations of modern Greek literature. Indeed, this is the context in which some of the most prominent figures in modern Greek poetry have written their poems in the first half of the nineteenth century under the influence of Western classicism and romanticism, and, especially in the case of Dionysios Solomos, in the vernacular *δημοτική* (*demotike*) language, often using Greek popular oral poetry.

As far as the literature of areas which were under Ottoman rule is concerned, if the first authors of the Athenian school were linked to an intellectual tradition that stressed the idea of continuity between ancient and modern Greek cultures, the novels of the period following the creation of the independent Greek state vary substantially in their forms and subjects. Novels such as Alexandros Soutsos's □ □ξόριστος το □ 1831 (The Exile of 1831) and Iakovos Pitsipios's □ □ρφαν □ τ □ς Χίου (The Orphan Girl

of Chios) can indeed be associated with the ancient Greek tradition as they feature what Mikhail Bakhtin analyzed as the chronotope of the romance of the Hellenistic period with characters remaining unchanged despite the passage of time (86-110). Others are linked more directly to European genres, for example the epistolary novel (Panayotis Soutsos, □ Λέανδρος [Leander]), the novel of manners (Pitsipios, □ Πίθηκος Ξο□θ [The Ape Xouth]), the picaresque (Palaiologos, □ Πολυπαθής [The Man Who Suffered a Lot]), the historical novel (Rangavis, □ Α□θένης το□ Μωρέως [The Prince of Morea]), and, the genre of city mysteries (Votyras, □ Συνέπεια τ□ς αμαρτίας [The Consequence of a Sin]).

While authors of the first Greek novels focused on links with antiquity and West European authors, in the second half of the nineteenth century one can find various novels which take place in the Ottoman empire and involves Turkish characters. In several works the Turks are described as the enemy through the fight against whom the Greeks are to establish their national identity (e.g., Votyras, □ σπάθη τ□ς □κδικήσεως [The Sword of Vengeance], Ramfos, □ Κατσαντώνης [Katsantonis], Xenos, □ □ρωίς τ□ς □λληνικ□ς □παναστάσεως [The Heroine of the Greek Revolution]). Also, more nuanced representations depicting love or desire connecting Greek and Turkish characters appeared in novels which took Ottoman culture as an autonomous entity and narrated both positive and negative characteristics of Turkish characters (e.g., Kalogeropoulos, □ Φλ□ρος [Floros], Leventis, □ Τασσώ [Tasso]). Further, writers also narrated manners, social reality, and internal problems of the Ottoman empire (e.g., Palaiologos, □ *Esquisses des moeurs turques*, Ramfos, □ Χαλέτ Εφένης [Halet Efendi], Xenos, □ Διάβολος □ν Τουρκία [The Evil in Turkey]), characters with hybrid identities between Christian Greek and Turkish Muslim cultures (e.g., Nikolaidis, □λή-Χουρσχήδ Μπέης [Ali-Hourshid Bey]), and urban mysteries with focus on aspects of the social realities of the Ottoman capital were prominent themes (e.g., Samartsidis, □ πόκρυφα Κωνσταντινουπόλεως [Mysteries of Constantinople]).

The narration in novels which feature Turkish characters and Ottoman settings or refer directly to the Ottoman reality does not necessarily constitute evidence for the existence of relations of contact and influence between Greek and Ottoman literatures. In recent scholarship there is the proposition that Greek prose writing of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries might have been influenced by literary techniques of the Ottoman/Oriental genre of *hikaye* and that the concern of Greek authors with social and religious questions in the second half of the nineteenth century might be connected with similar concerns present in the Ottoman Tanzimât period (see, e.g., Kehayioğlu). Important is to note that aspects of relationship or contact between the Greek and Ottoman literatures has not been explored sufficiently until now and no systematic research has been conducted in this area. Scholars have not yet explored, for example, possible contacts between the Greek and Karamanli (Greco-Turkish) literatures, that is, Turkish-language writing in Greek script, several examples of which are known to have been produced in the nineteenth century (see, e.g., Balta). More importantly, one would expect that relations and contact would be discernible in the work, for example, of the Phanariots, the Greek elite in Istanbul representatives of which assured during the eighteenth and to a certain extent the nineteenth centuries control over the Greek Orthodox patriarchate and the Romanian principalities where they were appointed by the sultan as *hospodar-s* (princes).

A considerable number of nineteenth-century Greek authors were linked to the elite of the Phanariots: Panayotis Soutsos and Alexandros Soutsos were members of a prominent Phanariot family and some of their close relatives had served as *hospodar-s* in the Principalities. For example, Palaiologos was born in Istanbul and his father had worked for the prince of Wallachia, Pitsipios, although not from Istanbul had a relative who had served as dragoman of the Porte, Rangavis's family served in the court of Alexandros Soutsos, *hospodar* of Wallachia and others such as Ramfos and Nikolaidis were able to speak Turkish, the former having served as consul of the independent Greek state in the Ottoman cities of Ioannina and Thessaloniki and the latter being born in Istanbul and brought up in an Ottoman context. However, while the Phanariots formed one of the few Greek elites familiar with Ottoman language and culture, they were not necessarily interested in depictions of Ottoman material and their works do not manifest any particular relation of contact with Ottoman literature. At the same time, no such relation can be safely established in texts of authors who were interested in Ottoman themes: Xenos's □ Διάβολος □ν Τουρκία, for example, is influenced by Lesage's *Le Diable boiteux* and Ramfos might have privileged French historiographic sources over Ottoman

ones for his □ Χαλέτ Εφέντης (Halet Efendi) although it is not clear to what extent he made use of these French and Ottoman sources (see, e.g., Tonnet). The interest of these authors in the manners, mentality and the administrative and social organization of the Ottoman empire as observed in Istanbul during the reign of Mahmud II in the first three decades of the nineteenth century should be seen as connected with similar concerns on the part of Western authors of the time for whom the Ottoman Orient was both an object of study and a subject to be addressed in fiction. It is not without significance, in this sense, that Xenos's work was published in English a decade before it was published in Greek. On the other hand, a number of Greek Ottoman scholars — including members of the Phanariot elite who remained attached to the Ottoman empire after the constitution of the independent Greek state — had a significant role in Ottoman intellectual life in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The contribution of these writers and scholars in not only the political, but also the intellectual life of the Ottoman empire was connected with a specific demand to be able to transmit Western knowledge to an Ottoman context (this demand developed first during Selim III's Nizam-ı Cedid reforms in the late eighteenth century and then again during the Tanzimât era in the nineteenth century). Greek Ottoman scholars provided translations of West European, mostly French, historiographic and scientific works in Ottoman literary language, but also dictionaries and textbooks addressed to a Greek reading public. Others composed works with a view to transmitting the heritage of Greek antiquity and of the Byzantine period to Ottoman readers (see Strauss).

The lack of research with regard to relations between Greek literature and Ottoman, Oriental, and Southeast European traditions and the historical and ideological forces which hinder such research do not allow for definite conclusions as to the contacts between Greek and non-Western literatures. What can be observed with certainty is that the Ottoman influence on the evolution of Greek literature is limited compared to its contribution to Bosnian (see Duraković and Nametak) and Albanian literature (see Elsie) both of which adopted Ottoman forms and genres developing, for example, their versions of divan poetry. It would be reasonable to say that the contribution of Ottoman literary culture to the evolution of modern Greek literature has not significantly affected the configuration of the Greek literary canon. On the other hand, the vast majority of Greek translations published in the nineteenth century were works by French, English, German, or Italian authors. And translations of non-Western literature are limited, although popular, consisting primarily of several new translations of the above mentioned *Syntipas*, *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, and versions of the *Arabian Nights* for all of which the source language is not known, of some works translated from Sanskrit and of Oriental works translated from European intermediaries featuring the *Arabian Nights* and *Nasreddin Hodja* (for a detailed account of translations published in the nineteenth century, see Denisi; Iliou; Iliou and Polemi; Kasinis). Interestingly, non-Western works which circulated and gained popularity were of Oriental and not of Ottoman origin and were translated from languages other than the Oriental works and that circulated among the Greek population and gained popularity with readers in the Western world and were indeed many times translated into Greek not from the original but from Western-language versions. In this sense, it is not clear to what extent these works should be considered part of a specifically Oriental legacy in the Greek-speaking world. Likewise, the enormous popularity of works such as the Alexander Romance in Western Europe, on the one hand and in the Greek- and Turkish-speaking world (see, for example, Bombaci 223-25, 244, 250-52) and in the Balkans on the other indicate the presence of a tradition of popular literature that was shared among the different literary cultures of the Ottoman empire.

Another field unexplored in Greek scholarship or criticism is that of the relations between Byzantine/Greek and Slavic Balkan literatures. For example, since the time of Cyril and Methodius medieval Bulgarian (Castellan and Vrinat 52-78; Lazarov 78-87; Moser 9-37) and Serbian literature (see, for example, Barac 18-19; Deretić 12-37) were largely based on translations and adaptations of Byzantine authors featuring the writings of church fathers such as John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and John Damascene, but also scientific, philosophical, and theological treatises, chronicles, hagiographies, legends, *apocrypha*, as well as popular narratives which were not necessarily of Byzantine origin, but translated into Slavic through a Greek intermediary. Interestingly, the Byzantine/Greek influence on the literatures of Southeastern Europe would still be important during the Ottoman period and even during national revivals in the nineteenth century. The ideas of

the Enlightenment are introduced in Bulgarian literature through Greek writings and the first examples of literature of the Bulgarian national revival will significantly call for the emancipation not from the Ottoman imperial center, but from Greek religious and linguistic domination. The relations of Bulgarian with Greek literature were based historically first on the policies of acculturation employed by the Byzantine empire and later tied to the leading role of a new Greek bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century. Further, this relationship was owing to the existence of important schools which enrolled students from Southern Europe who in turn would become part of the intellectual elites of their respective countries, as well as owing to the role of Greek intellectuals as carriers of the ideas of Enlightenment and revolution. The Greek war of independence resulted in the formation of the independent Greek state several decades before the Bulgarian one and thus these processes led to the formation of an important Bulgarian Greek-speaking elite still existing in the nineteenth century that assured Greek influence over Bulgarian cultural elites (see Moser 38-43; Castellan and Vrinat 99-102). From this perspective one would be able to explain the fact that even some of the most prominent poets of the nineteenth-century during Southern European national revivals — for example the Bulgarian/Macedonian Grigor Prličev or the Albanian Naim Frashëri — wrote some of their works in Greek.

While the hegemonic character of colonial culture in zones which have been under the domination of Western countries has been discussed extensively in postcolonial studies, colonialism within Southeastern Europe remains a lacuna and I posit that this is so because scholars of Southeast European literatures and cultures have not generally developed an interest to apply postcolonial theory to Southeast European literatures and cultures. However, in more recent scholarship there has been discussion about the validity of the concept of "Balkanism," an adaptation of Said's Orientalism referring to the negative stereotypical representations which the West makes of Southeast European peoples whether in history, politics, sociology, the study of literature, etc. (see, e.g., Fleming; Goldsworthy; Todorova). A similar debate whether postcolonial theory can be applied to the study of literatures and cultures in Central Europe with regard to Soviet and communist domination occurred in the early 1990s following the Fall of the Berlin Wall (see, e.g., Andraş; Berlina and Tötösy de Zepetnek; Moore Chioni; Tötösy de Zepetnek). In the case of Southeastern Europe I add that while the frontiers of the Orient can only be conceived of as a construct of Western imagining, the "Balkans" do have a geographical space even if various historical and political factors have located the region in different parts of Southeastern Europe during various periods. Apart from my above observations, there are also differences between the concepts of Orientalism and "Balkanism": contrary to what is conceptualized as "Orient," the "Balkans" were not part of a Western empire and the structures of the Ottoman empire were different from those of the Western colonial states, as it did not, for example, implement any generalized policy aiming at the linguistic, religious, and cultural assimilation of its subjects. Further, if Orientalism consists in the ways the West constructs the image of their previously colonized subjects, "Balkanism" — rather than being expressed in the discourse of the imperial forces which dominated the region — is also a construct of Western imagining. More importantly, while the postcolonial condition of the subjects of Western colonial empires involves a dimension of hegemony in the sense that the colonized would themselves internalize the idea of their inferiority to Western culture, the peoples of Southeastern Europe based their national narratives on their opposition to what they saw as an obscurantist and pre-modern Ottoman imperial center. Thus, apart from a "Balkanism" consisting in the negative representations of the region, its cultures, and peoples in Western scholarship, in the case of Southeastern Europe there is an "internal" and self-referential process of narration and historicization by writers and the population itself similar to other literatures in Central and East Europe (see Tötösy de Zepetnek's concept of in-between peripherality and self-referentiality) and who tend to produce negative imageries of their neighbors and ascribe them an essentially "Balkan" character they reject for themselves (see Bakić-Hayden). Hence, while Orientalism consists in a Western discourse discrediting what is vaguely seen as Oriental culture and while "Balkanism" consists in the West's discrediting "Balkan" culture, people of Southeastern Europe would themselves articulate an Orientalist discourse vis-à-vis their Ottoman past. The rejection of the Ottoman factor as a positive contribution to local cultures, as well as the negative perception that the different Southeast European cultures made of one another can account at least partially for the reluctance in scholarship

to identify contacts and inter-dependencies between the different literary cultures of the region. I posit that it is in this sense that one of the reasons relations between the various literatures of the region are not studied is not a rejection of "Balkanism," but in fact Orientalism because it represents a "blanket" and un-differentiated perspective and discourse.

The assumption in Greek literary studies that modern Greek literature is linked to antiquity and to Western literary cultures and that any major connection with non-Western literatures should be dismissed ought to be revised. I postulate that modern Greek literature — similar to other European "minor" literatures — has canonical value within world literatures in the sense that it has formed the expectations and, to a certain extent, tastes of Greek readers thus contributing to the configuration of a specific national construct, that is, my postulate is that a "national" literature whether major or minor is part of world literature (on this, see in particular Juvan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/10>>). At the same time, the premise of Greek literature's place in world literature is based on the context that its texts were indeed produced mostly under Western and not Ottoman influence although the Ottoman cultural impact is observable and ought to be researched further. Further, the premise of Western influence dismisses popular literature which represented a large part of Oriental origin and underestimates the numerous characteristics that the Greek oral popular tradition shared with its Southern European counterparts. With regard to modern Greek literature's place in world literature I add a caveat: canonical texts constitute a small part of overall literary production and even if it were possible to ascribe them a specific value independently of any historical or ideological context, they remain exceptional cases, but cases of relevance.

In conclusion, scholarship of literature is interested in processes of canon formation often leaving aside presumably minor works and opting for what could be seen as a history of events (*histoire événementielle*) in literature. This kind of history which is associated with the "short time span ... the individual and the event," the history that "has long accustomed us to the headlong, dramatic, breathless rush of its narrative," is however "the most capricious and the most delusive of all [the time spans]" (Braudel 27, 28). While this time of events in canon formation comprised principally works featuring West European texts, it did not account for literary phenomena which developed under the influence of different literary cultures. Such phenomena include the tradition of popular oral poetry that could be seen as part of a common Southeast European interliterary network or popular literature that during centuries comprised translations of works of Oriental origin even if it is not clear whether such works reached the Greek public as an Oriental or as a Western legacy. Byzantine and post-Byzantine literature — although associated with Greek culture — could be seen as a tradition that was shared among various Southeast European literary cultures and translations of this literature served as a basis for the development of the respective medieval literatures. If "it is in relation to ... [the] slow-moving history that the whole of history is to be rethought" (Braudel 33), a history of the *longue durée* of modern Greek literature — one that would not involve a discourse of Orientalism or "Balkanism" — ought to be written systemically in an exploration of its dependence on Western and non-Western influences, as well as of its place in the context of broader interliterary networks.

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