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The Formation of Modern Greek Literary Canon in its Relation to Academic and Social Institutions

As Guillory argued, it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how literary works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated over successive generations and centuries. Canon formation process takes place within social institutions among which education is the most important in the sense that it is through canon that education regulates access to literacy, to the practices of reading and writing. This is why canon constitutes a cultural capital in two senses: a linguistic capital, the means by which one attains to a socially credentialed and therefore valued speech, otherwise known as “standard language”. A symbolic capital, a kind of knowledge – capital which entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person. (Guillory, 1993) But what happens when national institutions are fragile and incohesive social formations and, therefore, not able to sustain the complicated and intense procedures that canon formation invites? If education cannot be, for certain reasons, the institutional site in which canon formation takes place, where would it possibly be constructed? I am going to show that in the Greek case, literary canon was incorporated by the educational system much later after it had been formed in the public sphere. The question is: What are the consequences of this difference as far as the dissemination of the cultural capital, that the literary canon supposedly constitutes, is concerned? On top of that, as canon formation in Greece was strongly connected, up to a certain point, with the controversy over the language, we come across with a strange phenomenon, where the language that was being used in school (archaistic, the so called *katharevousa*) was different from the language of the literary texts that were taught in this school (vernacular, the so called *demotic*). The issue that arises here is, in what extend the literary canon could possibly play its role as a linguistic capital for successive generations of Greek students and for the dissemination of literacy in general. In what follows I will try to make a sketch of the interrelation between canon formation and canon legitimatization procedures in four institutional sites: literary production, non - academic criticism, university (academic criticism) and secondary education.

The Greek national state was established in 1830. Its official language, in parliament, in press and literature was exclusively the *katharevousa*, for about fifty years. In 1880 a new generation appeared in the literary scene, the so called generation of the eighties, which wrote poetry exclusively in demotic language and declared, along with linguists, journalists and other intellectuals, that demotic language is the real language of Greek people, it is the only language that can express the “Greek soul”. Demoticists, therefore, fought for the absolute prevalence of the demotic language in all sectors of public life: education, press, state bureaucracy etc., a prevalence that didn't become definite until 1976. The demoticist movement has been a wide intellectual movement with political and ideological aspirations that have to do with the completion of the unification procedures of the nation state. I won't analyse those here. What interests us more is that the modern Greek literary canon was shaped within this demoticist movement and was marked by its romantic, populist values. (Tziovas, 1986) Folk songs were considered the unparalleled start of

modern Greek poetry and all following works had to resemble them in language, rhythm and content.

The most prominent figure, both of the generation of the '80s and the demoticist movement in general was Kostis Palamas (1859-1943). He represents the ideal type of the poet / critic. Both his poetic and critical work are of great importance for the making of modern Greek literary language as well as for the notions of the category of "literature". Through his critical work, which was being produced continuously from 1880 to 1930, Palamas shaped the Greek literary canon in detail. (Apostolidou, 1992) His critical work consists of articles, longer essays, prologues to books, book reviews, all published in newspapers and magazines. He is a shadow historian of literature, when no other histories of modern Greek literature existed, while the ones that were published later, were based on his standards. We could say that he has proposed a canon, although he did not declare it in clear terms. The reason why his implied canon had been so successful, although it was made by a poet who was not authorized by a social or a state institution, is that Palamas' major concern was not to defend, through his critical writings, his own poetical practice and to prepare for himself the place in which he was to be situated, as poets usually do, when they interfere with canon formation. (Lindenberger, 1990: 139-140) He knew that he was the undisputable leading figure of his time and he managed with confidence to treat generously his fellow and previous writers. Consequently, he succeeded in expressing a larger configuration of forces, namely the demotic movement, for which the individual poet / critic served as spokesman and advocate. The source of his representational power was his recognition as national poet. What I am trying to point out here is that a critic alone, without institutional support, without being, for example, university professor or a prominent figure of the state bureaucracy (let me remind here that Mathew Arnold was school inspector) could never succeed in making a canon which would possibly prevail. As far as the Greek case is concerned, a temporary conclusion so far would be that in nations where state institutions cannot, for many reasons, produce canons, the literary field regulates itself through its own institutions, such as the national poet. Later, the state comes to embrace the national poet and use him in education.

But why the Greek state was not able to sustain a more typical canon formation process? State institutions were totally orientated towards ancient Greek culture and katharevousa language. The national ideology could identify itself only with the ancient glory and had hard time acknowledging any value in the rural life and demotic tradition of the ottoman period as well as in contemporary literature. The first time that modern Greek literary texts were introduced in schools was in 1884. (Koudoura, 2006) Although they were written in katharevousa, they were not welcome and many teachers refused to teach them, because they didn't believe in their cultural value. Their reaction is understandable. They were educated by the University of Athens, which was totally against demotic language and treasured only the classical heritage. Modern Greek literature was not studied at the university until 1925, when the first chair was founded in the University of Athens, a chair devoted both to medieval and modern Greek literature. One year later, 1926, at the new University of Thessaloniki, Giannis Apostolakis, a demoticist, was elected first professor of exclusively modern Greek literature. We will return to him later. Conclusively, Palamas was alone in making the canon. No one else could undertake this task. His canon was the product of the literary system and the cultural capital it constituted could not easily be accepted, moreover disseminated by the education system.

By 1910, Palamas' canon was sufficiently formatted and had already acquired appreciation by a wide range of intellectuals in public sphere. It is not a coincidence therefore, that secondary education started at this point, hesitantly in 1913 and more affirmatively in 1917, to accommodate modern Greek literary texts in demotic language. In the meantime, demoticist movement had won some battles and the Venizelos' regime made in 1917 an education reform, according to which demotic language was to be taught in primary schools. Paradoxically enough, secondary teachers

were asked to teach literary texts, which had never studied before at the university and the cultural content of which undoubtedly questioned.

I have to say a few words about the first university professor of modern Greek literature at the University of Thessaloniki, Giannis Apostolakis. Although he belonged to the demoticist movement, he was a keen enemy of Palamas. He only partly accepted the palamic canon; he acknowledged the value of folk songs and Solomos, the first national poet in 19th century, and nothing else. He rejected Palamas' poetry. His orientation was towards a Carlylian model of the poet as a super hero and he was remote to the historicist concepts of Palamas. As far as the canon is concerned, Apostolakis was the most unsuitable person to teach not only the palamic canon but any canon at all, on an academic level. In any case, he retained his chair only for ten years, so he wasn't really able to found a tradition. The chair remained empty for thirteen years. It was not until after the end of the war, in 1948 that a new professor of modern Greek literature was elected.

The main characteristic of the interrelation between the canon and the institutions that has been evident so far is discontinuity. Even when the institutions open their door to the demoticist canon, this doesn't last long. Just for the record: the Venizelos' education reform of 1917 ended in 1920, when his party lost the elections, and came back in 1929, when he regained power. In 1931 we notice the peak in the process of incorporation of the palamic canon in secondary education. The curriculum at this point not only includes the vaster range of canonical writers but it invites a historical narrative about the evolution of modern Greek literature, a narrative which would explain the logic, the hierarchy and the values of the canon more eloquently than the texts themselves. (Koudoura, 2006) However, again, the coup of Ioannis Metaxas in 1936 stopped this process and things went back.

In considering the decade of the thirties, we are confronted with another example of uncongeniality between canon formation process in the literary field and education system. In the literary field a new generation appeared which introduced modernism to Greek poetry (Giorgos Seferis and Odysseas Elytis, are the most famous poets of the generation, both awarded with the Nobel prize) and revised the palamic canon in such a way as to install a new "literary sensibility", capable of appreciating the modernistic forms. However, the poets and critics of the generation took all the effort to do this without, by all means, to disvalue the demoticist tradition so as to assure the continuity of national ideology as well as the continuity of literature itself. (Lambropoulos, 1988) Whereas in the literary field this revision was taking place, the educational system, under Metaxas' dictatorship, became gradually more and more hostile, not to the demoticist texts themselves, but to the demoticist values. Of course any appropriation of the revised canon was out of the question.

In the meantime, huge historical events such as the Greek – Italian war (1940-41), the German occupation (1941-1944) and the following civil war (1947-1949), ended up to the so called post civil war state, which has probably been the most authoritative state in modern Greek history. In the period between 1949 and 1974 (the fall of military dictatorship which started in 1967) an intense ideological struggle was being held between the state ideology, which retreated to the most archaistic and nationalistic values and the culture of the left, which eventually attracted liberal intellectuals as well. In this period, state institutions are very suspicious to demoticist tradition, although they can't really reject its literary canon. What we have now is a completely different situation than the one we had back in the twenties or in the thirties. Back then, the secondary education had been fairly open to the demoticist canon, whereas academic criticism and university syllabus were unable to promote any canon at all. In the fifties and sixties, academic criticism is, at last, well established and begins to develop a distinct critical tradition while, at the same time, incorporates and teaches the demoticist canon as revised by the generation of the thirties. Secondary education though, more subjected to state ideology, was forced to accept a curriculum, which, although based on the demoticist canon, brought back literary texts in *katharevousa*, being, by far, remote to the contemporary canon of the period.

In 1948, two major incidents occur. Constantine Dimaras, the first really significant historian of modern Greek literature published his History, which is based on Palamas' critical work and elaborates his canon in a more scientific, detailed and constructed way. His history is still in use today. Dimaras, a distinguished cultural historian, became later professor at Sorbonne, Paris but he would never care to enter the Greek university of the time. He felt he didn't belong there. His enlightening, liberal attitude couldn't stand the nationalistic, arrogant atmosphere of the state institutions. The same year, Linos Politis was elected professor of modern Greek literature at the University of Thessaloniki. He was a well educated philologue, son of the distinguished university professor, Nikolaos Politis. Both Dimaras and Politis belonged to the generation of the '30s and they were close friends with Seferis. Politis taught for 21 years the demoticist canon, as revisited by his generation, and, through his academic practice, the canon was, at last, officially incorporated, about 30-40 years after its formation, by the academia. A proof of how important Politis thought that was is the *History of Modern Greek Literature* he published in 1973. This is the history of literature that is still being taught at Literature Departments. Politis' academic practice, influenced by New Criticism, revalued literature as the cultural capital of the university, by reading it in a new way, as the embodiment of a language distinct in its difficulty, and thus, suggesting a different kind of linguistic capital from the previously known as "demoticist". (Guillory, 1993: 172) Nevertheless, let me point out again here, it was not until 1976, when demotic language was declared by the constitution official language of the Greek state, that it was made possible this canon to be taught across all school levels.

A question is raised here, weren't there any challenges to this demoticist canon, any alternative canons formed in different cultural environments? I thought that the most possible place to look for alternative canons was marxist criticism and historiography, which, in the interwar period, started to question the ideology of national continuity. (Apostolidou, 2003) Left criticism though, while it criticized certain canonical works or authors that were considered reactionary or, on the other hand, tried to argue for the value of socialist authors, it was not orientated towards a coherent project of making an alternative canon. The reason was primary that left criticism lacked hegemonic aspirations, which would have seemed completely unrealistic, considering the fact that left ideology was excluded from any kind of state institution. Secondary, the policy of patriotic front that was adopted by the Communist Party, when the danger of fascism was approaching in the thirties, brought left intellectuals closer to bourgeois criticism and made them interpret demoticism as a progressive movement.

Nevertheless, in the post war period, Dimitris Chatzis, one of the most prominent prose writers, who belonged to the left, tried, throughout his essays, to scrutinize the demoticist canon and propose a completely different interpretation of the literary tradition. Yet, it was absolutely impossible for him to gain any acceptance. He was a political refugee in Budapest, he studied there and earned his PhD from Humboldt University of East Berlin, not to mention that he used to publish his essays in magazines in exile, all credits that had no chance to be appreciated by Greek cultural and academic field. Furthermore, he didn't have any luck even within the institutions of the left, since he was not a member of the party and he objected also party's cultural policy. His essayist work did not achieve the necessary measure of legitimacy, in other words, the symbolic capital his challenge needed as to make a difference. (Dean Kolbas, 2001)

Conclusively, for the most part of the 20th century, the formation of the literary canon was a process that was taking place outside the state institutions. This is a highly problematic feature as far as the dissemination of the linguistic and cultural capital the canon constitutes is concerned. Actually, two kinds of linguistic and cultural capital, the katharevousa's and the demoticist, were struggling to reach audience following different paths. The former, through the institutions, but without a canon of its own. The later, constituted by a sufficiently formed canon, was disseminated through institutions of the public sphere such as newspapers, magazines, literary events. Obviously, none of them, in the extend they lacked significant means, succeeded to prevail and fulfill the

demand of regulating access to literacy. This may be one of the reasons why literacy in Greece has always been so deficient. This situation also raises the issue of power of the non - state institutions, such as the institution of criticism, which seems in the Greek case to act independently, against Guillory's argument that "the canon is not grounded in an institution of criticism as is sometimes said. Criticism is not an institution but a disciplinary discourse inhabiting a historically specific educational institution". (Guillory, 1993: 56) It is more likely that the Greek case supports Bourdieu's position that the literary canon does not rely wholly on educational institutions. (Bourdieu, 1993) Bourdieu, on the other hand, regards the power of the literary field by itself to be relatively "weak" and very little institutionalized. (Bourdieu, 1996) I think that the Greek case study shows that in countries where all institutions are weak, the literary field may consist a considerably stronger institution within which a literary canon can very well be constructed. Anyway, the tension between canon and education may be responsible for the fact that the cultural capital that the modern notion of "literature" constitutes was never very significant in Greek culture, at least not as much as classical tradition.

Another set of conclusions has to do with the unification of the nation state. It is often said that Greece has been one of the most successfully unified nation states. The situation I tried to describe leads us to the assumption that the linguistic and cultural unification of the Greek nation state had not been completed, at least not until the second world war. At the same time, the linguistic homogeneity of the bourgeois public sphere was delayed as long as a standard vernacular language could not prevail. This may be the reason why in Greece the production in writing genres which have no canonical authorization was so weak and a canonical crisis in the form of discrimination of "serious" from "popular" writing did not arise until at least the decades of '70s or '80s. (Guillory, 1993: 133) It was after the constitutional declaration of demotic language as official language of the Greek state in 1976 and the educational legitimatization of the canon that radical changes in writing, production and dissemination of literary works became possible and provoked a canonical crisis; a new tension between the institutionalized canon and the literary field came up, a tension in which we still live.

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