

Greek-Australian Literature: Between 'Majors'

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine la place qu'occupe la littérature gréco-australienne, une 'mineure' coincée entre deux 'majeures', l'australienne et la grecque (en Grèce). Cependant, l'article n'attaque pas seulement les littératures 'majeures' en raison de leur traitement arbitraire ou injuste qui marginalise les écrivains Gréco-australiens, mais tente d'expliquer pourquoi cela se passe ainsi. Dans cet ordre d'idées, l'article discute de façon critique des écrits de la première génération de Gréco-australiens ainsi que de leur développement, de la poésie orale populaire à des oeuvres ayant une approche plus littéraire et enfin à quelques oeuvres hautement littéraires. Ces dernières occupent maintenant une place au sein de la littérature australienne 'majeure' mais non pas -pour le moment- dans celle de la Grèce. Cet article affirme que l'isolement linguistique et culturel de la plupart des Gréco-australiens soit des 'centres' australiens, soit des 'centres' grecs, a sérieusement freiné la création d'oeuvres littéraires substantielles.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the position of Greek-Australian literature as a 'minor' between two 'majors', the Australian and the Greek (in Greece). It does not however simply attack the 'major' literatures for arbitrarily, or unjustly marginalising Greek-Australian writers, but it attempts to explain why this may be so. In order to do that, the paper critically discusses the writing by first generation Greek-Australians and its development from community oral poetry, to works with a more literary approach, to a few highly 'textual' works which have now attained a place in the Australian major literature, albeit not in the Greek as yet. The paper contends that the linguistic and cultural isolation of most Greek-Australians from either the Australian or the Greek 'centres', has seriously limited the creation of substantial literary works.

To begin in the subjective mode, the notion of 'major' and 'minor' literatures first became an issue for me in the early eighties when I had to decide on a topic for my research. As I was doing combined studies in Greek and English literatures, I thought at first that one of the 'major' Greek poets (from Greece) would be a suitably respectable topic. This however soon changed after I enrolled in a subject of 'Australian' literature and for the first time I heard talk of a 'cultural cringe' and terms which had not concerned me until then, such as 'centre' and 'margins', 'major' and 'minor', 'mainstream' and 'periphery'. For those not familiar with Australian literature, English departments did not teach much else except the English canon, excluding therefore any Australian writers. In the seventies and more so in the eighties, however, Australian literature became a subject of study, followed in 1984 in the Greek Department of Melbourne University by a half unit of literature of the Greek diaspora. Needless to say that

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the topic of my research was swiftly changed from a 'major' Greek poet (from Greece) to an 'emerging' poet of Greek descent living and writing in the Greek language in Anglophone Melbourne. In other words, I was embarking on a path away from the 'canon' and into the area of 'minors', with social history and cultural politics being at the core of any discussion about literature.¹

It has been so often said that this is the era of the minorities. The era of 'de-centering', of 'storming the citadels', of challenging the 'centres'. This 'revolution' has also been fortified by changes in literature departments of universities where even up to the seventies, nothing but canonical works were taught. With theories such as marxism, feminism and, of course, post-structuralism and post-modernism, canons have been challenged, be that on grounds of ethnicity, race, class or gender.

The great irony is of course, the illusion that by challenging the 'canon', the result will be a more inclusive body which reflects more justly and democratically the historical conditions which produced it. What happens instead is that the formerly 'minor' literature goes on to become 'major' in relation to another body which is smaller in size or status. Australian literature, which had successfully challenged the notion of an 'English' canon went on, in turn, to create its own Anglo-dominated canon or major 'Australian' literature, consisting mainly of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (and of course, middle-class) writers, (WASP), which, in turn has been challenged by the various 'minor' ethno-specific literatures which are claiming their place in the Australian canon.²

One of these 'minor' literatures is the Greek-Australian one, an ethno-specific minority group in Australia (a country with English as its official language and Anglo-Celtic [English-speaking] as its dominant culture, despite its official policy of multiculturalism.)³ The Greek-Australian literature which is written by Greek migrants and their offspring in Australia has been given several labels by academic researchers and bureaucrats. Depending on the viewpoint and aim of the research, writers of Greek descent living and writing in Australia have been called 'Greek-Australian', 'Australian Greek', 'diaspora' or less ethno-specifically, 'migrant', 'ethnic', 'multicultural', or 'NESB' (Non-English speaking background) writers.

While ethno-specific terms such as 'Greek-Australian' are often used by both Greeks and Australians in order to differentiate the origin of a particular group or person, terms such as 'ethnic' and 'NESB' are used only by the 'centre' and connote a literature which is not of the centre, and by implication not as worthy.⁴ Ethno-specific minor literatures emerged in the seventies with the adoption of a multicultural policy which gave new migrants in Australia (especially those from the Southern European countries) the freedom to be themselves, to retain their own ethnic culture and to create literary works in their own language.⁵

The dichotomy between 'centre' and 'margins' adds to the difficulties which a Greek migrant writer faces in becoming recognised in Australia. On the other hand, writing in the margins of a dominant Anglo-dominated culture and away from the mother tongue in Greece, Greek writers in Australia are inevitably marginalised by both centres. Dichotomies then are on the one hand artificial constructs which are ephemeral depending on circumstances and tastes, but on the other hand, they reflect real difficulties which prevent writers from gaining wider acceptance.⁶

If we were to look for the distinguishing characteristics of 'centre', and 'margins', 'majors' and 'minors', even though the notion of a 'canon' has been challenged, one can easily see that the literature of the 'centre' is a literature of 'winners'. That is, writers who have been lauded by critics and public (though not always by both) and whose approach is a 'professional' one (without necessarily writing full time). Writers of the 'centre' seem to know about the art of writing, and see it as artifice, not as a personal or social document. For them literature is art. Writers of the 'margins' are, generally, amateurs and lack linguistic and artistic skills to write in the sophisticated manner of those in the 'centre'. In other words, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, minor literatures tend to lack major talent.⁷ On the other hand, as Deleuze and Guattari also note, 'minor' literatures tend to be more political and they have more collective values. Is this the case with Greek-Australian writing?

Community Writing: the Greek Oral Tradition Continues

*We are amateurs and so we earn our bread not by our writings
but by the sweat of our brow.*

- Savas Zoumis, *O Logos* 5 (1995)⁸

Living in the margins of a major language and culture tends to create the phenomenon of "community" writing or more specifically amateur writing which is not usual in the 'major'. Ever since Greek migrants arrived in Australia, they have written and published works in their Greek-language papers and magazines. It was therapeutic for them trying to survive amidst a foreign language and culture. After mass migration began in the 1950s, literary activity flourished not only in newspapers and periodicals, but also books. According to George Kanarakis, the first Hellenist who undertook systematic research into this area, over seventy books of literary works had been published by 1985.⁹

The main characteristic of Greek cultural life in Australia has been its orality. The great majority of Greek migrants who came to Australia up to the middle of

the 1960s were poor, under-educated and came from the rural areas of Greece. Such people, of course, did not have much connection with a written form of literature, except the folk-songs which were 'sung' in their place of origin.¹⁰

These Greek migrants having been nourished in an oral culture with a strong community spirit, continued along similar lines in Australia. Community spirit included the arts, especially poetry (albeit of the folk, oral kind). It was mainly through art that they felt that they were acting as a community. So poetry was the genre which flourished in Australia. The long poetic tradition which they had absorbed was now being perpetuated in Australia. As Jacques Bouchard discovered in his study of Greek-Canadian writers, it is also true of Greek migrants in Australia that they mostly came from a rural culture into an urban one.¹¹ Cut-off from the host Anglo-Australian culture, they set off to revive and perpetuate the rural culture they left behind. A culture rich in folk traditions.

The most known and respected Greek oral poet in Australia is Stathis Raftopoulos, who like his predecessor Odysseus came from Ithaka. In the following poem, the speaker is sending regards to his mother through a friend who is returning home.

Κι αν σε ρωτήσει η μάνα μου,
ποι χρονια με προσμένει,
πες της πως δεν την ξέχασα
κι ας ζω μακριά στην ξένη

Φείγοντας είχα υποσχεθεί
γοργα πως θα γυρίσω.
Μα όλα μου θρθανε στραβά.
Πες της πως δεν θ'αργήσω.

(«Παρε μου χειρετίσματα». *Η μπαλάντα του ξενιτεμένου*, σ. 98)

(And should you be asked by my mother/Who has long been waiting for my return/Tell her that I have not forgotten her/Even though I live in a foreign land./I had promised her/Upon leaving that I would soon return/But things turned out bad/Tell her I will not be long.)

(*This is a rough translation of the above rhymed poem*).

Raftopoulos has been entertaining the Greek community with his poems which he recites by heart at various functions for more than forty years. He mostly improvises for each occasion and is a good example of an oral poet who reflects through his poems the reality of Greek life in Australia. The above poem encapsulates the dilemma facing the early migrants who metaphorically

lived with a foot in each country, discovering that their plan of spending only a few years, making money and returning to the mother country was not to be realised.

Raftopoulos' verse has the quality of real oral composition. It is in the traditional rhyming meter, alive, funny or sad and satirical depending on the occasion. What also makes his poems ring true is that Raftopoulos deals not with the myth of xenitia but with social reality. With his ability to produce hundreds of poems to describe every possible occasion Raftopoulos is the last of a special breed of oral composers. (These poems have subsequently been published by the poet in book form).

Most of the Greeks of his generation onwards, publish their poems either in Greek community magazines (such as *Antipodes* or *O Logos*) or publish them as books at their own expense.

The magazine *Antipodes* is the literary instrument of the Greek-Australian Cultural League which has been a major contributor to the perpetuation of Greek culture in Australia. Since its inception in 1971 it has published its magazine twice yearly giving many people in the Greek community in Melbourne (and in Australia) the opportunity to publish their works. The second magazine *O Logos*, is the instrument of the recently founded Hellenic Writers' Association, giving the opportunity to new writers to publish their poems or short prose pieces.¹²

With Greek being an oral culture and the majority of Greeks in Australia having been nourished in the oral tradition, most Greek migrants in Australia who have some natural artistic ability, 'compose' and publish poems rather than prose works. Their poems are simple, spontaneous compositions about all aspects of their life in Australia, or their past in Greece. However, among the plethora of such community 'poets', very few of them have the freshness and the authenticity of the true oral poet Raftopoulos.

In most of these poems, especially those written by many males, the myth of xenitia predominates such as, excessive nostalgia and idealisation of the mother country; idealisation of Greece as a country which never lost a war; as a country of legendary heroes; idealisation of the 'glorious' past of classical Greece implying unselfconsciously that modern Greeks are the direct descendants of the ancient Greeks. The present does not feature very highly among most of these 'poets'.

Idealising the past is common among many of the poems of these community writers who find an escape into the past good therapy for their present survival. While many writers escape social reality by resting on the laurels of the ancient past with their sentimental and highly patriotic poems, others, especially women choose to confront the present, thus giving us truthful pictures of migrant life in

the fifties and the sixties. Notice, for example the following extracts from poems by Greek migrant women:

Κρατούσα μέσ' στα χέρια μου
μία φωτογραφία.
τον άνθρωπο που θα' περνα
εδώ στην Αυστραλία.

(A black and white photograph/I was clutching in my hand/of the man I was to marry/when in Australia I did land.)

(“Sorrrows of Migration” by Keti Pavlou in *Re-telling the Tale*, p. 15)

Κάθε πρωί και κάθε βραδυ
η ίδια πάντα ε:τωδός
σπιτι, εργοστάσιο, παλι σπιτι
ιδιος ο πόνος, ίδια οδός.

(Every morning, every evening/always the same refrain/the same pain, the same path/home, factory, then home again)

(“Foreign Land”, by Dimitra Koutouli, in *Re-telling the Tale*, p. 106)

The phenomenon of self-publication of books is widely spread for two reasons: Firstly, the Greek community in Australia is too small to be able to make publishing of literature a viable proposition. It would be excessively optimistic to expect that more than five hundred Greeks in Melbourne (much less in Adelaide or Brisbane for example) would be the readers of any writing produced by Greek-Australians. Secondly, many of the works are not ‘professional’ and therefore do not meet the criteria of publishers in the ‘centre’, either in Greece or in Australia (if translated into English). It is in the difference of criteria that the conflict is revealed between orality and textuality, with the latter being the preferred mode of writing in our times. But as Dimitris Tziouas states in his article “Residual Orality and Belated Textuality in Greek Literature and Culture”, the Greek literary tradition is based on orality and not on textuality.¹³

This is true of Australian Greeks and it accounts for the lack of prose writing in Greek-Australian writing, as most of the ‘writers’ have lacked a literary education. If however they write their compositions and publish them in newspapers, periodicals and most importantly in book form, then, they are going to be assessed with the same criteria as any other literary writing. This may account for the lack of interest from the Greek ‘centre’, as some of this amateurish

writing (if and when it comes to their attention) tends to reinforce the stereotype of migrants as workers, not literary writers.

Towards a Literary Approach

Largely due to the fact that Greek literature has been mostly oral, rather than textual (based on western textual patterns), very few Greek writers in Australia (of the first generation) have systematically written prose, especially short stories, and very few novels. Notable exceptions are John Vasilakakos from Melbourne¹⁴ and Dimitris Tzoumakas from Sydney.¹⁵

However, two prominent short story writers (who are also prolific poets), Dina Amanatides from Melbourne and Vasso Kalamaras from Perth are considered by many as the quintessential 'Greek-Australian' writers documenting in literature the Greek-Australian migrant experience. Both arrived in Australia in the fifties having completed at least high school education in Greece. They have been living in Australia ever since and they are two writers dedicated to writing, whereas with most of the community writing is of an amateurish nature.

While many of the community poets perpetuate a myth of xenitia with its concomitant idealisation of the homeland, Amanatides and Kalamaras depict in their short stories the harsh realities faced by the first generation of Greek migrants. In other words, the emphasis in their writing is on the present, not the past.

Deleuze and Guattari have said that minor literatures tend to have a collective value.¹⁶ This is true of Greek-Australian writing. Everything that is said, assumes a larger significance which the writer either intends or which the reader draws from it. In the case of Dina Amanatides, as I have argued previously (*Migrant Daughters*, p. 40), she has a definite aim: to plead the cause of the migrant (all migrants), and to make her characters the mouthpieces of the migrant's grievances. This seems to be a fairly common characteristic of any minor or peripheral group which tries to raise the consciousness of those outside it. Virginia Woolf argued this very point about nineteenth century women writers in England who wrote in the periphery of a male-dominated society.¹⁷

A didactic aspect has a long tradition in Greek literature, and in Amanatides' case, it accounts for the characters in her prose writing who tend to be flat and one-dimensional, always speaking with the same voice, a plot being almost non-existent and the message coming out unequivocally: migration is an unenviable situation. A quick look at her prose works *Petrina Somata*, [*Stone Bodies*], *O Sporos ths Eirinis* [*The Seed of Peace*] and *Homatenioi Anthropoi* [*Earthen People*] will confirm this.¹⁸

While it is true that Amanatides' characters do not have the kind of

complexity often expected from prose works, and they hardly ever surprise us as to the outcome, the repetition of the migrant motif is engraved in the readers' memory. Despite her technique not being of the self-conscious, 'textual' kind, the intensity of feeling is remarkable. While occasionally idealising Greece or often presenting migrants as martyrs, Amanatides also depicts with accuracy the conflict in each migrant's heart of where their loyalties lie: in the country left behind, or in the present. Her eloquent gnomic thought, "They say that the bread of exile is bitter, and yet it nourishes us", encapsulates fully the central dilemma of any migrant. (Skorpies Skepseis [Scattered Thoughts] 1988).

Vasso Kalamaras wrote her first collection of short stories in the fifties, isolated in a small farm town outside Perth. She wrote in an environment which had not the remotest interest in literary pursuits. In observing the people around her, Kalamaras could only see harshness, isolation, dislocation. So she wrote about this experience. Her narratives depict migrant women who try to survive in a hostile and claustrophobic environment which cuts women off from anything that is familiar or friendly.

Kalamaras' depiction of the isolation of the migrant woman is vivid and is as close to reality as it is possible to ascertain from socio-historical accounts or from personal histories. Kalamaras's central narrator gets into the skin of the characters and creates vivid portrayals of lonely women:

Mrs Sophia washed up the evening dishes, calling out two or three times to the children, telling them to go to sleep without any more talk. She swept the kitchen floor and got out the ironing board to iron the shirts and aprons for the shop...

It was the same every evening. Those last hours seemed never ending... She watched the flames which had come to life in the stove, and listened to the monotonous sad bubbling of the water boiling in the kettle. A great weight of loneliness began to oppress her... (*Other Earth*, p. 5)

The women in Kalamaras' short stories are not only oppressed by hard work but in addition, they are also oppressed by a patriarchal system which treats its women as second-class human beings. In the short story "Mademoiselle", Katerina comes to Australia thinking that she was coming to the land of plenty, only to find that her future husband wanted a worker for his shop:

"Hey! where are you, you stupid bitch, blast you!" the heavy angry voice of her husband bellowed from the shop. His tongue dripped

venom and betrayed his irritation...

“I expected to get a woman who would standby in the shop, but instead of that up comes a half-dead cat...” (*Other Earth*, p. 40)

Kalamaras is far from interested in depicting a ‘nice’ picture of migration and perpetuating the myth that migrants always become successful in their new country. While a great number of migrants have settled relatively successfully in Australia, the first two decades, which Kalamaras depicts in her three seminal works (*Other Earth*, *Bitterness* and *A Breadtrap*) are not characterised by success but by great hardship.¹⁹

In her short story “The Pensioners”, the old woman represents the great number of women who in the fifties and sixties were isolated linguistically and socially: “Here I have been driven mad for so many years, despised by people, drowning in a dumb world”. (p. 29). The word dumb, or mutism (μουγγιμάρα in the original Greek), is a key word in Kalamaras’ work, as it clearly represents the state of most Greek migrants in the first two decades of their life in Australia.

As with Amanatides, Kalamaras also depicts a reality which existed for the majority of the migrants who arrived in Australia up till the late sixties. While Amanatides uses ‘types’ to convey her message, Kalamaras uses more true to life, rounded characters, many of whom have become quite memorable.

Literary works by these two writers are indicative of the collective value of migrant writing and of the contribution which a minor literature can make, as they powerfully depict socio-historical realities resulting from the mass-migration of southern-Europeans to Australia.

Literature as High Art

Because most of the Greek community writing in Australia is based on an oral tradition and not having much knowledge of textuality, the reception of this kind of writing from either ‘centre’ (Australian or Greek), has been low-key to dismissive silence. Especially, since the phenomenon of ‘oral’ or community writing has never really existed in Australia (theirs has been mainly a written tradition based on western textual patterns), most mainstream critics in Australia tend to dismiss the majority of such ‘marginal’ writing as not ‘good’ writing.

Robert Dessaix, a critic from the Australian ‘centre’ in his article “Nice Work If You Can Get It” in the *Australian Book Review* (a large-circulation Australian mainstream literary magazine), dismisses constructs such as ‘centre’ and ‘margins’ as an invention of academia and claims that ‘centres’ consist only

of 'good' writing, not of ethno-specific writing. Therefore, he implicitly states, any writing which is 'good' will join the list of 'winners' in the 'centre'.²⁰

Dessaix raised quite a controversy when his article appeared and rightly so. However, his argument does at least raise a significant point: Can literary writing be judged by non-literary criteria?

Despite the politicisation of everything including literature, academic courses in the nineties are still teaching literature (with a capital 'L') in core courses while 'other' works (such as 'ethnic' writers) are offered for study in elective, non-major courses. Proof of this is that those writers of Greek-Australian descent who have been admitted into the mainstream Australian literature are highly 'textual' writers such as the poet Dimitris Tsaloumas (who writes in both Greek and English), the poet and prose writer Antigone Kefala (who writes in English) and many of the Greek migrants' offspring who naturally write only in English.

Tsaloumas and Kefala both arrived in Australia in the early fifties and have been writing at least for the last three decades. In their works, they display all the characteristics of post-modernist writing, a style which is favoured by contemporary tastes and certainly by the 'centres'. It is a style which is aware of its own artifice and which uses words in such a way, as Dessaix has claimed, that raise the story they tell (either in poetry or prose) to literature. Tsaloumas and Kefala, have used extensively the theme of xenitia in their work, but in a highly textual, non-mimetic manner.

While those of the first-generation who write poems or prose came to Australia with high school education at the most and were brought up on a diet of folk songs and high school literary texts which did not include any writings beyond the ethnographic or nationalistic mode, Dimitris Tsaloumas and Antigone Kefala received tertiary education (in the Humanities) in Australia resulting in their gaining a deep knowledge of Western styles of writing and of world literature, as well as literary theory.

In studying the works of Tsaloumas and Kefala, one becomes immediately aware of a high 'textuality' in their work. Despite the fact that I have argued earlier on in this essay that Greeks in Australia have written more poetry because Greece has a long oral tradition (and by implication it is easier to compose a poem than it is to write a novel), both Tsaloumas and Kefala treat poetry as a form of high art and as a means of combining intellectual rigour with deeply-felt emotion.

Their primary concern is the text which they treat as a literary construct. While their contemporaries (Greek migrants in the fifties) worked and developed a community spirit, presumably in order to survive in an alien environment, Tsaloumas and Kefala were becoming educated in the western tradition,

the former graduating from Melbourne University and going on to become a high school teacher of English literature, the latter graduating from Wellington University in New Zealand with an MA in literature. It is significant to note that both writers moved within an Anglo-Australian context, until they were 'discovered' by the Greek-Australians in the eighties when both were becoming accepted by the Australian establishment for their work. And this is a significant difference between these two writers and those moving within a Greek context and thus being in the periphery of both 'centres'.

As both these writers are fully aware of the artifice of literary writing, irony is an indispensable tool in their work. By using irony, they display their awareness of the multiplicity of approaches and responses to any given situation. The condition of being an exile is not something for them to express subjectively but to hold up, to analyse and even to mock.

The title of Tsaloumas' award-winning collection *The Observatory* (in Greek-English edition)²¹ is revealing of his stance as a writer. He stands back and observes. He observes himself, the country he lives in, the country of his origin, Greek history, and much more. Perhaps Tsaloumas shows that one of the positive aspects of migration is to observe that which is taken for granted by the complacent majority comfortably sitting in the 'centres'. In his poem "Alexander the Great", the speaker of the poem is not of the West which exalts the importance of the historical past, nor of the East which is concerned with everyday survival, but the speaker is the sceptic who is not looking for answers to all the big questions, or suspects that there are none:

I saw the mermaid this year again
bathing by the desert islands
of midday
but I didn't speak to her as on other
occasions. One tires of
the same question.

And where would I have seen Alexander the Great?
(*The Observatory*, p. 17)

Tsaloumas' exile forces him to examine the situation. What is xenitia? How does it change us? What are the benefits, or the losses? Such questions are perhaps encapsulated in his epigrammatic lines: "to have held something in your hand/is worth the pain of losing it." ("Consolation", *The Book of Epigrams*, p.103)

The speaker of many of Tsaloumas' poems goes back home and questions what the locals call progress. He, the exile who returns home for a visit in the sixties and seventies (a time of material advancement in Greece), has seen more and has had time to reflect, so that what is progress for the locals is the opposite for him. In the following lines, we have an ironic juxtaposition of the two opposing views:

Why the hell do you grumble and blame tourism
for everything? What's wrong with it in any case?...
If I had a property in the spot that yours is in,
I'd raise a fifty-room hotel, I'd...
That's how my fellow-countrymen go on, and truly
they've never yet had whiter bread to eat,
nor portlier corporations,
nor a glossier sheen on their bald heads.

(The Book of Epigrams, p. 93)

As for history and the ancient Greek past, Tsaloumas does not idealise it. It is simply there, as part of his consciousness and it is employed often when the speaker needs to discuss the present, as in the following lines where echoes from Herodotus are heard as the speaker sends a message to his mother: "Tell her that her son/came down to the spray-misted headlands/of the South and saw the onslaught of waves /huge as island hills and cried out /The sea! The sea!" (*The Observatory*, p. 125). In this poem a variety of elements, linguistic and historical come together to create a memorable poem.

Tsaloumas' many voices, lyric, epigrammatic, ironic, philosophical, combine to give us a multi-faceted, polyphonic view of migration: loss and pain, gain and enrichment.

Antigone Kefala, by being a writer writing in English in Australia should by all accounts be considered an Australian writer, as there are many Australian writers whose origins are other than English-speaking.²² The interesting phenomenon is that when Hellenists began to research writing by writers of Greek descent, they discovered that there were also a considerable number of writers of Greek origin who were writing in English. Kefala is a member of the Hellenic diaspora having lived in Romania and then migrating to New Zealand

after World War II and finally settling in Australia in 1960. Like Tsaloumas, Kefala is also a detached, intellectual writer, interested in deconstructing myths, not in maintaining them. Kefala has written both poetry and prose and it is in her prose especially that she uses young narrators like herself who, being young and slightly detached from the generation of their parents, are able to sit and observe the older generation as being deeply rooted to the past:

They both stayed in the kitchen and cried over her sorrows, over their sorrows, over the sorrows of the world...

I was cleaning the house. The sharp voice of the vacuum cleaner drowned their voices, from time to time I could see Loula wiping her eyes. What could I do to save them? They were going one by one and I could do nothing to stop it. Like the telegram last month, so deceptively simple. 'Buried last Sunday.'

(The Island, p. 29) ²³

The above picture convincingly encapsulates the life of migrants being tied to the past from where the news of the death of some loved one arrives with monotonous regularity. However, the narrator, being the child of migrants remains detached so that we get enough of the intensity of the moment but without the sentimentality of a more personally involved narrator.

From biographical information we learn that migration for Kefala was extremely hard.²⁴ Her family, having come from a middle-class, cultured environment in Europe, was relegated to hard manual labour in an antipodean country which must have seemed like a descent to Hades.²⁵ However, Kefala, by being aware of textual techniques, did not simply pour out her bitterness in some personal migrant testimony, no matter how strong the need for it was, but instead wrote an ironic story in the fairy-tale mode. In this, far from simply idealising the mother country or criticising the new one for its backwardness or its perceived vulgarity, the writer gives us an ironic view on the problems of migration with language and cultural differences being at the heart of it. For example, the central character Alexia is puzzled by the superfluous use of the word 'happy' in her new country:

For she felt Happy to be an Enormous Word, a word full of flamboyant colours, which only people who had reached an ecstatic state had a right to use... But she could not explain this, for everyone on the Island kept asking, as if this Fantastic Word was the basic measure of their days

'Are you Happy?' Does this make you Happy? 'Isn't this Happiness?' and so on. And Alexia imagined them all dancing in the streets, flying above houses, their hair blowing in the wind, surrounded by flowers and angels.

(*Alexia*, p. 98)

In her novella *The Island*, Kefala implies through Melina, the young narrator who enrolls at the university, that migrants who are forced to live a divided life, often acquire (and by implication give back) a deeper understanding of the world: "... in order to understand history one needs a type of vision that only people placed at the crossroads could provide. That is, people who lived between two cultures, who were forced to live double lives, belonging to no group..." (*The Island*, p. 10).

Where Kefala goes further than the other Greek writers whose characters move only within a Greek migrant context, is that she is able to compare and juxtapose the two worlds, often to analyse them, even by mocking them as she often does in *Alexia*, but not by mythologising and mostly being fully aware that what she deals with is a literary construct, not social history.

What Kefala seems to achieve by being able to compare and contrast both worlds, is continued and developed by the so-called second-generation Greeks, that is, those either born in Australia of Greek parents or those who arrived in Australia at a very young age and therefore gained a western-style education.

These children write from the perspective of being firmly rooted in the new land, albeit not without the concomitant dilemmas and questions about identity. David Malouf, a prominent fourth-generation Australian writer of Lebanese descent has said that it is the children and the grandchildren who will write best about the migrant condition, as they possess the required detachment from their parents' culture to write more objectively, that is to turn their social history into literature.

The Significance of 'Minors' ²⁶

It seems already quite obvious that the distinctions between majors and minors have more often to do with literary value, that is, what is termed 'good' writing by current criteria. Can Greek-Australian literature make a difference? Salman Rushdie in his recent visit to Australia (December 1995) repeatedly said that he believes that hybrid cultures can produce the best writing. Rushdie's point is significant because a writer with access to and knowledge of two worlds can project a more interesting and clearer vision. Tsaloumas and Kefala are two examples.

The children of Greek migrants in Australia have already shown that their dual culture is an advantage in that it enables them to become astute observers of both worlds. Ideally, the best writers will be those who will take the best from both worlds. Those writers who move only within the one language and culture (most first-generation writers) are by necessity limited. Limited in their scope and limited in finding an audience.

I believe that Greek-Australian writing is blessed with a 'good' topic: migration and a divided life. In the case of writers like Tsaloumas, Kefala and some of the second-generation writers, the happy union of a good topic and a 'textual' style has achieved an excellent result, while in the case of the so-called community writing, the necessary tools are missing. In other words, amateurism in writing can only produce works of limited literary value and there is actually a sharp division between writing which is unaware of its own artifice and that which is. Tziovas has demonstrated the chasm between oral and textual writing in Greek literature. The same chasm exists in Australia where, of the first-generation of writers, only a very small number writes in current styles.

The difference between the Greek-Australian 'minor' literature and the Australian 'major' is that the former consists of a mixture of amateur and professional writing, while the centre consists only of professional. A small number of writers of the 'minor' literature however can join the body of 'winners' in the 'major'. So far, of the first generation there is already such a number.

George Kanarakis in his recent article "Migrant Writing in Multicultural Australia: the case of the Greeks" argued vehemently against sub-categories such as 'minors' against 'majors'.²⁷ While in principle this is what we all wish, the reality so far has shown that in regard to the field of 'literature', literary merit is the only passport to it. Even though departments of literature do teach cultural studies alongside the literary canon, the reality is that prizes for best literary works are not given on cultural/ethnic grounds, but on literary merit, irrespective of whether any decision by any panel is ever totally objective.

Admittedly, a canon does seem a rather elitist construct, a realm which contains literary texts deemed 'winners' by certain people's criteria. One can argue ad nauseam about the subjectivity of such criteria (i.e. who decides what is 'good' literature, or 'good' for whom? etc.) but the answer to this is simple. Artistic tastes are decided by those in power (i.e. cultural power) and unless there is some dramatic development, which is not likely, the criteria for assessing literary works will remain unchanged.

Significantly, Greek-Australian writing of the 'literary', 'textual' kind, has played an important role in widening the Australian 'canon' to include writers from Australia's post-war arrivals such as Tsaloumas and Kefala. Considering its limitations as a literature created somewhere in mid-space, away from its linguistic and cultural centres, to produce even one writer like Tsaloumas, who in

1994 won the Patrick White Award for major literary achievement in Australia, is a measure of the significance of 'minor' literatures.

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NOTES

1. The Melbourne poet was Dimitris Tsaloumas whose first Greek-English collection, **The Observatory** was awarded first prize for Australian poetry in 1983.
2. Sneja Gunew has been a major contributor to challenging the notion of Australian literature as a 'mainstream' and all non-Anglo-Australian writers as 'marginal'. Her book **Striking Chords: Multicultural Literary Interpretations** (co-edited with Katerina Longley) gives a mosaic of views by the editors as well as by academics and writers on the subject (Allen & Unwin, 1992).
3. The pioneer of research into the Greek-Australian area is George KANARAKIS. See his publications, **The Literary Presence of Greeks in Australia**. Foundation for Modern Greek Studies, Athens 1985 (in Greek) and **Greek Voices in Australia**, (in English translation), ANU 1988. See also Con CASTAN, **Conflicts of Love**, Phoenix Publications, Brisbane 1986 and his long introduction to **Reflections: Selected Works from Greek Australian Literature** (Th. Spiliadis & S. Messinis, eds). Elikia Books, Melbourne 1988.
4. See George Papaellinas, "Exoticism is just a boutique form of xenophobia: writing in a multicultural society" in Gunew & Longley (eds), **Striking Chords** (op. cit), p. 165 and Nikos Papastergiadis, "The journeys within: Migration and identity in Greek-Australian literature", p. 149.
5. The Australia Council, a government body for the support of the arts has been helping financially those who wish to write in their own language.
6. See Helen Nickas, **Migrant Daughters: the Female Voice in Greek-Australian Prose Fiction**, Owl Publishing, Melbourne 1992 and Helen Nickas & Konstandina Dounis (eds), **Re-telling the Tale: Poetry and Prose by Greek-Australian Women Writers**, Owl Publishing, Melbourne 1994.
7. See Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari, **Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature**, UMP 1986, p. 16.
8. Savas Zoumis said this in an interview published in **O Logos** 5(1995). Zoumis was articulating the problems which characterise Greek-community writing and is one of the few people who are self-critically discussing our locally-produced writing.
9. See Kanarakis' introduction in **Greek Voices in Australia**, ANU 1988, op. cit.
10. In addition to Kanarakis' **Greek Voices in Australia**, see also A. Kapardis & Anastasios Tamis (eds), **Afstraliotes Hellenes**, Melbourne: River Seine Press 1988 and Anastasios Tamis, **The immigration and Settlement of Macedonian Greeks in Australia**, Melbourne La Trobe Uni. Press, 1993.
11. See Jacques Bouchard's article «Ο Ομιλος Ελλήνων Λογοτεχνών του Μοντρεάλ» in the Greek periodical *Η λέξη* 110(1992), p. 575.

12. **O Logos** is a magazine published by the Association of Hellenic Writers of Australia. However, it is interesting, and telling, to discover that many of the established writers do not belong to it, nor do they publish their works in it.
13. See Dimitris Tziouvas, "Residual Orality and Belated Textuality in Greek Literature and Culture" in **Journal of Modern Greek Studies** 7(1989), pp.321-335.
14. John Vasilakakos, a writer and academic, has published several novels and other prose works in Greek, and has been acknowledged both in Australian and in Greece. His books have been published mainly by Gutenberg in Athens and include the psychographic novel **To Kolpo (The Trick)** published by Elikia Books in Melbourne.
15. Dimitris Tzoumacas' two prose works are: **The Earth is Hollow-Merry Sydney** (Greek-English edition, Leros Press, Australia and rep. 1994 by Agrostis, Athens) and *Η γυναίκα με τ' αγκάθια στο λαιμό*, in Greek by Agrostis, Athens 1993.
16. See Deleuze & Guattari, *op. cit.* p. 16.
17. See Virginia Woolf, **Women and Writing** (intro. by Michele Barrett). London 1979, p. 49.
18. Dina Amanatides has shown her commitment to writing by publishing all her works (poetry and prose) at her own expense.
19. Vasso Kalamaras' earlier works were published by herself, while her prose works have been published as follows: **Other Earth** (bilingual short stories) by Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1977, **Bitterness** (bilingual short stories) by Artlook Books 1983, **The Breadtrap** (bilingual play) by Elikia Books 1986 and **The Same Light** (short stories in English translation only) by Fremantle Press 1989.
20. See Robert Dessaix's essay "Nice Work If You Can Get It" in **Australian Book Review** 128(1991), p. 22-28.
21. Tsaloumas' published collections by the University of Queensland Press include the bilingual **The Observatory**, 1983 and **The Book of Epigrams**, 1985; the all-English collections **Falcon Drinking**, 1988, **Portrait of a Dog**, 1992 and **The Barge**, 1993.
22. See George Kanarakis, "Migrant Writing in Multicultural Australia: the Case of the Greeks" in **Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies**, Vol.3. No.2 (1995), p. 17-24)
23. All (but one) of Kefala's works were published in English by various Australian publishers: **The First Journey**, Wild & Woolley, 1975, **Alexia**, John Ferguson 1984, **The Island**, Hale & Iremonger, 1984, and re-print of **Alexia** in an English-Greek edition by Owl Publishing, 1994. Her last collection of poetry is **Absence**, Hale & Iremonger 1992.

24. See interview with Kefala in **Migrant Daughters**, op. cit. p. 225 and A. Kefala, "Statement" in **Striking Chords**, op. cit., p. 49
25. See introduction by Helen Nickas in **Alexia: A Tale of Advanced Children**. Owl Publishing, 1994
26. I owe some of the inspiration for what I say in this paper to a number of articles which appeared in **JMGS** 8(1990) and especially to Gregory Jusdanis' paper titled "The importance of being Minor", even though we are both discussing different matters.
27. In **Hellenic Studies/Études helléniques**, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1995, p. 17