

About the Term “Cypriot Literature”

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RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur de cet article se concentre sur le terme «littérature chypriote» et met en évidence sa prédominance, sur les autres termes utilisés de temps à autre. Il prend position en faveur de l'utilisation du terme «littérature chypriote» parce que les termes «littérature grecque de Chypre», «littérature grecque moderne de Chypre», etc., constituent des terminologies inutiles qui présentent le danger d'exclusion ou de suppression de la définition «chypriote» de différentes expressions de la vie à Chypre.

ABSTRACT

The author of this article focuses on the term “Cypriot literature” and points out its prevalence on other terms used from time to time. He argues in favour of the term Cypriot literature because such terms as Greek literature of Cyprus and modern Greek literature of Cyprus make up a redundant and dangerous grammatological terminology that could exclude or eliminate the “Cypriot” dimension from various expressions of Cypriot life.

In June 1925, the literary journal *Avgi (Dawn)* suspends its publication. In an unsigned comment of the editors – most probably written by Aimilios Hourmouzios – the reasons that led to this decision are explained:

“‘Avgi’, upon completing one year of presence, also completed the first period of its publication in Cyprus. Very soon, it will be ‘transplanted’ to Athens, where it hopes to accomplish its destiny more thoroughly and successfully. Its distance from the centre of Greek literary world has always been a great obstacle and insurmountable hindrance to the thorough observation of both the Greek literary movement, as well as the foreign one [...].

In Athens too ‘Avgi’ will maintain its Cyprian character and as the sole instrument of Cyprian literature it will seize the opportunity to be appreciated by a wider intellectual environment...”.

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In any case, the publication of the journal was discontinued. However, this excerpt is of interest to us for two reasons. On the one hand, it indicates the isolation of regional literature, and on the other, the use of the term “Cypriot literature” affirms its content leaving no room for misinterpretations.

Starting from the end of the 19th century and until the beginning of the 20th, the term “Cypriot literature” becomes standardized. During the following years and over the later English occupation period, the term will prevail without any national, historic, social, political and ideological parameters constituting reasons for contesting or replacing the term.

From as early as 1897, Demosthenis Stavrínides uses the term “Cypriot Poetry”, the content of which is explicitly defined: “What I want to signify is that the war [namely the 1897 Greco-Turkish war] has not nurtured the Greek muse. And by saying Greek muse, I do not exclude the Cypriot one”.

Within the next year, George S. Frangoudes publishes his own text on demotic Cypriot poetry while the use of the term over the following years is an undeniable fact. In 1924, Ioannis Sikoutris will talk “About Cypriot Poetry”, whereas during the 1930s, references and discussions regarding Cypriot literature increase.

The circulation of the journal *Kypriaka Grammata* (*Cypriot Letters*) (1934-1937 and 1939-1956), the most important literary journal of the last years of the interwar period and the first post-war years, will contribute to the promotion and prevalence of the term, aiming to underline the importance and function of literature in national life. The objective, a Cypriot Grammatology, is pinpointed since the first issues of the journal and in 1935 Yiannis Lefkis’ research “How Modern Cypriot Literature should be studied” is published. Within the same year, the texts of Lefteris Yiánnides on Cypriot literature and the interventions of Nikos Kranídiotis, Yiannis Stavrinós Economídes and Savvas Christis are also published.

As Lefteris Papaleontiou notes, since 1888 and until the first decades of the 20th century, the term “Cypriot Literature” (Cypriot philology, Cypriot poetry) is traced in the texts of most scholars of those times. However, the intervention of Antonis Indianos, Kostas Prousis and Nikos Kranídiotis (the latter, in his capacity as director of *Kypriaka Grammata* [*Cypriot Letters*] and reacting against British propaganda, proposed during the 1940s to avoid use of the term “Cypriot literature”) was decisive as far as the predominance of the term is concerned. These people, through their critical work set the preconditions for the study of modern literature.

As it appears from this brief retrospective examination of the history of the term under investigation, its use becomes established and acknowledged; even more so during a period when the national movement is rekindled.

Nevertheless, the historic roots of the use of the term and any objections raised during critical periods of the Cyprus Issue have not been examined systematically. Exactly what Sikoutris stressed in 1929 about the dialectal literature, it belonging to the national literature, and later, that Cypriot men of letters “are, as Cypriots, as remotely different from others as their counterparts in Lesbos” has remained, for many researchers, open for negotiation over the last three decades.

Therefore, during a period of political turmoil, transitions and unrest following the 1974 military invasion of Cyprus by Turkey, the term “Cypriot literature” is transformed from a grammatological issue to a seminal problem of ideological and political dispute.

From the “Anti-manifesto for Cypriot Literature” unto the 1982 *Symptoma* (*Symptom*) journal and the recent fabrications of short-lived journals, not one disambiguated point of view has prevailed and even more so, no persuasive argumentation has been expressed.

When in 1958, Nikos Kranidiotis’ book *The national character of Cypriot Literature* was released in Athens, the demand for Self-determination – Union was almost entirely prevalent. One may object to the fact that emphasis is placed on a study which was imposed by political and ethnic wilfulness. Nevertheless, bearing in mind that during the same time the Basic Library volume, *Cypriot Literature* came out, the use of the term since the interwar years suggests its resistance to various historic and political pressures; its enhanced standardization is combined with a clear definition of its content.

The intervention of Modern Greek scholars (e.g. Georges P. Savvides etc.) after 1974 will determine more precise grammatological issues regarding Cypriot Literature. However, for reasons emanating from the tragic historic context of Cyprus, the term is being challenged, without any other concise, explicit and functional term put forward in its place. The excerpts that follow refer to the objections raised to the use of the term while (in the second excerpt) the term “Modern Greek literature of Cyprus” is proposed:

- a) “The official separation of Cypriot literature from the rest of the Greek literature, applying as sole criterion the origin of the writer lacks any scientific credibility [...]. It is evident that the literature of Cyprus,

including the dialectal texts, belongs to Modern Greek literature just as the literature of Crete, the Eptanisa or Epirus does”.

- b) “...in terms of form, there is nothing that could discern modern and contemporary “Cypriot literature” from contemporary Greek literature in the Helladic area. This significant grammatological conclusion leads us to the search of other terms that could characterise Cyprus’ literary production of modern years [...]. That is why the term “Modern Greek literature of Cyprus” is proposed”.

These objections ignore the views of most researchers who claim that Cypriot literature constitutes an integral part of Modern Greek literature and deny its specific particularities. From as early as May 1979, Georges P. Savvides formulated his views about Cypriot literature shedding light on some fundamental aspects of the matter:

“I shall clarify first what I perceive as “Cypriot Literature”, works of Cypriots who live in Cyprus, written in Greek, whether it be Modern Greek or the Cypriot dialect [...].

The unquestionable existence of Cypriot literature does not necessarily mean that there exists a “Cypriot School” [...]. However, the political and cultural circumstances through which Cypriot literature is developed are very different from the Helladic ones. So, sooner or later, its particularity will become more apparent and beneficial to the sum total of Greek literature”.

These distinctions by Georges P. Savvides put forward in an interview (“Cypriot literature from a Helladic point of view”) provided answers to philological questions of a coherent literature outside the borders of the Greek state. In the same interview, he answered directly or indirectly to other issues as well, such as centre and periphery, dialectal– national literature and moved on to the concluding statement that “if Cypriot literature, just as the Cretan before, constitutes an integral part of the Greek, then Cypriot writers rightfully hold a place among Greeks who speak the same language and serve the same art as them. Important people join important people and the rabble joins the rabble”. He also points out the need for a scientific history of Cypriot literature and refers to regional “provincialism” as a motive power. Shortly afterwards, Yiorgos Kehayoglou too underlines the need for an analytical history of the Cypriot literature in his study “Modern Cypriot Literature in the framework of Modern Greek Literature Histories”.

During the last decades, the term “Cypriot Literature” becomes generally acceptable, despite the objections we have already examined, which most times approached the issue with non-philological criteria. It contains a literature characterised by geographical polymerisation (Cyprus, Alexandria, Cairo, Athens etc.). This polycentrism will later become limited mainly to Cyprus and Athens.

The terms “Literature of Cyprus”, “Greek literature of Cyprus”, “Modern Greek literature of Cyprus” make up a needless grammatological terminology that bears the danger of excluding or suppressing the definition “Cypriot” from various expressions of life in Cyprus. This regulatory behaviour in the form of a philological policeman would eventually undermine everything, from the Cypriot wedding to the Cypriot wines, or should we say... the Modern Greek wines of Cyprus! For, by considering that the term “Cypriot Literature” is misleading and any attachment to it inevitably leads to a separatist approach of literature and by extension, to national division, then we are merely fighting with shadows. And no problem can thus be resolved.

The term “Cypriot literature” is far more explicit and at the same time its long-term use adequately covers local and regional literature and justifies its grammatological use. The historic and political events of 1974, with their tragic consequences, did not alter the character of this literary making, just as in previous years, the establishment of the Republic of Cyprus in 1960 did not lead to its national ghettoization.