

## Literatures of the Periphery

Stephanos Constantinides\*

Modern literary criticism may eschew canons and labels in academia, but publishers, readers and writers know all too well that creative efforts are pigeonholed politically or aesthetically according to the times. Nothing is written or read in a vacuum. A quick glance at well-known literary critics like Terry Eagleton, Edward Said and Harold Bloom reveals just how subjective and difficult it is to define terms like minority, national, regional and ethnic literature.

In terms of language and identity, post-colonial theorist Edward Said has spoken of textuality as a tool of colonization since the language of the colonizer was the only written or 'literary' language. The national literature becomes a foreign, formal imposition while the oral tradition loses its importance as part of a people's identity. The choice of language remains vital to identity, not just an author's but a people's.

Some of Edward Said's theories may apply to Greek periphery Literature as one of the main characteristics of the Greek Diaspora culture has been its orality. The great majority of Greek immigrants after World War II were poor, under-educated and had emigrated from rural areas. Naturally these people did not have much of a connection with written forms of literature.

On the topic of nationalism, Terry Eagleton, a British literary critic of the traditional Marxist school, insists on the political motivation of national literature because of its ties to the State. Lastly, in defiance of political correctness, American literary critic Harold Bloom bemoans the fact that ethnic and minority literatures, such as feminist, latino, Black-American, are taught instead of the 'western canon' of what Bernard Knox called 'Dead White European Males'. He is not against minority or peripheral literatures in English, in America, but believes that the authors have not attained the level of the "western canon". Students need to be grounded in the classics before approaching anything lesser.

\* Université du Québec à Montréal

Given today's literary landscape, where do writers of the Greek diaspora creating modern Greek literature belong? On the edge? In English? In the Greek national pantheon? A literature of the periphery, or periphery literature, operates in relation to two national centres; i.e., one in the host country and the other in the motherland, Greece. The concept of the periphery challenges the traditional view of a literary canon, but nevertheless enables us to consider the social framework within which this literature is produced as well as its aesthetical and ideological patterns.

Interestingly enough neo-hellenic literature has been built up by regional literatures, what one could call literatures of the periphery. Because of the Ottoman occupation, modern Greek literature had no real centre for development, until the formal creation of the Greek state in 1830. However, even then Greek culture continued its development merely outside the newly founded democracy. It is worth noting that the Greek state created in 1830 had a population of only 600,000 people, while approximately three million Greeks lived outside its borders. For a long time, Constantinople, Alexandria, the Ionian islands as well other cities and areas inside or outside the Ottoman Empire continued being more important centres than Athens in terms of developing Greek culture. It is no accident that three of the more important poets of modern Greek letters lived outside the Greek state: Dionysios Solomos, the Greek national poet in the Ionian islands under British occupation; Andreas Kalvos in Italy, Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe; and Constantin Cavafy in Alexandria, Egypt. In fact, the periphery remained more important in terms of culture and literary creation than the centre for some time. It was only after the national disaster of 1922 that the capital, Athens, was definitively imposed upon the periphery. Yet even in the thirties, some of the greatest names in Greek literature — George Seferis, Georges Theotokas, Dido Sotiriou, and Fotis Kontoglou — came to Greek literature with the memories of Asia Minor. The situation changed radically when a new periphery of Hellenism was created by immigration to Australia, Canada, Western Europe (especially Germany), and the United States. This new periphery of Hellenism thus became the diaspora issued from immigration. The writers of this new periphery have been considered as a sub-category and, with few exceptions, have actually been excluded from the corpus of Greek national literature.

Nevertheless, these literatures of the periphery have another centre in the host country; i.e., the national body of the literature of the country where the authors live as first- or even second-generation immigrants. This is considered immigrant literature, and in the Greek case, it is a minor one in relation to the national literature of the host country. In this way, Greek immigrant writers are marginalized as members of minority groups. In host countries, the works of Greek writers and immigrants in general, are placed under the banner of «ethnic» literature and «multicultural» in countries like Australia, and Canada. Greek writers are thus obliged to remain on the periphery of the host country's national literature.

As George Kanarakis wrote, this ethnic qualification is given not only to the works written in Greek but also to the works written in English by Greeks and other immigrants, as far as Australia is concerned. His remark also applies to some extent to Canada and the United States. Kanarakis notes that «in addition those works written in a language other than English are doubly marginalized 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»<sup>1</sup> What is more astonishing is that multiculturalism in Australia has contributed, according to Kanarakis, to marginalizing writers of immigrant origin who express themselves in English. As he observed, «before the advent of multiculturalism, writers who were themselves, or whose parents were, migrants from a non-English speaking country, were not marginalized in any way if they wrote in English, but were accepted simply as mainstream Australian writers, even as important figures in Australian literature»<sup>2</sup>. With the advent of multiculturalism and label «ethnic» literature, even those of immigrant origin — that is to say the non-WASP writing in English — marginalization has been imposed. As a result they have been pushed straight to the periphery of Australian national literature.

As mentioned, writers of Greek 'diasporic' literature have two centres: one in the homeland and one in the host country. Consequently, their work is presented in a separate category from that of mainstream writers in both countries. This is a form of double jeopardy, as they remain on the edges of two literatures.

As far as Greece is concerned, little attention is paid to literature written in its diaspora. Only in exceptional cases have Greek writers of diaspora succeeded in earning recognition in their homeland. The most famous case, after World War II, is that of Nikos Kahtitsis (1928-1970) who wrote from Montreal, Canada. This lack of attention is not due to a lack of quality. It may be attributed to the general attitude of the Greek literary establishment. George Kanarakis noted that even «if they do receive attention, however scant, they are often viewed with a paternalistic, even condescending attitude, and judged with different criteria from that used to judge the writers of Greece itself».<sup>3</sup>

In the case of both the homeland and host country, «ethnic» literature may be considered an «exotic» product and examined from a sociological and anthropological point of view rather than on its aesthetic merits. One may argue that literary merit must be the only passport for the work of the diaspora writers. Of course the criteria for this merit are generally subjective. As Helen Nickas has noted «artistic tastes are decided by those in power and unless there is some dramatic development, which is not likely, the criteria for assessing literary works will remain unchanged».<sup>4</sup> That is to say the difficulty for Greek diaspora writers to gain a place in the main body of one or the other national literatures. All the more disappointing is the fact that the work of these authors is not judged by the criteria established by those in power. In fact, their works are simply ignored as if they never existed.

Greek immigrants «coming mostly from peasant and rural backgrounds, unlearned and poor, they did not immediately express in writing the wonder, anguish and triumph of their odyssey».<sup>5</sup> This remark depends, of course, on the host country. In the USA Greek literature appeared essentially after the 1930s, in Australia and Canada later in the 1960s and in Germany, even later. Research on this periphery literature is limited. The exception is may be Australia where Greek scholars in departments of Greek studies at Australian universities began to study the writings of their compatriots very early. Yet, even in the case of Australia, this study was limited inside a kind of Greek university ghetto. Moreover, for a long time in the United States, scholars in chairs of modern Greek literature disdainfully avoided Greek-American writing as a kind of subculture.<sup>6</sup> Even the Greek-American magazines, promoting modern Greek literature in America, avoided the literature of immigrants for the same reason. In fact they avoided publishing

anything related to its very existence. For these people, Constantin Cavafy was the model of Greek diaspora literature.<sup>7</sup> Only in the 1980s did some academics of Greek origin show limited interest in this literature. This interest increased a little more one decade later. As George Kalogeras noted, they could at least study this early diaspora literature in relation to the literary production of mainland Greece, in relation to this period when the demotic, the romantic or the folklore style was adopted in Greece.<sup>8</sup> Today a small group of researchers is working on Greek-American literature, but academic and literary circles in Greece still generally ignore its existence and that of other Greek diaspora literature.

In the early stages, Greek diaspora literature usually reflected the evolution of traditional Greek patterns; i.e., romantic poetry and folklore. Later, especially during the second half of the twentieth century, trends from the literature of the metropolis, e.g., modernism as expressed by the famous generation of the thirties, influenced diaspora production.

One characteristic of Greek periphery literatures is the presence of few writers of prose and many poets. This ratio may be explained by the fact that most writers of the periphery are not professionals in the sense that they cannot support themselves with their literary work. It is not easy for people who are obliged to earn a living in other trades to find the time needed to cultivate prose. Moreover, these writers must turn to self-publication for various reasons. Helen Nickas describes these 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 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».<sup>9</sup> Nickas' remark applies to all Greek writers in the periphery. Also, as it is well known, the Greek literary tradition is mainly based on orality and not on textuality.

Another topic of discussion among scholars and writers is the identity of Greek periphery literature. Some claim that this literature includes only what

is written «exclusively in the Greek language, by people usually of Greek origin who, for a long period of time have lived or live permanently outside of Greece and whose works thematically revolve mainly, if not exclusively, around the life of migrants».<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, others claim that one must also include «writers of Greek origin (and not only) whose themes are Greek»,<sup>11</sup> although their language is not Greek. Other scholars consider the Greek language to be the basic criterion of Greek periphery literature but do not absolutely exclude English-speaking writers of Greek origin.<sup>12</sup>

In Greek-American literature, things are even more confused. Some scholars include everything written in Greek or English that considers or reflects the life of Greek-Americans, or their heritage and culture. But others, such as the poet Makis Tzilianos, believe that Greek-American literature can only be texts written in Greek.

Stephanos Constantinides has sought to identify Greek periphery literature<sup>13</sup> using a number of criteria. The first one and most important is that of the Greek language. As for the writers of Greek origin using another language, he distinguishes between authors of texts referring to «Greekness» in the sense of history, culture, country of origin and diaspora reality, and authors whose writings have nothing to do with these themes. With some reservation, Constantinides admits that the first category could be included in the Greek periphery literature, but surely not the second one.

If geographical criterion is used as to define Greek periphery literature, then it must be considered as part of the national literatures of the countries where the authors live. Based on this criterion, the publications of Greek-Australian authors belong to Australian literature; the writings of Greek-American writers, to American literature. According to many specialists, this criterion is valid but only for writings in the languages of the countries where the authors live. The work of Greek-Americans produced in English thus forms part of American literature.

On the contrary, the geographical criterion does not apply to writings in Greek. George Kanarakis in his article published in this edition, is quite explicit on this point, citing two cases to illustrate his position. The first case is that of the poet Ioannis Papadiamadopoulos «who was born and raised in Greece where he published his first and only Greek poetry collection

*Trygones kai Ehidnai (Doves and Serpents) (1878)* before settling in France where he wrote in French, under the *nom-de-plume* Jean Moréas, «achieving a place as a poet in French literature». Thanks to his first collection of poems in Greek, he has of course «his place in Greek letters», and «is represented in Greek anthologies and histories of literature». As the well-known Greek scholar Konstantinos Dimaras observed, Moreas has in this way been, «lost for Greek Letters»<sup>14</sup>. Contrary to Jean Moreas, Constantine Cavafy born and raised in Alexandria, has nothing to do with Egyptian literature as he wrote in Greek, and the geographical criterion does not apply to him. In accordance with the language criterion, Cavafy is included in Greek national literature. Of course Greeks are not alone in this literary category. Other writers for whom the criterion of language has determined the identity of their work are Samuel Becket (Anglo-Irish origin), Eugene Ionesco (Roumanian origin), Julien Green (American origin) and are considered French authors. It is neither geography nor ethnic origin but rather language that actually determines to which national literature an author belongs.

George Kanarakis also opposes the use of the label «Greek-Australian» literature on the basis of an author's origin, whether their works are written in Greek or in English. He observes that «by assigning such a label we do this body of literature a disservice, as in effect we assign it a peripheral existence—neither Greek nor Australian and thus simply that this literature so designed does not fully belong either to the Greek or Australian national body of literature, and thus is of marginal importance». Kanarakis advances an additional reason against using the label: «it carries in itself the seed of its own destruction». He writes in his article published in the current issue of *Etudes helléniques/Hellenic Studies* :

*The term «Greek-Australian literature» presupposes the existence of Greek-Australian writers, but the matter is for how many generations can we consider these writers Greek Australians and at which point do they become Australians of Greek origin. Given that in the last two decades, Greek immigration to Australia has diminished to an insignificant level, it is easy to understand that the term «Greek-Australian» has an expiry date. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the literary writing of people of Greek origin will not continue when this literature will not be known any more as Greek-Australian, since it will be a term not used for its writers any longer, while, on the other hand, the bodies both of Greek and Australian literature will carry on as long as these nations and peoples continue to exist.*

In any event, language constitutes the main component of the identity of a literature as it consists of a code leading to a social, cultural and historical reflection of reality. This dialectical relation between the linguistic code and the social reality, poses another problem : How does a Greek linguistic code reflect the American, Canadian or Australian reality — or even the Hellenic one — if of course one accepts that the linguistic code expresses the social and cultural specificity of a country? Even the reference to a global village goes through the particular linguistic code used. As Eleni Torosi put it, «each language works with different images and habits».<sup>15</sup> To paraphrase Cornelius Castoriadis, the writer exists *in* and *through* society — and society is always historical. In the same way as the writer exists *in* and *through* language, and language reflects history and society. Yet which history and which society do Greek authors of the diaspora reflect? The history and society of the homeland, Greece, or that of the host country? Perhaps the answer is both. As a result, we may discover an interesting cosmopolitan dimension in their work.

In conclusion, Greek periphery literature is a separate entity which is difficult to define very precisely. Without a doubt, it remains outside the main-stream literatures of both the home and guest-countries. Excluded and even disdained by the literary establishments of both countries, it is viewed as a “parochial” phenomenon. In reality, there is not one Greek periphery literature but rather different Greek literatures of the periphery. Here, the geographical criterion enter into the equation. We speak of Greek-American, Greek-Australian, Greek-Canadian literatures. In this sense, we could consider Cypriot literature as part of this periphery literature. Within the context of Greek literature, Cypriot literature is also generally viewed as a «parochial» phenomenon by the Athenian establishment. However, Cypriot literature has a dynamic spirit not found in the diaspora literatures. This major difference may be attributed to the fact that Cypriot literature is the product of a society that has its own identity. In a sense it stands as an autonomous literature, as the product of an autonomous society.

Finally, obviously there are essential theoretical and practical problems to examine in the future if we are to explore or cultivate the field of the Greek-periphery literature. Research is necessary to examine the similarities and peculiarities of the broader Greek literature of the periphery.



In this issue of *Études helléniques-Hellenic Studies* we focus on Greek periphery literature with articles from the United States, Australia, Canada, and Germany. Reference is also made to Cypriot literature. This special issue embraces variety hence one article presents Greek women writers in Australia, Canada and the USA; whereas, another article raises key questions about the ethnic identity of the immigrant writer.

Of course there are Greek writers in many other countries, for example, France, Scandinavian countries, England, African countries, and former Soviet-bloc countries. However, it was beyond the scope of this issue to present what is going on everywhere. Nevertheless, study of the Greek periphery literature all around the world must one day be achieved as a tribute to these people who work and create under difficult conditions.

Georges Kanarakis in his article presents the perspectives on the literary achievements of Hellenism in Australia and the relation of this literature with Greece and the mainstream Australian literature. After an overview of the Greek and English language literature produced by Greek immigrants and their descendants in Australia the author raised the question of the national identity of this production. He considers the language as the only satisfactory criterion by which we can identify a literary work and also the national body of literature to which it belongs. Concerning the literature of the Greek-Australians he concludes that everything written in Greek language belongs to the national body of the Greek literature and that works written in English belong to the national body of the Australian literature. Furthermore Kanarakis thinks that this is the canon for the literature written by Greeks in general in the diaspora.

Helen Nickas explores the theme of memory in the work of three Greek-Australian poets : Dimitris Tsaloumas, Antigone Kefala, and Yota Krili. The author analyses the three poets in terms of their imaginative dialogue with the past and in terms of the dual vision attributed to the migrant writer. Memory, however, indicates the author, does not imply a spontaneous or natural flow of images as it has to be constructed by inventive and creative writers. The important in these three poets is that they are bilingual, of first generation immigrants, but writing in English, and trying to make their mark within the wider Anglophone literature. She concludes with the words of a critic reviewing Kefalas book of poems, *Absence*, one of the three poets she presents in her article :

*It is an old truth : inspiration requires absence rather than presence. Only when something is far away, or no longer exists, does it press upon the imagination and truly belong to the writer. Poetry is not an engagement with the present, but a belated mediation on the withdrawal of presence. Every poem tries to create a world where what has been lost may be found again. Sometimes verse carries with it a little of the pleasure of writing. Yet, not even the most dated of poems wholly disguise the fact that it is a labour of mourning<sup>16</sup>.*

Makis Tzilianos presents the state of modern Greek literature produced in the United States. He insists on the importance of the use of Greek. Tzilianos, a poet himself, considers Greek writers those who express themselves in Greek. The Greek-American writers who write in English must be considered, according to the author, as writers of America itself and to compete with the other American writers. The same theme of identity is also discussed by Thalia Tassou who explores the situation of Greek-American writers expressing themselves in English.

Greek-Canadian literature is explored by Jacques Bouchard and Stephanos Constantinides. Bouchard refers to the Greek-Canadian poets of Quebec whose poems he has translated into French. Constantinides, after a brief presentation of Greek-Canadian literature, deplors the lack of studies and research on Greek-Canadian writers.

Niki Eideneier presents the situation of Greek literature in Germany. The author provides a rare, sweeping overview of the scene from the early post-war period to today. She refers to the first generation writers and to the second one, to the 'educated' versus the 'self-educated' from the rural areas. She points out the difficulties Greek writers in Germany have faced in being accepted by not only mainstream German but also mainstream Hellenic literature.

Ekaterini Georgoudaki discusses the dreams and the difficulties of Greek women writers in three countries, Australia, Canada and the U.S.A. Exploring their texts, the author considers that they function as testimonies of immigration and that there is a variety of characters, themes, and techniques in their writings.

Pan Bouyoukas, a Greek-Canadian writing in French, explores the theme of ethnic origin and identity. The author raises the question of acceptance of the immigrant or the “ethnic” writer by the mainstream body of the literature.

In a fragmented article rather than a manifesto, Stephanos Constantinides expresses some heretical thoughts on Cypriot literature and wonders about its place within modern Greek literature.

Obviously there are basic theoretical and practical problems to solve in the future if we are to explore or cultivate the field of the Greek-periphery literature. Research is necessary to examine the similarities and peculiarities of the broader Greek literature of the periphery.

#### NOTES

1. George Kanarakis, “Migrant Writing in Multicultural Australia : the case of the Greeks”, *Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies*, vol.3, No 2, Automne/Autumn 1995.
2. G. Kanarakis, *op. cit.*, p.21.
3. G. Kanarakis, *op. cit.*, p.19.
4. Helen Nickas, “Greek-Australian Literature between ‘majors’”, *Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies*, vol.4, no 1, Printemps/Spring 1996, p.77.
5. Alexander Karanikas, “Chapter in Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature”, New York: Modern Language Association, 1983, p.65-89. [www.helleniccomserve.com/greek\\_american\\_literature.html.72k](http://www.helleniccomserve.com/greek_american_literature.html.72k)
6. Giorgos Kalogeras, “H ellinoamerikaniki logotechnia os panepistimiako mathima: Mia protasi”, in Michalis Damanakis kai Giannis Mitrofanis, *Logotechnia tis Diasporas kai Diapolitismikotita*, (*Literature of the Diaspora and multiculturalism*), Rethymno, EDIAMME 2004, p.24.
7. G. Kalogeras, *op. cit.*, p.24.
8. G. Kalogeras, *op. cit.*, p.24-25.
9. Helen Nickas, “Greek-Australian Literature between ‘majors’”, *Études helléniques/Hellenic Studies*, vol.4, no 1, Printemps/Spring 1996, p.68.

10. John Vasilakakos, "Mapping Greek-Australian Literature: a Re-evaluation in the Context of the literature of the Greek Diaspora", in Stephanos Constantinides, Maria Herodotou, *Greeks in Australia, Etudes helléniques/ Hellenic Studies*, vol.7, no 2, Autumn/Automne 1999, p.180.
11. J. Vasilakakos, *op. cit.*, p.189.
12. J. Vasilakakos, *op.cit.*, p.189-200.
13. Stephanos Constantinides, "I Taftotita tis Diasporikis Logotehnia" ("The Identity of the Diasporic Literature"), in Michalis Damanakis kai Giannis Mitrofanis, *Logotechnia tis Diasporas kai Diapolitismikotita (Literature of the Diaspora and Multiculturalism)*, Rethymno, EDIAMME 2004, p.18.
14. K. Th. Dimaras, *Istoria tis neollinikis logotechnias : Apo tis protes rizes os tin epochi mas (History of Modern Greek Literature : From the First Roots to Our Time)* Athens, Ikaros, 1975, p.350.
15. Eleni Torosi, "Ta Chromata tis Glossas-Magika Symvola", in Michalis Damanakis and Giannis Mitrofanis, *Logotechnia tis Diasporas and Diapolitismikotita (Literature of the Diaspora and multiculturalism)*, Rethymno, EDIAMME, 2004, p.92.
16. Hart Kevin, «Absence : new and selected poems, by Antigone Kefala». Melbourne: *The Age*, 28/11/92, cited by H. Nickas in her article.