

# What do we mean by “Greek-Australian Literature”?

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## RÉSUMÉ

Le terme littérature greco-australienne a été utilisé tant par les universitaires Grecs en Australie que par les critiques en général depuis 1980. L'origine et la fonction du terme sont examinées dans cet article. Il semble qu'il en résulte du multiculturalisme nationaliste adopté aux années soixante-dix par les deux partis politiques australiens avec comme but de donner une autonomie limitée aux groupes ethniques minoritaires. Cette politique a été adoptée à condition que les groupes ethniques souscrivent aux valeurs du groupe majoritaire et se considèrent comme faisant partie de la nation australienne. C'était en particulier le cas en littérature où les littératures minoritaires étaient perçues comme des miniatures nationales et comme parties de la littérature nationale, maintenant multiculturelle. Comme de miniatures nationales elles façonnaient l'identité du groupe malgré le fait qu'elles étaient lues par un petit nombre de ses membres et bien que la plupart des textes ne traitaient pas directement des questions d'identité. La littérature greco-australienne ainsi définie - une parmi les autres littératures minoritaires - a été probablement celle qui a remporté le plus grand succès et a attiré plus l'attention des critiques.

## ABSTRACT

The term Greek-Australian Literature has been used since the early 1980s both by Greek academics in Australia and by literary critics in general. In this article are examined the origins of the term and its function. It is shown to derive from the nationalist multiculturalism which was adopted in the 1970s by both sides of Australian politics and which tended to give a certain limited autonomy to the minority ethnic groups, on condition that they subscribed to the core values of the majority group, thus seeing themselves and being seen, as part of the Australian nation. This was particularly the case in literature where minority literatures were seen as both miniature national literatures and parts of the national-now multicultural-literature. As miniature national literatures they provide a group identity even though they are actually read only by a small number of the group members and even though many of the texts included in them do not deal directly or openly with group identity questions. Greek-Australian literature, one of many such minority literatures, has probably been the one that has gained most critical attention and been the most successful in the above terms.

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## What do we mean by “Greek-Australian Literature”?<sup>1</sup>

Greek-Australian Literature was written before it was invented. This entails two points. The first is that there are texts which are now included in the ‘canon’ of Greek-Australian Literature, which were written well before the category and its verbal expression (the term ‘Greek-Australian Literature’) came into use, certainly before it came into wide use.

I suspect that the term ‘Greek-Australian’ first came into existence to describe people and their activities, particularly those born of Greek parents in Australia, but also those born in Greece who had achieved mastery of the English language and taken on some aspects of Australian culture. Thus in the special issue of *Ο Κρίκος* of 1957 devoted to the Greeks of Australia, Δημήτρης Καλομοίρης speaks of *Ο Ελληνοαυστραλός σκηνοθέτης, Πήτερ Βερνάρδος, “Ελληνοαυστραλοί επιστήμονες”*. Of course it is not a great leap to apply the term to the productions of such people. Interestingly, in the same issue, Ανάργυρος Φατσέας describes a story he contributes as ‘Ελληνοαυστραλιανό Διήγημα’<sup>2</sup>. This type of coupling (and the consciousness that lies behind it) is, I think, a little before its time. It is not till the 1980s that the idea of Greek-Australian Literature is accepted both within the Greek minority and the Australian literary establishment.

The second point is that the term points to an invention rather than a discovery. It is a conceptual category which is neither necessary nor inevitable for the student of its texts, but which brings in its wake certain ways of grouping, categorization, reading and valuing. These are not necessarily realized to the full and actually practiced by those who use the term.

As I have already indicated, the term Greek-Australian Literature came into wide use in the 1980s and 90s, along with such siblings as German-Australian, Italo-Australian and Chinese-Australian Literatures. They are the products of nationalist multiculturalism, the policy of offering inclusion in the nation to those migrants of ethni-

cities other than the founding ones, which, in the Australian case, are usually lumped together in the inelegant term 'Anglo-Celt'.

Before nationalist multiculturalism took hold in the seventies, people of the minority ethnicities were referred to as 'New Australians'. On the face of it this sounds more nationally inclusive than the various terms multiculturalism has generated; but, for reasons that I shall not go into here<sup>3</sup>, in reality, it was not. 'New Australians' really expressed the desire of the 'cornstalks'<sup>4</sup> that the migrants become their clones in double quick time, shedding all their past – language, culture, history – and adopting a 'cornstalk' identity. Its underlying assumption was that human identities can be changed like clothes at a moment's notice. It was an unreal expectation and caused much suffering.

The difference between the two policies can be understood as assimilation versus integration. Assimilation demands that the members of the minority ethnic groups become part of the nation by adapting all of the ways of the host society and abandoning the culture (including the language) they brought with them from their homelands. Very few minority ethnic migrants are able even to approximately satisfy this demand, although many of their children born after migration can travel, more or less successfully, down this road. Over a period of years such a policy results in unacceptably high levels of return migration; unacceptably high, that is, for a nation which wishes to increase its population.

Integration, on the other hand, requires only that the members of the minority ethnic groups accept a set of core values, without the adoption of which we could not speak of citizenship. For the rest, each individual and each minority ethnic group is free to retain and to develop - with more or less state aid - the culture/s they brought from the homeland. This is a much more humane policy than assimilation and much more appropriate for a nation which wants population growth through migration.

This policy of integration has been adopted by both Labor and Coalition governments since 1972, although the present Coalition

government of John Howard is rather uncomfortable with it, and is trying to turn the word 'multiculturalism' into one that is not spoken in polite society.

Although the policy has been official government policy for more than twenty years, it has been resisted by some sections of the population. Furthermore, even if it had not met with silent and sullen undermining - not so silent today with several politicians voicing their opposition - it was never going to deliver all that it promised, for its hidden assumption is that time will bring about what assimilation can not, and many of those who have embraced it have been unaware of this. Nevertheless, it has signaled a change of attitude in Australia towards minority ethnic cultures, and has itself assisted in this change.

What is the ideological burden of such categories as 'Greek-Australian Literature'? First, it implies some kind of similarity between the literary production of a nation and the literary production of a minority ethnic group within a nation.

There are many institutions that a nation requires if it is to take its place in the 'international family of nations', and one of these is a national literature. This is so even if the nation shares a language with another nation, as is the case with Australia, which shares English with the United Kingdom, the United States, and many other English-speaking nations, and Cyprus, which shares Greek with Greece. Each nation needs its national literature which can be read as the narrative and description of that nation. This is so even with texts that do not deal with the nation (or some aspect of it) thematically. Modern Greek Literature is probably more nationalistic than the other literatures I am familiar with; but even so, not every text in it is part of the national story. To take an example: the 'Carmina Profana' of Σταύρος Βαβούρης (1983) operates at the personal level, below that of the nation, and at a 'universal' level, the level of meditations on Fate, which is above that of the nation. However, a critic thoroughly committed to the cause of the national literature might read these poems 'against the grain', might deal with some aspect of language or some allusion that can be shown to illuminate the national story. The point,

however, is that a nation has a national literature although only an ardent nationalist would want to read each individual text as an exemplum of the nation.

To be a 'proper' minority ethnic group within the Australian nation, the Greeks and their descendants in Australia need a literature of their own, and this is Greek-Australian Literature. It helps to give validity and 'authenticity' to the social formation. Many of the Greeks who are included in it - and even more of their descendants - remain contentedly unaware of its existence, but a similar phenomenon may be observed with national literatures. Many Greek-Australian authors become quite angry with their fellow Greeks who steadfastly refuse to buy the books that they have gone to considerable expense to print and publish. However, it is not necessary for their books to be read by great numbers for them to do their work. Greek-Australian Literature helps to establish the Greek-Australian community as part of the multicultural Australian social imaginary, to use Castoriadis's useful term. It has done this job well, for Greek-Australian Literature is generally acknowledged as the most successful of the minority ethnic literatures of Australia.

Many of the texts of Greek-Australian Literature can be read easily and 'naturally' as social documents - even when they are dealing with personal experiences and feelings - but not all of them. All of the other concerns of literature from time immemorial, such as love, death, family joys and sorrows, personal happiness or sadness, can be more prominent and, again, an 'against the grain reading' might be needed to make them specifically Greek-Australian.

Greek-Australian Literature, then, is an ethnic minority literature constructed on the model of a national literature. There is, however, another aspect to it. It is an overlap category which produces an overlap literature. It includes texts written in Greek, which might easily be thought of as belonging to Greek Literature, that is, as part of the literature of the Diaspora, and texts written in English which might be thought of as part of Australian Literature. In this way, the category could be broken down and its texts distributed between two national literatures.

It is interesting to notice in this connection an important anthology that makes no use of the term 'Greek-Australian'. This anthology first appeared in 1985 as *Η Λογοτεχνική Παρουσία των Ελλήνων στην Αυστραλία* and then in 1987 as *Greek Voices in Australia*. Basically, the first is the Greek language version and the second the English language version. The texts were collected and edited by George Kanarakis of Charles Sturt University. As is apparent in both the titles, Dr Kanarakis makes no use of the term 'Greek-Australian'. The same is true in the extended introduction and other editorial material in the volumes. It would be an interesting exercise to consider to what extent the implications of multiculturalism that I have isolated and analysed are present in the volumes, even though the term is not used, and to what extent the category is replaced by the distribution of the texts to the two national literatures.

Whatever such an analysis would show, the overlap quality raises another possibility. Greek-Australian Literature can be seen as a supra-national, or at the least a cross-national, literature. In this case it might even be seen as part of the process by which the 'national' is beginning to lose its centrality as the most important organizing principle of international relations. In this case, too, the whole of Greek-Australian Literature belongs to Australian Literature, and undermines the concept of a national literature as the product and possession of one exclusive ethnic group. If all of this sounds rather muddle-headed, this should cause no surprise; for the ideas of nations and of ethnicity exist in the world of inter-subjectivity, a notoriously confused and confusing area.

Although a body of criticism has developed around Greek-Australian Literature, not much of it is devoted to a discussion of the theoretical issues of categorization and construction. I myself have tried to deal with the subject on many occasions but I would like to mention for any interested readers only three essays. My 1983 essay in *AUMLA* (Journal of the Australian Universities Language and Literature Association), was the earliest presentation of my views on the matter. A much fuller treatment is to be found in the Introduction

to the anthology *Reflections* which was published in 1988. My latest version, before this essay, was published in 1994 in the journal *Culture and Policy* in an essay called 'Multiculturalism and Australia's National Literature'.

Another critic who has written interestingly on the subject is Helen Nickas in her Introduction to her monograph *Migrant Daughters. The female voice in Greek-Australian prose fiction* (1992). Although she points to several problems with the category, she decides that it is the best to hand and uses it herself.

The third critic to enter this territory is Nikos Papastergiadis in an essay 'The journeys within: Migration and identity in Greek-Australian Literature' (1992). He argues that the binary opposition between Greek Diaspora (best illustrated by Kanarakis) and Greek-Australian (with the location in Australia and best illustrated by Castan) leaves out the most important element, that indicated by the hyphen which points to the space that is neither Greek nor Australian but a kind of a no man's (or no person's) land in which the most important problems of the minority ethnic groups are being fought out. He argues that both Kanarakis and Castan present belonging (to Greece in one case and Australia in the other) as if it were the reality, while the reality is a rupture within identity, a non-belonging to either place.

Papastergiadis is making an important point which adds to our understanding of Greek-Australian Literature. It is not, as at some points he seems to imply, an overthrowing of the category as the fact that he himself uses it shows. The hyphen is an important part of the term and at the level of the individual text, including some of the finest, it is the rupture within the identity, the space between Greece and Australia that has to be bridged, that activates the imaginative powers. This can be seen in the prose work of Antigone Kefala which Papastergiadis discusses in his article and in Vasso Kalamaras's fine poem 'The Farmer' who curses Greece 'που τον έδωξε τόσο μακρυστα ξένα', and Australia, whose soil gives him a bountiful harvest, but which he can not love because he has given his heart to the Greek soil. There are, however, many texts in which the sense of belonging in

Greece and others in which the sense of belonging in Australia is unmistakable. An example of the latter is George Pappaellinas's *Ikons*. There is no question that Peter Mavromatis has a strong sense of being Australian even if he has his existential woes, in part caused by his parents' ties with Cypriot customs. Equally, Manny Kanellis of Angelo Loukakis's *Messenger* embraces Australian identity.

The main point, however, is that whatever individual works might explore in Greek-Australian identity, the effect of the sum total, that is, of the literature taken as a whole, is to stress that Greek-Australians are as Australian as anyone else. None of this is to deny the identity problems that many Australians have, or the specific Greek-Australian identity problems that many texts reveal. Quite often a whole is more than the sum of its parts and to construct the category of Greek-Australian Literature is to turn signs of a distance between Greek and Australia into an Australian space.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper in Greek was published in the Cypriot journal *Ακμή* 33, 1997, 65-72.
2. Interestingly, in an article in the same *Ο Κρίκος*, Φατσέας theorises on the need to form a new consciousness, the Greek-Australian.
3. Ghassan Hage's *White Nation* (1998) is an interesting analysis of multiculturalism, on the basis of which an explanation could be attempted. I would add, however, that he seriously understates the benefits that many non-foundation ethnics have gained from multiculturalism..
4. This was the term used in the early days of settlement in New South Wales to distinguish the native-born from the new arrivals. It was generally believed that the native-born were finer physical specimens, taller and leaner than the newcomers.

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