MIGRANT WRITING IN MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA: THE CASE OF THE GREEKS

George Kanarakis*

RÉSUMÉ

A travers les écrits des Grecs de l'Australie, cet article examine la place de la litterature immigrante en relation avec son appartenance soit à la litterature nationale australienne, soit à la litterature nationale du pays d'origine (pour des écrits dans une autre langue que l'anglais). Il est montré que tant et aussi longtemps que cette litterature est classifiée et analysée séparément d'un corpus national -australien ou du pays d'origine -, celle-ci demeurera une sous-catégorie. En outre, cette sous-categorisation diminue non seulement l'importance de la litterature des immigrants mais aussi le corpus littéraire national. Et cela parce que peu importe à quel corpus national appartient un auteur, il sera examiné comme faisant partie d'un noyau central et non pas d'un groupe minoritaire.

ABSTRACT

Through the literary writings of the Greeks in Australia, this paper examines the position of migrants' writing in relation to the national body of literature to which it belongs - whether this be Australian literature or, arguably for works written in languages other than English, to the national literature of the writer's homeland. It is shown that to whichever body the literature belongs it will remain a sub-category as long as it is classified and examined separetely to the main body of the literature. Furthermore, sub-categorization diminishes not only the stature of migrant's literature, but also the central body itself. Thus whichever national literature a writer belongs to, his works must be examined as a part of its central core and not as part of the writing of a minority group.

Although in this article I will use the literature of the Greeks in Australia (first generation migrants and their children) as a paradigm of literature written by migrants, the arguments I will develop can be applied to the literary writings of any migrant group from a non-English speaking background, certainly in relation to Australia and to varying degrees, depending on each country, to the homeland.

The fact that the concept of centres and peripheries has become the theme of conferences, such as that of the Second National Conference of Modern Greek Studies held recently (25-28 September 1994) by the Modern Greek Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand, which included papers on the literature of the Greeks in Australia under this thematic umbrella, shows that there exist, or that people believe there to exist, centres and peripheries either affecting this literature – and by extension, the literatures of other migrant groups – from without or existing within it.

Following and studying the literature of the Greeks in Australia[1] over the last nearly twenty years as it has developed within the social and cultural environment of this country, for example, I have come to believe that one, if not the,

*Charles Sturt University (Australia)

major problem for this literature, and for multicultural literature in general, is the very existence itself of centres and peripheries.

Opinions are divided on the classification of the literary works written by migrants, but it is not my intention in this article to support either side of this debate, since I have done this in various other publications.[2] What it is my intention to demonstrate here is that whatever way this literature is classified we run the danger of relegating it to a periphery.

Some believe, based on philological criteria, that the language in which a work is written and, consequently, its intended readership, determines its national identity and thus the body of literature to which it belongs.[3] Others, using geographical, social and other criteria, base their decision on a variety of factors, such as where a writer is living at the time when a work is written, the theme of a work, etc.[4], or even the writer's relationship with a person of a migrant background.[5]

Unfortunately, both these forms of classification unavoidably lead to marginalisation. If language is the determining factor for the body of literature to which a work belongs, then the literary works written in English by Greeks or any other migrants in Australia belong to Australian literature and those written in another language belong to the literature of that homeland country; so, for example, those in Greek belong to Modern Greek literature.

The problems here are twofold, because separating the works into two bodies of literature then allows two possibilities for their marginalisation and placement in the periphery.

Those works which fall to Australian literature are too often regarded as "ethnic" or "multicultural" literature – something interesting and perhaps rather exotic, but certainly not of the mainstream, while those which fall to Modern Greek literature, for example, become sub-classified under the literature of the Greek diaspora, something often ignored by both readers and critics in Greece, or viewed with condescension, and again certainly not part of the mainstream.

It is interesting to note here that Australia does not regard its expatriate writers separately and in a sub-category, but as an integral part of Australian literature. Examples which come to mind here are, from earlier decades George Johnston and Charmian Clift who both spent a number of years living on Greek islands and writing there, and of contemporary writers David Malouf and Germaine Greer, both of whom have lived in Italy for some years now, with occasional visits to Australia.

On the other hand, if we decide that geographical, social and other criteria are the determining factors, then everything produced by Greek or other migrant writers in Australia, whether it is written in English, Greek or any other language, belongs to Australian literature.

In this case, all their works can be placed under the banner of "ethnic" or "multicultural" literature, and thus on the periphery of Australian literature. In addition, those works written in a language other than English are doubly marginalised since, accessible as they are to only a very small proportion of the Australian population, they exist, as minority foreign-language works, on the periphery of the periphery! Moreover, if one considers Australian literature to be peripheral to English literature as some academics still postulate, then all these works become further marginalised, with the foreign-language ones so far out in the periphery that they are almost lost in the haze of distance!

So, whether there is one centre, Australia, or two, the homeland and Australia, migrant writers in Australia find their works examined under a separate category from those of the mainstream writers of that country.

In the case of Greece and the literature written in its diaspora, as with other homelands to varying degrees, little attention is paid to the works written beyond the boundaries of the mainland. While some diaspora writers do manage to gain some recognition in Greece, they are very few indeed, and I believe that this lack of recognition is based not on lack of quality in the works written outside Greece, but on the attitude of Greece itself towards the literature of the Greeks of the diaspora. Only rarely or in exceptional cases are Greek writers who live outside Greece, such as Constantine Cavafy of Egypt (1863-1933) and in more recent times Nikos Kahtitsis of Canada (1928-1970), considered worthy of inclusion in works on the history of Modern Greek literature, or included in the curricula of high schools and universities.[6] Moreover, if they do receive attention, however scant, they are often viewed with a paternalistic, even condescending attitude, and judged with different criteria to the writers of Greece itself. This is a grave injustice to the works, as they deserve to be allowed to stand on their own merits and to be judged with the same criteria as works written in Greece – the good placed with the good and the mediocre with the mediocre, to the advantage of the writers of both sides and of the literature overall.

The problem in Australia is somewhat different. While Australia is proud to call itself a multicultural nation, the very term "multicultural" has, in some cases, come to develop almost pejorative connotations.

Multiculturalism, so strongly and enthusiastically promoted and supported from its official inception in 1972 by the Whitlam government, originally applied to all Australians, since all Australians have an ethnic origin, whether they themselves are immigrants or their forebears were. The concept was intended to convey the idea and the practice that every person who lives in Australia, whatever their national or ethnic background, contributes to the rich tapestry that is the Australian nation. Consequently, Americans, New Zealanders, English, Scots, South Africans and others were as much a part of

multiculturalism as the Vietnamese, Greeks, Norwegians, Lebanese and any other group.

Multiculturalism had originally three main concepts, which were a careful balance between social cohesion, cultural identity, and equality of opportunity and access. In 1982, under a later govemment, a fourth concept was added, that of equal responsibility for, commitment to, and participation in society.

But, as Sam Lipski stated recently[7], voices are now increasingly arguing that while the idea of multiculturalism is still sound, its practice and the political exploitation of it have "gone off the rails".

So, all too quickly "ethnic" and "multicultural" have become synonymous with "different, strange, exotic" or even "non-English speaking", and despite the many policies of multiculturalism which helped to alleviate the disadvantages faced by some ethnic groups and their children, and attempted to bring the people of whatever origin together into a cohesive nation, the very naming of some things as "ethnic" or "multicultural" brought them not into the centre but placed them on the periphery of Australian literature. This, I believe, is what has happened with "multicultural" or "ethnic" literature. It has been set apart as a sub-category of Australian literature, or, as Angelo Loukakis, a writer himself, calls it, a "phony sub-branch"[8] and any national literature which, for any reasons whatsoever, separates some of its works into a special category, and concentrates on them only in that category, unavoidably marginalises them and puts them on the periphery.

Furthermore, in the minds of many readers "ethnic" or "multicultural" literature has erroneously become synonymous not only with writers from a non-English speaking background but also almost exclusively with stories about migrants and their lives. Admittedly, much of the literary production of migrants in Australia has been in this vein in the past, with stories of the difficulties of settling in the new land or the problems of being a child of migrant parents and the psychological and social struggle to live simultaneously in two cultures, all having a strong novelty appeal at first. But increasingly the range of works has widened, as we see, for example, in Fotini Epanomitis' recent prize-winning novel *The Mule's Foal*, which thematically is a Greek story, but has no connection whatsoever with the "migrant experience", or the novel currently being written by Tony Maniaty which is set in, and concerns, Indonesia. Yet despite this, the misconception that "multicultural" literature means "migrant stories" often prevails, while, as with any novelty, the appeal of this type of story is waning. This preconceived idea makes it even harder for a writer with a migrant background to be judged as a serious writer whose works transcend the limitations of his or her own experiences or the experiences of their family and friends, and explore far wider themes and concepts.

It is a sad comment on Australian literature that some English-language writ-

ers reputedly do not wish to receive ethnic literary awards, presumably because they feel that this will take them out of the mainstream of Australian literature *perse* and firmly relegate them to the periphery.

It is also worth reminding ourselves that, before the advent of multiculturalism, writers who were themselves, or whose parents were, migrants from a non-English speaking country, were not marginalised in any way if they wrote in English, but were accepted simply as mainstream Australian writers, even as important figures in Australian literature. Writers which come to mind in this respect are: Henry Lawson (whose father was Norwegian, their surname being changed from Larsen), Judah Waten (a Jew from Russia), David Martin (from Hungary) and Marie Bjelke-Petersen (from Denmark), all significant contributors to Australian literature but whom nobody would ever consider marginalising as "immigrant" writers, or in modern terminology as "multicultural" writers.

In a similar manner, the well-known exponent of American literature Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977), who was born in Russia, after living in various European countries settled in the United States in 1940 where he began to write in English. Becoming an American citizen in 1945, he stayed in that country until 1959, and his literary works from this period are firmly established in American literature. In addition, Walt Whitman (1819-1892), Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), Carl Sandburg (1878-1967) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) are just a few of the many American writers of immigrant stock – Whitman's mother was Dutch, Dreiser's parents were both German, Sandburg's parents were both Swedish, and Williams' mother was of Spanish and Jewish origin. Who, however, would consider pushing these writers to the periphery of American literature as "ethnic" writers?

Turning to British literature, Joseph Conrad (1857-1924) was Polish born and originally called Josef Konrad Korzeniowski. He moved to England at the age of 20, knowing nothing of the language of that country, but at the age of 21 he began to write novels and short stories in English. He, too, is firmly established as a writer in that national body of literature, but never referred to as an "ethnic" writer.

An even more interesting example is that of the versatile contemporary novelist and playwright Jan de Hartog (1914-) who wrote his first works in his native Holland, including the novel *Hollandse Glorie* which became a symbol of the Dutch Resistance in the Second World War, and who was forced to escape from Holland in 1943. He fled to England, and a few years after his arrival there he began to write literary works in English. Later he moved to the U.S.A., where he continued his writing in English, and he is now back in England again, still writing. The interesting point about this writer is that he can be found in reference books on Dutch, American and English literatures for the works he wrote while living in each of these countries, but in neither the

American nor the British literatures is he labelled as an "ethnic" or "immigrant" writer.

The point I wish to make here is that if the United States and Britain, each with a large immigrant population, do not see any need to place their English-language writers of migrant background into a sub-category and, consciously or unconsciously, put them on the periphery of their national literatures, what is it about the psychology of the Australian nation that we feel the need to do exactly the opposite?

This does not mean, however, that we cannot select certain writers from within a body of literature and examine them together because of certain common characteristics which they share, be these gender, social class, ethnic origin, writing style, genres they use, or many other such characteristics, but to group them together because of a common characteristic, label them accordingly, and examine them only under this label inevitably relegates them to the periphery.

As a result, not only are such writers and their works disadvantaged, being denied a place within the mainstream and allowed to be judged by the same literary criteria as other works, but this also undeniably harms and weakens the overall body of literature by lessening its range and reducing its richness and variety.

Therefore, dealing first with Modern Greek literature as a relevant example of a homeland literature, it is obvious that there has to be a change of attitude by Greece towards writers who live overseas, mainly on two points as I mentioned earlier:

a) familiarisation and full investigation of the breadth and depth of the literature written by Greeks overseas, to the extent to which it exists in each country, and

b) full and equal integration of this literature and the individual works into the mainstream Modern Greek literature, with the result that it will be evaluated and judged without sentimentality, concessions and special criteria, but with the same ones that the works of the rest of their fellow mainstream writers are judged and evaluated. In other words, the view which was held by Greek critics in the past, such as Manolis Yialourakis, the writer and critic from Egypt, who is quoted as stating that "what is mainly needed is that the Modern Greek critics understand the special conditions, the special climate of the so-called literature of the Greek diaspora, and evaluate it according to these factors"[9] has no place in today's literary conditions and thought.

Regarding Australian literature and directions for migrant writers and their works, a number of points could be made, of which I feel two are particularly pertinent.

First, if we accept that those writers who compose their works in a language

other than English belong to Australian literature, then it is important for the writers themselves to accept that if they do not have their works translated into English, not only will they be restricted to a very small readership in this country, but more importantly they will not be known to the general Australian readership. Thus their works will remain inaccessible and unevaluated on a national and objective level.

Second, I am very apprehensive about the sub-categorisation of works by migrants and their offspring into "multicultural" literature, for it is obvious that the outcome of this has been their marginalisation. I am hesitant to state categorically that it would be better if this categorisation were not made, because it does have some benefits for writers in the form of grants, awards, etc. But I feel it would be better for the writers concerned, as well as for Australian literature as a whole, if all our literary works belonged to an integrated centre, free of peripheries. When this time comes it will be a sign of the maturity of Australian literature, as well as of its writers, literary critics and readers.

In conclusion, according to the criteria used, whether we consider that the literary production of migrants in Australia belongs to two centres (the foreign-language works to the homeland literature and the English-language works to Australian literature), or all of it (regardless of language and intended readership) to one centre, Australia, it can be said without doubt that all these writers, like any writers in the world, contribute through their works to a specific national body of literature.

In fact, the particular characteristics which appear in the works of the migrant writers in Australia, that is for Australian literature the element of origin and its social and cultural manifestations, while for homeland literatures the element of country of residence and the resultant influences of that country reflected through their works, increase the richness and the multidimensional character of the specific literature. These should not be seen as elements which give rise to sub-categories and, therefore, to marginalisation, since the creation of peripheries for any literature ultimately harms the literature by diminishing the centre itself. On the contrary, both homeland and Australian literatures will be richer and more robust when the sub-categories of "diaspora" and "multicultural" or "ethnic" have waned, and all the works previously labelled as such constitute inseparable elements of the mainstream of the particular national literature to which they belong.

NOTES

1. For a study of this literature from its first appearance early in this century to the mid-1980s, as well as biographical information on the writers and an anthology of their works, see George Kanarakis, **Greek Voices in Australia: A**

Tradition of Prose, Poetry and Drama, Sydney, Australian National University Press, 1987.

2. For my position in this debate in relation to the literature of the Greeks in Australia see, among other publications, George Kanarakis, "The Greek Literary Presence in Australia", **New Literature Review**, No.15 (1988a): 1-10, and "The Literature of Greeks in Australia: A Study of its Identity and Development", in A. Kapardis and A. Tamis, **Afstraliotes Hellenes: Greeks in Australia**, Melbourne, River Seine Press, 1988b, pp. 41-51.

3. See, for example, Angelo Loukakis, "A National Literature", **The Bulletin** Literary Supplement, Vol.104, No.5372 (5 July 1983): 60, 62; Kanarakis, 1988a; Kanarakis, 1988b; Phaedon Bouboulidis, "The Linguistic National Identity of Modern Greek Writers", **Antipodes** (Melbourne), Nos 33-34 (1993): 32-35 [in Greek]; N.G. Contossopoulos, "Problems of Literary and Language Parentage", **Koinonikes Tomes** (Athens), Vol.6, No.60 (December 1994): 453-455 [in Greek].

4. See, for example, Con Castan, "What is Greek Australian Literature?", **Chronico**, Nos.8-9 (1988): 4-12; Jim Kable, "Multicultural Australian Literature and Me", in Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley (eds), **Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations**, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1992, pp. 86-91.

5. An example of this is the awarding of the 1994 Ethnic Writers' Award to Gillian Bouras, an Australian writer from a family of English, Scottish and Irish origin, several generations in Australia, who is married to a Greek.

6. To my knowledge, only at the University of Thessaloniki have some Greek writers of Australia been included for study in the subject on Modern Greek literature, and this in recent years.

7. "Somehow, Our Melting Pot Seems to be Working", **The Sydney Morning Herald**, 16 September 1994, p.13.

8. Loukakis, 1983, p.60.

9. In Yiannis Hadzinis, "The Literature of the Greeks Abroad and Petros Magnis", **Vias**, Vol.13, Nos.110-113 (January 1960):4 [in Greek].