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**‘The Battle of the Books’:
Canon and literary tradition in Literature school textbooks**

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In 2001 a new national curriculum for the compulsory Greek primary and lower secondary schools was adopted, inviting a plurality of perspectives and expressing openness to Otherness, as a result of the belated awareness that Greece is essentially multicultural.¹ These curricular intentions were also detected in the syllabus for the teaching of literature, which was followed by new textbooks issued for a first time in the academic year 2006-2007.² The present time may seem suitable then to look back at the development of the material for the teaching of literature in order to examine whether and how this new attitude affects the treatment of the Modern Greek literature in the school context and, subsequently, whether the latter is being recast in the shape of a wide variety of cultures.

¹ The multicultural disposition of the new Curriculum can be detected in set aims such as the following: ‘[For the students] to develop a positive attitude towards the contemporary multicultural and multinational society [...] to develop positive attitude towards the Other, the refugee, the immigrant [...] to think on/over the multicultural dimension of literature [...] to realize that we live in a world essentially pluralistic and to understand that self-understanding passes through the acquaintance and the constant comparison with other systems of values, customs, attitudes’ in Ministry of National Education and Religious Affairs, Pedagogical Institute 2000: 69.

² The school textbooks in Greece are officially designed and distributed by the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs. One textbook per class and subject circulates and is issued to students in all Greek schools. The publication of the textbooks is undertaken by the Organization for the Publication of Teaching Textbooks, (renamed from ‘Organization for the Publication of School Textbooks’ early in the 1960s) which was founded in 1937 in order to preserve the free issue of textbooks by the state. More information on the history of the school textbooks in Greece can be found in Kapsalis and Charalampous 1995.

The set of issues to be further elaborated in this article are, first, the mechanisms which underpin the dominance and maintenance of a national, Modern Greek, literature and, secondly, how the selection of texts is negotiated in the light of this emergent multiculturalism. The basic argument of this article is that the Modern Greek cultural authority is solidified through the accommodation of two conflicting attitudes towards the literary past, i.e. the fostering of a continuous, organic tradition, on the one hand, and the promotion of an axiological, hierarchical classification of authors and poets, on the other, while any emergent elements of multiculturalism are limited to a new, socially-orientated, didacticism.

Despite descending from the Ancient Greek word 'κανών', meaning either a 'measuring rod' or 'list', the 'canon' as a body of privileged texts deemed to be preserved has surprisingly only been introduced into the critical theoretical discourse about Modern Greek literature in Greece in the 1990s.³ Instead, the word 'tradition' or 'history' has been extensively used to signal a continuous career of the Modern Greek literary production from the past until the present which served and still serves as a vehicle for securing a national 'uninterrupted' past.

The teaching of Modern Greek literature was initially introduced into Greek Secondary Education⁴ in 1884 as one more branch of the core subject *Greek*

³ Tziouvas 1998.

⁴ Greek Secondary Education at that time was not the same as nowadays. In 1884, Secondary Education was seven years and consisted of two levels (Ellinikon Scholeion – three years, and Gymnasium – four years). Secondary Education nowadays is directed at students who have reached the age of 12 and have completed primary school. It consists of two levels, Gymnasium and Lyceum, lasting in total six years. The first level, Gymnasium, the first three years after primary education, is compulsory for all students. Every student attends the A' class (that is the first year of Gymnasium) and continues to B' class, while C' class is the final year of Gymnasium. In order to pass to the next class, students need to succeed in the final exams every year. Lyceum has a respective format. A description of the Greek educational system can be found in OCDE 1982: 76-83.

(*Ελληνικά*), which included the teaching of both Ancient and Modern Greek language.⁵ The educational system at that time was strongly orientated towards classical antiquity in an attempt to prove by all means the organic continuity between Ancient and Modern Greeks, thereby creating the sense of a common heritage.⁶ Shaping the desired past would help to create the desired present and would lead to the construction of the desired social and cultural identity. This new subject did not have a distinct identity at the very beginning, in the same sense that the Modern Greeks did not either, however it had clearly defined aims:

to provide, on the one hand, to Greek children multiple style patterns of the Modern Greek language and, on the other hand, to inculcate a love of their country and an eagerness for virtue in their hearts by unfolding the glorious and sorrowful scenes from our national history and the great moral lessons, which are abundantly included into them.⁷

The linguistic, ethnocentric and didactic aims, which the new subject was asked to serve, continued to plague the teaching of literature until nowadays and determined its role as an arbiter of the glorious historical past to the new generations. However, apart from the extraneous aims, the new subject experienced two important issues; first, which Modern Greek literary texts would be worth teaching, since none of them could be compared with Ancient Greek masterpieces⁸ and second, when Modern Greek Literature started and what was involved (genres).⁹

⁵ Frydaki 1996.

⁶ This necessity also derived from Fallmerayer's claims that Modern Greeks did not descend from Ancient Greeks and that this continuity had been lost though the course of time. For Fallmerayer's theories and Greeks' reaction to it, see Veloudis 1982.

⁷ Lambraki 1989: 103.

⁸ Toghias 1988.

⁹ Mastrodimitris 1996.

Simultaneously, the teaching of literature developed a dependent relationship on the past and never managed to escape from it. The primary role of literary texts at school was to preserve either the Greek historical past or later, when this was constructed, the Modern Greek literary past or even the linguistic past, but always past. This is explicit in both the historical arrangement followed in the C' class of the Gymnasium and in strongly national thematic units, such as 'Our National Regeneration', 'The Ordeal of Cyprus', '1940 War', followed in the A' and B' class. The desired attitude towards the past was that of the appreciation and respect of the heritage of Modern Greeks, which had its roots, obviously, in the distinguished, Ancient Greek past, overtly belonging to Modern Greeks.

In the western countries, the legacy of the dominant culture is transmitted through the canon. Numerous studies have been concerned with researching how the canon bequeaths the standardized social, political and cultural structure of a country,¹⁰ while it has also been criticized for being the vehicle for spreading and reinforcing the dominance of specific groups (male, bourgeois, white, educated, national and mono-cultural). Debates on the canon are not a current trend. Since its primary use in Ancient Greece, as Gorak has argued, the canon begot controversy since in all periods it was linked with the attempt for an inherited body of texts, practices, or ideas to be combined with the contemporary cultural needs. Since diverse interests fettered the reaching of a consensus, conflicts would occur which, however, would always lead to a reconstruction of the canon under the new conditions.¹¹ Hence this implied flexibility of the canon dilutes the myth of it being an unassailable and timeless conformity.

In all periods, what was contested more than the texts as texts was their transmission. The practical aspect of the canon was which texts and authors would be recognized and taught as the heritage of a country.¹² The examination

¹⁰ Bevers 2005; Pike 2002; Benton 2000; Wallis 1999; Lauter 1991.

¹¹ Gorak 1991.

¹² Guillory 1993.

of the popularity or the absence of specific authors as well as the treatment of specific texts in the textbooks can be informative of the mechanisms which underpin the shaping of a 'selective tradition'¹³ and the promotion of a selected past, since canon, unlike the all-inclusive tradition, is more eclectic.¹⁴

The research material for my study consists of the recently introduced series of textbooks (2006) for the teaching of literature in Gymnasium, which I examine in relation to the former series, used from 1983 to 2005.¹⁵ I concentrate on Gymnasium level since it is the part of Secondary education which all students need to complete, and I take 1983 as a *terminus post quem* for two reasons. First, this is the first series of textbooks which circulated after the restoration of democracy and the country's entry into the European Union (European Economic Community at that time) and after a socialist party (PASOK) was in government. These changes in the political sphere signaled a change of attitude towards the national identity and the reinforcement of the latter through education. 'Hellenism', as Beaton observes, 'from this time on becomes less territorial and less a matter of purely national identity'.¹⁶ Education, thus, need not serve as a vehicle for the promotion of nationalistic ideology, a rather significant change for the role it was constantly asked to play. Secondly, for the first time the textbooks present a linked history of literature. This means that apart from the texts included in the textbooks, some narratives preceding the texts have been inserted which provide a description and evaluation of either periods or genres furnishing the students with a more systematic restoration of the literary past.¹⁷

In relation to the former reason mentioned, the 1983 textbooks created the expectation that they would be a medium through which the student would

¹³ Williams 1992: 115.

¹⁴ Tziouvas 1998.

¹⁵ The research is funded by the Greek State Scholarship Foundation (IKY).

¹⁶ Beaton 1999: 261.

¹⁷ Kountoura 2006.

encounter real literature; there was an emphasis on the literariness of the texts rather than their 'didactic' or 'nationalistic' content.¹⁸ The change of attitude was depicted even in the title, since the new textbooks were and are still entitled 'Texts of Modern Greek Literature' (Κείμενα Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας) in contrast to the former textbooks entitled 'Modern Greek Readings' (Νεοελληνικά Αναγνώσματα). The committee responsible for the selection of the texts justified the change made at that time:

The term 'Modern Greek Readings' is very wide and, in the end, remains undefined and uncontrolled. It includes a sea of diverse things. On the contrary, in the "Texts of Modern Greek Literature" there is a ground: literature. There is a wider educational aim which is identical with the 'aim' of literature. There is a criterion: the philological appreciation and the quality of art.¹⁹

This committee (henceforth 1983 committee) consisted chiefly of working Philology teachers and school counselors, some of whom were also authors and poets; while for the selection of the texts they consulted some scholars who selected some 'significant texts'.²⁰ The textbooks were being prepared for a period of seven years, 1976-1983, remaining the same for 23 years, and were only revised once during this period in 2001. The change was minute, though, since the content was just 'updated' with some contemporary writers whose work could be incorporated into the already set themes and periods, and two new units, one for the A' class, entitled 'Our Friends, the Animals', and one for B'

¹⁸ Parisis 1989.

¹⁹ Plakas 1984: 60.

²⁰ For the Gymnasium level the committee consisted of G. Paganos, K. Balaskas, Ch. Milionis and N. Grigoriadis while the same committee prepared the textbooks for Lyceum level with G. Papakostas' contribution. For the justification of their selections, see Plakas 1984.

class, entitled 'The Refugees'.²¹ Since the above changes did not affect the main body of texts, the textbooks of the period 1983-2005 will be treated as a total.

The recently circulated textbooks (2006) are the fruit of a competition among the educational and academic community to produce the best in terms of both quality and most economical textbook. The most significant alteration in the new situation is the academic involvement, which signals the scholarly community's more active interest in education. This is rather indicative of a change of attitude towards the teaching of literature. Academics' poor interest in the teaching of literature was related to the low-appreciation of the *teaching* of literature and the high-appreciation of philology and the study of literature.²² While in the past the composition of the committee would, most of the time, include some authors or poets, the responsibility for the selection has now been delegated to the academic community alone.

Researching the content of the school textbooks proved to be a vast and complex field, therefore I shall venture to present the initial findings of my research regarding the practices employed inside the textbooks towards these two conflicting attitudes, canon and tradition.

An indisputably and distinctively Modern Greek tradition may easily be sought in the historical approach, based on the conventional periods of Modern Greek literature, which is followed in both series of the textbook for C' class and in all the classes of Lyceum. It is the clearest manifestation of a heritage which belongs to Modern Greeks, starting in Byzantium and continuing, uninterrupted, up to some point in the present. The only contemporary texts to be included are the ones which have proved their value in time; therefore the 1983 committee has allowed a twenty-year gap between the present time and the included texts. In the new textbooks (2006) even texts published three years earlier to the

²¹ Stamoglou 2005.

²² Hontolidou 2002.

publication of the textbooks (namely, books published in 2003) have been included. Along with curriculum changes, the inclusion of contemporary literature signifies a transition from an assumed and timeless literary value to a more critical engagement with the literary production and an emerging transfer to the present.

However, the linear narration of Modern Greek literature is enriched by introductory narratives, where the contribution of each period to the development of literature, to the encouragement of the Greek nation and to the promotion of universal values is highlighted. For a first time, in this new series, a new textbook, entitled 'History of Modern Greek History' supplements the teaching of the main coursebook. A homogenized past is being constructed, along with a distinctive history of Modern Greek literature as if the latter exists independently of history and changes according to its own inner logic.

The collective spirit which tradition represents has plagued the position of translated foreign literature in the same textbook, which is incorporated into the set periods of Modern Greek Literature. Thus, one can see under the title 'Phanariots and the Romantics of Athens' a poem by Samuel Coleridge entitled 'Job without hope', or under the title 'New Athenian School' a short story by Anton Chekhov entitled 'The Obese and the Thin'. The reluctance to omit the adjective 'Modern Greek' from the title of the textbooks, namely turning it into 'Texts of Literature', which would be less confusing and closer to the content included, shows the difficulty to restrict the centralized source of Modern Greeks' cultural authority and reconstruct the content on the basis of a multicultural plurality.

The new textbooks have shown a new attitude towards disregarded trends. A much-discussed absence from the 1983 textbooks was surrealism. The 'inapproachable', fragmented, language of surrealism, on the one hand, and the late scholarly appreciation of the literary movement, on the other, inhibited the

inclusion of any surrealists in the Gymnasium textbooks. An introductory narrative stresses the contribution of Greek surrealism in the introduction of radical changes in poetry and in painting and in the development of post-war literary production.

For different reasons, Romantic poetry and prose were also absent from the textbook of all classes in the 1983 series. The use of '*katharevousa*'²³ by its representatives was far from welcomed in a series of textbooks which had a strong orientation towards demotic language. There was only a narrative linking the periods where the 'negative attitude' towards Romanticism is explicit, since both poetry and prose are considered 'insignificant'.²⁴ In the 2006 textbooks, Greek Romanticism is rehabilitated and the narrative preceding the texts seeks similarities with the European Romanticism. It is also important that Romantic prose is being reevaluated, indicative of the tendency of literary criticism towards ignored works until the 1980s. This re-appreciation of the aforementioned movements demarks the relativity of tradition rather than its function in absolute terms.

Canon, however, being less democratic than tradition, functions in a less explicit way in the school textbooks. First of all, where the thematic classification is

²³ '*Katharevousa*' was the official written language of the state, a scholarly form of the Greek language, very close to the ancient Greek. It was introduced in the eighteenth century by Adamantios Corais and was used until 1976. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a movement against the prevalence of '*katharevousa*', demoticism, advocated the use of the spoken language, the demotic. The debate between purists (supporters of '*katharevousa*') and demoticists (supporters of the spoken language) is known as the 'Language Question'. For an introduction to and description of the "Language Question" and the debate between demoticists and advocates of *katharevousa*, see R. Beaton 1999: 296-365. For demoticism in relation to literature, see Tziouvas 1986. For the polarity between *katharevousa* and demotic and the consequent diglossia, see G. Babiniotis 2002: 199-207. Babiniotis 2002: 200 concludes that the Language Question in Greece was 'a politico-social and pedagogical, ideological question and not just philological'.

²⁴ Kountoura 2006.

followed, the themes in both series are exactly the same, preserving even the same titles in the thematic units, despite the complete alteration of texts included. Moreover, according to the committee responsible for the authorship of the 1983 textbooks, it was the texts that indicated the thematic units, which cannot be the case for the new textbooks. Thematic classification is not so 'innocent', as Jay points out:

Themes, like periods, derive from and are determined by a previously canonized set of texts and authors [...] Thematic classification can be especially discriminatory since themes are by definition repeated elements of totality or metanarrative centered in an historically limited point of view.²⁵

Apart from the broad thematic canon, a secondary one functions in relation to the authors and their selected works. I have examined so far the popularity of specific authors and have found a corpus of authors who are represented by more than one text in each of the textbooks. For the 1983 series this was even more evident, since more texts were included and one could see, for example, Greece's national poet, Solomos, represented by eleven texts, when others would have only one and only in one class. This happens in the new series as well, but more moderately; while it is interesting that there is a shift of focus from the generation of the 1880s to the generation of the 1930s corresponding with the shift of focus of the philological critics to this generation.

Furthermore, this selection becomes even more eclectic; four of the most popular authors are present in all three textbooks, despite the different approach to literature followed. This hierarchical prevalence of the specific authors is the clearest manifestation of how canon prevails in the educational context.

²⁵ Jay 1995: 22.

Since each textbook includes a range of texts, it would be further elucidating to examine which author is included in which thematic unit and with which text – another interesting topic for research. Elytis, for example, is always present in the thematic unit ‘Nature’ as the predominant bard of Greece’s natural beauty; the saint of Modern Greek prose, as frequently characterized, Papadiamantis, could not be absent from the thematic unit ‘Religious life’. This stereotypical presentation unveils the conservative approach to literature followed where an unspoken but systematic legitimacy and authorization takes place.

Another point of interest which I am researching at the moment is the introductory and biographical notes preceding and following a text. In the 1983 series, these were mainly full of value-laden statements about the text or the author’s significance, while for the most ‘significant’ authors, both the biographical and introductory notes tended to be lengthier, with more follow-up questions exhausting the various aspects of the text. In the 2006 series, an implicit establishment of an author is achieved via the absence of a biographical note. As awkward as this may sound, if a biographical note follows after a text, then this author was not considered important and therefore, s/he was not included in the supplementary historical textbook. Thus, it is only children’s literature writers and foreign authors who have a biographical note, assuming that a student must have been familiar with the rest.

The emergence of contemporary children’s literature in the new textbooks for the A’ and B’ class of Gymnasium was the outcome of a long debate about its omission from the school textbooks for Literature teaching which entailed the students’ unfamiliarity with literature addressed to them and, consequently, with topics and issues that interest them.²⁶

The incorporation of children’s literature should be associated with the significant development and proliferation of literary production addressed to children during

²⁶ Patsiou 1999.

the last twenty years in Greece but also with the professionalization of this field of literature in Greek universities.²⁷ It should also be linked to the change of attitude towards children's literature worldwide. The innovation though has not been completely accommodated since the textbook for C' class lacks any reference to children's literature or does not include any author who addresses a 'younger' audience. Children's literature has been characterized 'the great excluded' due to the lack of references to its content and representatives in histories of literature and book reviews all over Europe and was very much devalued compared to adult's literature until recently.²⁸

Changes have also been observed between the two series regarding the genres considered as literature. Along with the established genres of poetry, prose and a touch of drama – dominant in all textbooks – other cultural expressions, such as songs, start being accommodated in the new series. The inclusion of popular culture in the literary canon shows a disposition for seeking the social production of the meaning of the text. Thus, literature is turned into a 'cultural locus'²⁹ and its classical division into the aforementioned established genres is for a first time questioned.

One may plausibly wonder whether multiculturalism could ever find a place in this overwhelming Modern Greek dominance and indeed the mechanisms which have been motivated to guard and condition any threatening emergence do not leave much room for it. Nevertheless, multiculturalism enters the literature textbooks in the content of the selected texts; empathy for the Other and an increased social character can easily be sought inside the texts, which is reinforced in the questions following them. These intentions also explain the remarkable increase in the prose texts in the school textbooks in comparison to poems. As Koumbarou-Hanioti observes:

²⁷ See Giakos 1993 for the didacticism in children's literature from the past till the present.

²⁸ Escarpit 1995.

²⁹ Paschalidis 1999.

This choice is not, of course, fortuitous. The prose texts, due to their lack of realism, are converted into a powerful medium of ideological standards and, additionally, they can “easily” undergo multiple adaptations, which some selectors attempt unconsciously and which the tribunals of the Ministry of Education approve. Hence, it is apparent that the state, armed with “pedagogical” choice criteria, promotes with the content of the textbooks a specific set of beliefs for the nation, for its politics and ethics. The aesthetic principles and the demands of literature are seen from this perspective.³⁰

To conclude, what seems to be missing from most discussions about the content of the school textbooks and from all policies employed so far in the teaching of Literature is the understanding that literature at school is subject to different and manifold procedures and it is not the reflection of its philological counterpart. Bernstein has used the term ‘recontextualisation’ to argue that the educational discourse of a discipline is the fruit of its recontextualized theoretical equivalent. In the pedagogical field the theoretical discourse cannot be used as it is; it needs to leave the field of production of the discourse and be reinstated into the secondary field of recontextualization.³¹

I hope that I have shown that the attitude towards the past, the tradition and the hierarchies in it, is obfuscated. A progressive foreground is highlighted which conceals a firm, conservative background, while by now it should have been evident that canon and tradition are not conflicting but supplementary attitudes when they enter the school gates, since the canon reflects what it means to be educated and the tradition what to be Modern Greek. The homogenous Modern Greek culture is promoted through a historical approach to the past, whilst a

³⁰ Koumbarou-Hanioti 2000: 344.

³¹ Bernstein 1996. The recontextualisation in Literature teaching has been further discussed in Frydaki 2003 and in Kountoura 2006.

multicultural approach asks for a sense of literature in history and needs to make a long way to reach the Greek school. Thus, the curricular intentions mainly blur the conservative approach followed, the imported changes are parochial and they, basically, do not aim at challenging the cultural authority of the Modern Greek literary past. As Williams observes:

The reality of any hegemony, in the extended political and cultural sense, is that, while by definition, it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive... Any hegemonic process must be especially alert and responsive to the alternatives and oppositions which question or threaten its dominance.³²

³² Williams 1992:113.

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