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# Theoretical Problems in the Study of Cypriot Literature

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se concentre sur les concepts qui s'appliquent dans l'étude de la littérature chypriote. L'auteur explore l'identité de la littérature chypriote qui est reliée à la discussion de l'identité chypriote. Il suggère une identité républicaine civile commune pour tous les Chypriotes qui pourrait aussi abriter la littérature grecque et turque de l'île. Il est également en faveur de l'utilisation du terme littérature chypriote pour ce qui est écrit en grec, la considérant comme faisant partie de la littérature néohellénique.

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on concepts that apply to the study of Cypriot literature. The author explores the identity of Cyprus's literary output in relation to the Cypriot identity. He suggests a common republican civil identity for all Cypriots which could embrace the island's Greek and Turkish literatures. He also argues that Cypriot literature could only be in Greek, and considers it as part of the neohellenic literature.

## The Concepts

Discussions of Cypriot literature, its place, name, autonomy and specificity in the broader Greek literature remain fragmentary. There is almost a fear to tackle these problems as well as a series of others related to it, because they are not only philological, but ideological and political, because Cypriot literature has always evolved in a social context that exercised a very decisive influence on it.

There is no doubt that the study of every national literature is confronted with problems of ideological and political nature. However in the case of Cypriot

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literature these problems are more complex and difficult because they don't concern a literature that could be qualified as national, whilst even the use of the term Cypriot literature is contested. Even if the problem of the name already existed and was discussed in a certain way from the time of the British colonial era<sup>1</sup> it took an even more explosive dimension after independence.

At that time step by step began to be formulated the question whether the Cypriot state would dispose its own national symbols. And if among these symbols one could speak of the existence of a national Cypriot literature. It was during the same period that some people began speaking about the creation of a national Cypriot identity. For the Greeks of Cyprus such discussions were questioning the long struggles for national restitution i.e. union with the Greek motherland. That's why these efforts had been identified with the old propaganda used by the British rulers either contesting the Cypriots' Greek identity or promoting the idea of their dissimilarities from the rest of the Greeks.

Yet beyond all these questions was the problem of the strong Turkish community, which of course identified itself with Turkey. If one was to consider a national Cypriot literature, what this term would include? The Greek or the Turkish literary production, or both? Given that language is the main substratum of a national literature, it would be impossible to combine Greek and Turkish Cypriot literature to form a single national literature. This doesn't mean that their coexistence would be impossible in the context of a Cypriot state, in the context of a secular democratic society. Otherwise, a national Cypriot identity or conscience wouldn't exist. But it would be possible that a common civil identity could exist, without bringing into question the composing ethnic identities of its parts. It is understood that one cannot exclude shared cultural practices and traditions. More problematic, if not utopian, is also the idea of the existence of two "Cypriot literatures" or of one Cypriot literature having as starting point Cyprus' two "languages and literary productions"<sup>2</sup>.

In any case the term Cypriot literature was regarded as one of the Greek peripheral literatures, like those of Crete, Ionian Isles, Alexandria, which have gradually eclipsed because the heavy Athenian dominance did not leave enough space for them. Nowadays Cypriot is the main peripheral literature together with that of the Greek Diaspora<sup>3</sup>, although some particular literary voices are still heard from Salonika. Of course the phenomenon of the Athenian centralist

model which barely admits the traditional cultural polycentrism of the late Ottoman Empire and the first period of the national Greek state, doesn't concern only literature but all aspects of Greek contemporary life, ranging from economics to politics and from nurture to culture. Nevertheless the concentration of everything in the national capital is not only a Greek phenomenon. We meet it also in most European countries. Only in the English speaking world, i.e. America, Australia and Canada, we meet, for reasons which are not going to be examined in this article, an important decentralization in all fields of human activity. In these countries there is a relatively strong multicentrism and their capitals are rather administrative centres than anything else.

In the case of Cypriot literature, one extreme opinion is that it does not exist independently but only as part of contemporary Greek literary production, in the same sense as those of the other Greek regions. The difference, though, lies in the fact that today we can hardly speak about a peripheral literary production in Greek territory, if we accept the general rule that a Greek writer must live, work and produce in Athens or be related with it. On the contrary, Cypriot writers, with some exceptions, live, produce and publish their work in the precise geographical space of their island. In other words Kazantzakis may be Cretan, Ritsos or Vretakos Peloponnesians, but they had not been recognised in their region of origin, but at the Athenian centre.

Thus linguistically speaking, there is a Cypriot literature as this term has been used for the Greek literature of Cyprus. It is the last peripheral literature of the Greek space with its own specificities, thematic and at a certain point its relative autonomy and particularity, as part of it has been written in the Cypriot dialect. It is natural that this literature has links with the Turkish Cypriot literature of the island. I suppose that the Turkish Cypriot literature is included in the larger context frame of Turkish literature, even if some want it to be included together with the Greek Cypriot one.

One realises that the terms used to define Cypriot literature are fluid. And they are so because the same applies to the terms related to Cypriot identity, especially those used by intellectuals, rather than in reality. For many years, from the end of the Ottoman Empire to the end of English rule, the term Greeks of Cyprus was standard. After independence the term Greek Cypriots was gradually imposed. But at the same time, the term Hellenism of Cyprus was emphasized.

Same discussions seem to exist also among the Turkish Cypriot community. Rauf Denktaş's position about the non existence of Cypriots but of Greeks and Turks of Cyprus is well known. Of course to be Greek or Turk doesn't exclude to be also Cypriot. Other people, though, in the Turkish Cypriot community promote the idea of "Cypriotism" or "Cypriotness". The idea was to create a common national Cypriot identity. It has to be noted that in the Greek side an effort has been made to promote the same idea of "Cypriotness", but it was the object of many strong reactions and remained marginal. Greeks of Cyprus, without ignoring their local specificities like in various other Greek peripheries, consider that their Greekness and national conscience deriving from it are unquestionable. Besides, it is worth mentioning, that from the beginning of independence, voices from various circles either within the island or abroad, have promoted the construction of a unified national Cypriot identity. Something that the Greeks of Cyprus have seen as a continuation of the English propaganda effort to present them as "phinikizontes," behaving like Phoenicians rather than Greeks.

Identity issues preoccupy societies that are not confronted with the same political problems as Cyprus. Societies thinking having solved it and in spite of that it appears strong in front of them<sup>4</sup>. This is because identity is never static. It is a strong process leading to its continuous redefinition, construction and deconstruction, especially today in the context of the globalization. That is why the study of Cypriot literature, its definitions and theoretical problems, are linked to the concept of identity. And as every identity the Cypriot one is also multileveled. Any "Cypriotness" is not different from the "Kritikotita" (local identity of Cretans) or the "Ipirotikotita" (local identity of the Epirotes). If this Cypriotness can link Greek with Turkish Cypriots without abolishing, as some want it, their Greekness or the Turkishness, so much the better. And of course all these local identities, as far as Greeks are concerned, are included in the frame of Greekness. Thus Cypriot literature is included in the broader Greek literature following the same principle applied for the literature of Alexandria, Crete, or the Ionian Islands. A question remains though, if we can speak of a Cypriot school of literature in the same sense that we speak of a school of the Ionian Islands. Some characteristics of Cypriot literature such as its thematic specificities and dialect could give it this character. It would be difficult though to consider it as a school in the sense

of some different philological, even ideological current or in the sense of some break that has been brought to the Neohellenic literature. Cypriot literature is more a geographic reality than anything else.

On the other hand the abandonment of ethnic identity would drive to a cultural alienation, given that it cannot be replaced by a hermaphrodite artificial identity with a taste of Cypriotness: an identity drawn from an ideological nursery without social background and support. Any identity is the result of a long social process, sometimes of centuries and it is not produced by recipes, as some in Cyprus believe after independence, especially when most of the time these recipes were coming from outside. From London as had been experienced during the colonial era, from Washington where the term of nation is more political and didn't have the European sociological comprehension of this definition, but also from the Athenian centre, from some people who mainly after '74, may feel guilty, because of the coup d'état and the Turkish invasion. Such people would like to get rid of this Cyprus problem. So the foreigners like it more to impose an artificial identity because this facilitates to impose also their solution to the Cyprus problem. Willing to safeguard its national identity is not a question of nationalism as some neoliberal apostles of a unidimensional globalisation advocate. It's a question of human dignity and people have the right to oppose a unidimensional conception of culture. The sense of togetherness between Greek and Turkish Cypriots, but also between other smaller communities of the island, doesn't require either the abandonment of everybody's national identity or the homogenisation of cultural diversity. This sense of togetherness requires only a common civil identity. This common civil and political identity means no exclusion of the "Other". Its construction is and will be based on the ground of the common Cypriot citizenship<sup>5</sup>. Common European identity will be also an important ingredient for this Cypriot civil identity.

### **A Comparison: The Canadian Case**

Those who dream about the Cypriotness should study the case of other countries in order to understand how difficult is the production of identities or national symbols through an ideological nursery process against people's will. The case of Canada may give them an answer to many questions and would lead them to the realities of the social process which doesn't follow recipes. The

Canadian federation exists since 1867. The various Canadian governments spent millions if not billions of dollars, in order to impose the Canadian identity. In vain. During the first years of federation, Canadians of English origin were identified as British. Only Canadians of French origin were considering themselves as Canadians. Later the terms were inverted: British adopted the Canadian identity and the Francophones became French Canadians. When the numbers of French Canadians began to diminish and their main residence was limited to the province of Quebec, then French Canadians became “Quebequers”. Certainly there is a common Canadian civil identity, as there is the common Canadian citizenship. But at the same time on ethnic grounds people have a multileveled identity. Because apart from those of English and French origin we have a multitude of other ethnic groups resulting from immigration and as far as literature is concerned of course there is no Canadian national literature. Sometimes the English literature of Canada is claiming this definition of national literature. As far as French literature is concerned, given that during the last decades it is developing in Quebec, it has been proclaimed as its national literature. The Anglophone Canadian literature is threatened in its very existence as a distinctive autonomous specific literature from the American cultural influence. On the contrary Quebec’s French literature, in spite its relations with France, became completely autonomous and is defined as a national literature. I don’t know if it is possible to draw some conclusions from the Canadian experience. Of course the failure to build a Canadian national identity may foretell also the failure to create a national Cypriot identity. Nevertheless one may be inspired from the Canadian example of a common civil identity and see as very possible a common Cypriot civil identity. On the other hand the failure to create a Canadian national literature with the participation of English and French speaking Canadians, shows how unrealistic is the expectation to create a national Cypriot literature based on the Greek and Turkish language. On the contrary the autonomy of Quebec’s literature from this point of view could give arguments to those who see a similar orientation in the Cypriot literature as this term is understood to cover the literature written in Greek. But even in this case the comparisons are difficult. Quebec has a population of seven million and an economy which if it was an independent country would be ranked fortieth in the hierarchy of the world’s economy. One realises that it is a different case from that of Cyprus. Nevertheless in spite of the autonomy of its literature and its definition as a

national literature, all the writers active in Quebec tend to consider as their ultimate consecration the recognition of their work by Paris and the French salons. In short, the Parisian literary salons continue to play the same role in Quebec's literature as that of the Athenian salons do on the Cypriot one. Something that was happening in older days also with the interrelations between the English-Canadian literature and the British one is less visible today. Having said this, even if in Canada they refer to two "solitudes" English and French, the interrelation between French and English culture is vivid<sup>6</sup>.

The difficulties of definition of Cypriot literature derive also from the lack of comprehensive studies which would relate the Cypriot literary production with the historical, political, ideological and cultural developments on the local Cypriot level but also the Greek and international levels as well. In reality there is a lack of critical evaluation of Cypriot literary production apart from some hagiographies or public relation presentations. Some exceptions don't invalidate the rule. Because neither the rhetorical outbursts nor the superfluous talks in the presentation of some Cypriot writers either in Cyprus or in Greece, constitute an interpretation, a critique, or a philological study.

### **Relations with the Athenian Centre**

It is natural that Cypriot writers try to be recognized by the Athenian centre. Nevertheless Greek critics rarely showed a continuous interest for Cypriot literary production. The same is valid for neohellenists, philologists and other specialists. There is a lack of systematic study and presentation of the work of Cypriot creators to the Greek public. We could say that the interest of Greek writers, critics and neohellenists for the Cypriot literary production is occasional. This was happening even in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it happens and in its second half and continues up to now<sup>7</sup>. During the post war period it appears that the Cypriot experience of Seferis who gave the collection "Kypron ou m'ethespien" (Cyprus, where it was ordained for me... 1955) created in Athens some interest for Cypriot literature. Lefteris Papaleontiou attributes the interest of George Savvides for Cypriot literature to its relation with Seferis. George Savvides is perhaps the first Greek critic and neohellenist who after the war, basically in the '70s, made an effort to face somewhat globally Cypriot literary production. Nevertheless these studies were in their major part selective. Even the increased number of tributes of Greek reviews to Cypriot literature "take,



according to Papaleontiou, a festive character and are written in the heat of the moment, on the occasion of an important political event or anniversary, but also on the basis of personal contacts. Thus often the texts published are not the most representative or the most important of Cypriot literary production. Or there is a lack of a real critical evaluation".<sup>8</sup> We could say that the participation in these special editions is depending on interpersonal relations and even, to use a term from politics, on clientelistic relations. The same is valid, beyond the special tributes and for the presence in Greek publications of some Cypriot writers, not after a critical evaluation but more on the basis of public relations that they maintain with some circles in Athens.

What is characteristic of the limited, if non-existent interest of Greek critics – if there are nowadays such critics, – or specialists, neohellenists and historians, is the fact that there is a complete absence of reference to Cypriot writers in the histories of the neohellenic contemporary Greek literature. The limited presence of some names in the last edition of the history of Mario Vitti doesn't change this reality.

Apart from the older Cypriot writers who lived in Athens or Alexandria (Loukis Akritas, Tefkros Anthias, Emiliou Hourmouziou, Nikos Nikolaidis, etc.) and who somewhat have been noticed by the Athenian centre, if one would look to see who of the Cypriot writers have won some recognition in Greece, he would hardly find others than Costas Montis and Kyriakos Charalambides. The first was noted somewhat mainly at the end of his life, because of George Savvides. The second built himself from very early a network of interpersonal relations which permitted his promotion, in contrast with others who stayed unknown because they didn't have this opportunity or they didn't want to work in the same systematic way for their promotion.

This finally proves the limited Greek interest in the study and critical evaluation of Cypriot literary production, apart some conventional and occasional presentation related most of the time to political events. Also the occasional presentation of certain Cypriot writers is done mostly on the grounds of public relations than on any other evaluation of their work. These presentations are generally anodyne, conventional, colourless and odourless. They avoid the obstacle of serious critical evaluation in order to satisfy everybody. The Cypriot writers contribute also to this phenomenon by accepting a superfluous promotion and even they go after it. They are satisfied

and even search through public relations a little “recognition” instead of claiming the real study and critical evaluation of their work. Often it is a behaviour of “poor relatives”. One could argue that Cyprus doesn’t have writers who have provoked a rupture within the Greek contemporary literature analogous to those of Cavafis, Kazantzakis, Seferis, Ritsos, or Elytis. Nevertheless Vassilis Michaelides or Costas Montis, closer to us, and perhaps some other poets, could stand next to big names of the neohellenic Greek contemporary poetry. Also contemporary poets such as Pantelis Michanikos or Costas Vassiliou, but also others, could stand next to some of the best Greek poets of the so called generation of the ’70s. The question is why they are absent from anthologies, studies, histories of literature, and from school manuals. The same could be advanced and for some prose writers such as Georges Ph.Pierides, or Ivi Meleagrou and others. It is characteristic that Georges Savvides has admitted himself that till 1973 he had never heard the name of Costas Montis<sup>9</sup>.

Of course if Cypriot literature remains in the margins the responsibility doesn’t only lay on the Athenian centre. Equally responsible are the Cypriot writers themselves who look spasmodically for its favour, some of them even using the clientelistic way instead of trying to be presented by serious publications, or perhaps to create publishing houses which will promote Cypriot books in the Greek market<sup>10</sup>. Cypriot philologists are also responsible because they didn’t show interest to study, interpret and evaluate the work of Cypriot writers. In other words, there could be created a pole of a systematic study and promotion of Cypriot literature in Cyprus. The aim would be to present this work in a critically evaluated way at the larger Greek public. A Cypriot pole in the space of neohellenic literature could help to put into evidence a polycentrism and favour Greek voices of the regions neglected by the Athenian centre. Naturally the question is if they could put aside the clientelistic relation and conventionality which kill creativity and help to promote mediocrity. There even exists the “inferiority” complex from which suffer many Greek Cypriot creators as well as the complexes of “superiority” afflicting their Greek-Helladites (the ones residing in Greece) counterparts.

## **Conclusion**

It is certain that in discussing all these subjects we move into a fluid and slippery landscape. Aphorisms are always dangerous, as well as definitive

conclusions. It is well known that what we believe today is based on scientific documentation that tomorrow may be challenged and inverted. Also, we should not ignore the dynamics of the political situation in the island and the ideological currents deriving from it. From another point of view “scientificity” is never neutral.

With these reservations, we would advance some early conclusions:

1. As far as the term Cypriot literature is concerned, it is scientifically correct. It adds nothing and subtracts nothing from its Greekness, nor cuts it from neohellenic literature. Furthermore it doesn't add more Cypriotness to it from what it carries with its specific characteristics. This literature as a peripheral one disposes of a relative autonomy.
2. The relations with the Athenian centre remain superficial. As it happens with the literature of the Diaspora there is a limited if not inexistent interest for it and for everything done beyond the Athenian ramparts. But it's a fact that the Cypriot writers try in general to obtain artificial applause and provisional recognition rather than the real appreciation of their work. The same thing is going also on in the narrow Cypriot space where usually are held equilibriums in the distribution “of applauses” and “prizes”.
3. Finally the subject of identities which troubles all the contemporary societies in the context of a neoliberal globalising economy is even more painful in a country partly under occupation. Something which is necessarily reflected on the theoretical discussions concerning Cypriot literature. Without a strongly built national identity, cultural alienation waits in the corner. The coexistence, though with the Turkish Cypriots imposes also the parallel common republican political identity. This republican identity could shelter and interrelate the Greek and Turkish literatures of the island without cutting them from their corresponding ethnic trunk.

## NOTES

1. For this subject see Lefteris Papaleontiou “Greek reception of Cypriot literature during the after war years”, *Porphyras*, Octobre, December 2002. See also Stephanos Constantinides, «Some Rather Heretical Thoughts on Cypriot Literature» *Etudes helléniques /Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 13, no 1, Spring 2005, as well as the article of Lefkios Zafeiriou in the present volume.

2. Matthias Kappler in his article in the present volume and Mehmet Yaşın, “On Cypriot literature and indeterminable identities”, *Syghrona Themata* [Current Matters] 68-70 (July 1998-March. 1999) 321.
3. In the special volume of the academic revue: *Etudes helléniques/Hellenic Studies*, a tribute to the literature of the diaspora (under the direction of Stephanos Constantinides, Kathryn Radford and Thalia Tassou) the term used is “Literatures of the periphery”, vol. 13, no.1, Spring 2000.
4. Stephanos Constantinides, *Preface* to Michalis Damanakis, *Identities and Education in the Diaspora*, (in Greek), Athens, Gutenberg, 2007.
5. Another way to destroy the identity of Cypriots – Greeks, Turks, or whatever other origin – is to accept the colonisation of the island by the settlers from Turkey. Something that apparently doesn’t trouble some neoliberal intellectuals on grounds of “non-exclusion”. These people on grounds of their “antinationalist” obsessions are ready to accept colonisation and expropriation of Cypriots and to legitimate Turkish neocolonial expansionism.
6. Craig Brown (sous la direction), *Histoire générale du Canada*, Montréal, Éditions Boréal, 1990.
7. Lefteris Papaleontiou, “Greek receptions of the Cypriot literature during the after world war years”, *op. cit.*
8. Papaleontiou, *op.cit.* p. 423.
9. Papaleontiou, *op.cit.* p. 434.
10. An effort to create a publishing house in Athens has been done by the intellectual Tassos Psaropoulos of Cypriot origin, during the 60s, whose aim was to publish important works of neohellenic literature as well as of Cypriot. It was the publishers Alvin Redman Hellas in cooperation with the English publishing house of the same name. At that time there have been published in Athens some books of Cypriot writers, among them the well known anthology of Cypriot poetry (under the direction) of the Cypriot poets Costas Montis and Andreas Christofidis. In a note in this anthology signed by Tassos Psaropoulos reference is made that this anthology of Cypriot poetry and an analogous anthology of Cypriot prose will be republished from time to time updated. Reference is made also to the formation of a committee for this purpose with the participation of Costas Varnalis, Andreas Karantonis, Michalis Peranthis, Lili Iakovidis, and from Cyprus of Costas Montis and Andreas Christofidis as supervisors. It was also mentioned that Athina Tarsoulis would be responsible for the section of the folk songs. The publishers activities were atrophied after the imposition of the dictatorship in Greece. Psaropoulos is also known for his literary work, mainly for his novel *O Dimios* (The public executioner), published by his own publishing house at that time.