

## The State of Modern Greek Literature in North America

Makis Tzilianos\*

*... However, for many years we know that Cronos dined with the flesh of His children; he spits out the bones and we sprout immigrants...*

Helen Floratos-Paidoussi

### ABSTRACT

The following article offers a brief overview of the Greek-American immigration experience as an introduction to Modern Greek Literature produced in the United States. The author looks at the situation from a passionate, personal perspective as he stresses the different types of immigrant, the linguistic struggle of second-generation Greek-Americans and the role of the Orthodox Church within the community. A writer/translator himself, the author concludes with a plea for more study of Greek-language literature produced in America or other English-language countries. The names of several key authors and some extracts are provided.

### RÉSUMÉ

Pour mieux contextualiser la littérature de la diaspora hellénique aux États-Unis, cet article fait un survol rapide de l'immigration grecque depuis le XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle jusqu'à nos jours. D'un point de vue personnel, empreint de sa passion, l'auteur traite des thèmes tels la nature de l'immigration, la lutte pour la survie de la langue grecque parmi les enfants de la deuxième génération et le rôle de l'église orthodoxe dans la communauté. Il présente les auteurs les plus importants et quelques extraits poétiques. En guise de conclusion, l'auteur, qui est écrivain et traducteur aussi, lance un cri de coeur pour l'étude et le rayonnement de la littérature grecque créée en Amérique du nord et dans d'autres pays anglophones.

\* Writer/Translator

## Greek Immigration to America

The Greeks began immigrating to the US in significant numbers around the middle of the nineteenth century. They originally arrived with the label 'Levantine'. At the turn of the twentieth century, the independent Greek state with its efforts of nation building, made Greece a European nation, and its inhabitants were accepted as Western Europeans. With the easing of American immigration laws, communities were established in western Florida, for example the sponge gatherers in the Tarpon Springs area. By the end of World War I, Greece was a respected modern nation, poor but rich in history and culture. A large merchant marine fleet was the pride of the Hellenes, although many of its ships were flying foreign flags. After the defeat in 1922 of the Greek army in Asia Minor, Greeks concentrated on the tip of the Balkan peninsula, abandoning their "Great Idea". The population expansion of the thirties, together with the two million refugees from Asia Minor after the population exchange, made living conditions difficult, so many sought refuge at sea. As a result, seamen's meager but consistent wages were sent home to support extended families. Others chose to head for the United States in search of the American dream.

During World War II, the Greek sea expertise was used to transfer goods and war materials to the Allies from America to England with rewards of compensation for the danger. Many of these seamen now found ways to immigrate to America. Others came from Greece as legal immigrants, a salvation for the starving Greek farmers and workers because of the destruction left by World War II. Later the transport of wheat for Northern Europe involved the risky Transatlantic crossings. In Canada and the US, Greek manpower filled in factories and railroad yards. Hence, the Greeks established themselves in the Western Hemisphere as seamen or manual labourers. After World War II, Greek shipowners transported oil from the Middle East. Despite the fact that Washington was cautious about immigration, men and women were permitted to stay as workers if they married American citizens. In this way they could obtain early citizenship without facing quota restrictions on the entry of their relatives. It is worth remembering that the main desire of most immigrants was to bring over their relatives. The Orthodox Church soon followed.

By the end of WW II, Greek immigration reached its zenith. Just before the Greek Junta in Greece, a stream of educated and highly skilled Greeks

arrived on the North American continent, in American or eastern Canadian cities, seeking better employment opportunities. Although the first Greek immigrants of the early twentieth century were not highly skilled or educated, their children often rose up the ranks in various sectors.

In the late 1960s, after the American-backed Junta took power in Greece, a second wave of educated Greek immigrants came, regardless of their political beliefs. These new immigrants did not mix easily with the older wealthier immigrants, who feared Communism and other progressive ideas. The newcomers were independent, for unlike their predecessors, most already spoke the language of their adopted country before attaining immigrant status. They were also better skilled and more readily employed. Whereas the first immigrants had sought an identity by working on church councils; later immigrants were proud of their Hellenic heritage, but to considered the Church of ceremonial value only.

Some of the newcomers were free thinkers and some kept their mother language including talented writers who wrote creatively in their native Greek. Their writings reflect how this Greek population possessed a culture and literature based on its daily pains, struggles and efforts — first for survival and then for identity. For many of them, Greek identity is retained mostly through language rather than through Christian Orthodoxy.

The Cyprus conflict, for instance, was one of the themes that generated revolutionary poetry. The message of the seventies resounded: "let Cyprus be free". In short, there is a half a century's worth of writers in North America. Note they were working outside of any school classification or any ten-year cycle, as is commonly accepted in mainland Greece.<sup>2</sup>

### **Who and Where Are the Writers?**

This presentation highlights the writers *expressing themselves in Greek*, who seek to perpetuate the language in America and who live among the ethnic Greek-speaking neighbourhoods within major urban centres. This means that we are defining a literature written in Greek although perhaps translated into English. Most writers and poets live in New York City, while others reside in San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, Boston as well as in parts of Texas. These are cities in which they can earn a living from other trades,

since writing cannot support them. Their literary contribution thus comes from a hobby that fills their leisure time while fulfilling their need for expression in Greek.

The published or unpublished Greek Writers in America are legion; however, statistics show that over 500 books have been published in the last 50 years. Below is a quick list of those writing in Greek in the United States. These writers express a full gamut of ideas and emotions including nostalgia, cultural stances and their immigrant lives. At times bitter, at times philosophical, most are not pious. Some may feel piteous for being immigrants, cut off from their homeland; hence they describe their new surroundings, compare old and new customs, make adjustments, but are not lethargic in the Christian sense of turning the other cheek. They walk along without bending to fate, without whimpering. Instead they stand up and work — work hard and successfully in this famous melting pot. Some may say it is admirable that they speak and write in Greek. Indeed, they are proud of their past, their origins, their language, the Greek way of their daily lives on American soil.

Individually, either in prose or poetry, the Greek writers in America have their preferences, either in traditional or free (modern) writing, in poetry. Their narrative in novels covers such subjects as:

- immigrant experiences (Vana Kontomerkou, Dionysis Kontarinis);
- the seaman's life (Gabriel Panagiosoulis);
- daily Greek-American life (Theano Papazoglou-Margari, Eleni Paidoussi, Giannis Michalakis D. Tsamoulis-Nedas, Petros Livaditakis,);
- memories of their previous life in Greece (Dimitris Diamantis, Lili Bitá, Regina Pagoulatos).

Others chose to express themselves in plays, either dramas or comedies with Greek or universal themes (Giorgos Giannaris, Dionysis Maravegias, Makis Tzilianos). Others have penned essays on art (criticism) or history (Giorgos Giannaris, Nikos Spanias, Rigas Kappatos, Regina Pagoulatos, Dimitris Moustakis).

Still others have produced satirical verse and essay-chronicles, for example, D. Georgopoulos, Theodosios Athas, and Nikos Tzaniios.

Lastly, many writers especially in New York have translated works from English or Spanish into Greek. This is the case for Theodoros Giannakoutis, Rigas Kappatos, Theodosios Athas and Makis Tzilianos. There are also essays on Greek *belles lettres* written by Giannis Antonopoulos, Giorgos Giannaris, and Arnakis, K. Tsirpanlis, to name but a few.

There are also several Greek literary magazines (quarterlies) circulating in the US: For many years the bilingual *ATHENE* was published in Chicago. *The Argonaut* had 3 yearly large issues in New York by Ziogas and Babis Malafouris. There is also *The Hellenism of America* in NYC, and recently *New Hesperia* in NYC. The Greek dailies *Atlantis*, *Proini* and *National Herald* have published Greek literary works as well, and there are still others published weekly or monthly like *Kampana*, and *Eseis*.

### **A Taste of the Modern Greek-American Literary Tradition**

To savour Greek-American literature, one could sample the poetry of the last half of the twentieth century. Note that poets of this period belong to the generation of immigrants who arrived after World War II. Given the usual space limitations, only a few could be presented here, in English. These poets represent the breadth of themes and styles of Greek-American poetry. Some highlight their Hellenic heritage while others do not.

Here is an extract from the work of Theodosios Athas (Lynaios), who wrote for freedom.

*Here, it does not have an Angelos Sikelianos  
here it does not have a Madonna and Icons...  
Here it does not have equinoxes  
with poles the day of Easter  
and the name day of St. Demetrios*

Here it has 365 faithful copies of the day Naught  
(Songs of the season of silence)

Not to be missed is the Nikos Spanias, the poet *maudit* who reveals a certain existential anguish.

*Frequently, his face and his eyes  
Were red by drinking.  
Frequently he was seized by a desperation  
So great like a chasm of earthquake on his chest  
From where two flowers of March were trembling.  
His luck was favorable  
And he desired to have deep feelings  
Like in the "ode to the moon"*

*(Dionisios Solomos).*

Quoted at the beginning of this article was Eleni Floratos-Paidoussi, whose work shows her social sensitivity.

*I renounce the sacrificial lamb the seared plastic entrails the  
acid odor of Dionysian orgies the lethargic Pnyx (from where  
Solon was banished) I renounce the cymbals  
the anthems of the Atlantic Alliance imported waves of  
stereophonic nausea rock and roll bog (the little black pupil in  
Little Rock, Arkansas still haunts me).*

*(First Person Singular: Ten Poems)*

This is a sentimental example from the poet-writer Rigas Kappatos.

*My father at 83 years old makes deliveries.  
He takes flowers to their recipients.  
Confessing, he tells me how much he loves the flowers,  
those huge perfumed bouquets of many colors,  
or the oversized pots that he carries in his arms.  
My father got old.  
My father lessened.  
and I am saddened tonight that I have remembered him.  
I bring him to my memory and then I lose him.  
I see bunches of flowers to go by themselves  
from street to street, slowly,  
to turn the corners in tired pace,  
to climb the bushes at the bus-stops  
conveying an emptiness,  
an absence.*

*(For my father at his 83 years)*

Georgos Giannaris is yet another poet who observes the human condition.

*Our house for security was built without windows.  
Only the roof in the middle  
Had a round opening above the hearth.  
Through there the rain,  
The wind, the sun and God were commuting.  
The birds passing over  
Were casting dung on the hearth. And there was peace.  
Today an airplane imitated the birds...*

*(Unfinished letter from a Vietnamese Boy)*

Regina Pagoulatos versifies her sharp wit.

*There is nothing new  
just old things  
wearing a coat of newness  
the cloak of today's world.  
Brass beds  
and wicker chairs  
are now in fashion.  
Hatred as old as man  
is camouflaged  
in philanthropic institutions.  
The dove of Peace  
is caught in line-twigs  
by the merchants of death.  
And in my child's first love  
I live my own again.*

(From the collection *Pyrrhios*)

In this example, Antonis Decavales describes his nostalgia.

*At eight in the evening, properly humble, I went  
With movements harmonious and restrained  
Poured into the prototype of fear,  
With a landscape of devotion on my eyelids,  
All as was shown me with much circumspection  
By the last mirror:  
The kissing birds on my belt buckle,  
Whatever of my chest might be revealed  
Arranged in the image of unfaithfulness,  
A slight fragrance of narcissus  
On my earlobes; I went  
At eight in the evening  
With a small sheaf of papers soaked in sin  
To the dreadful encounter with judgment –  
But found that the god had gone  
On one of his honeymoons.*

(From the collection *Nimule-Gondokoro* 1949)

Other poets came to the US after World War II and belong to the first generation. Their themes have to do with their condition in their new country, the nostalgia of Greece, and especially the sensibility which results from the social and physical environment and from what is going on around the world, e.g., the peace movement, anti-colonial struggles, antiracist and feminist demonstrations. They are influenced by traditional poets like Palamas and Varnalis, and the modernists, especially Cavafy, Elytis, Seferis. Among these Greek-American poets are Persa Varsa-Paraskevopoulou, Carmen Karka, Panos Vozikis, Loucy Marouletti, Makis Tzilianos, Georgios Skoularikos, Yota Statis, Christopher Agritellis, Spiros Darsinos, Lili Bitá, Dionysis Maravegias, Polykarpos Kyriakou, Stathis Gourgouris, Orestis Varvitsiotis, Dimitris Dolios, Georgios Koutoumanos, and Nikos Alexiou.

Of course, there are many more poets involved in groups in Chicago, New York, Washington, Boston, and elsewhere in the USA, like D.E. Valakos, Nitsa Kappa, Sp. Milios, Nikos Laidis, John Ntellas, Giannis Kalogiannis, Leonidas Stellakis, Kostas Karkatsoulis, Theodoros Giannakoulis, Christos Tsiamis, Dinos Siotis, A. Maskaleris, Giorgos Chouliaras, Nikos Korkidis, Despina Vlachos, and Kostas Efkarpidis.

### **The Greek Language in America Today**

Today, the Greek population of the North America continent has reached three or more million people. This population supports many Greek daily or weekly newspapers and daily radio programs. They network daily with other Greek-speaking individuals, who are exasperated by the indifference of Greeks who are losing their identity. They are frustrated with the Church's attitude which puts language aside and tries to save through the Orthodox faith alone<sup>3</sup>. They ask the following basic question: Why has Greece entrusted the education of Greek-Americans to a religious organization that lies outside Greek borders?

Mainly because it was *Greek* Orthodox. A Church in the United States is a non-profit cultural organization whose purpose is to spread the "word," i.e., the New Testament. It is unconcerned with the preservation of the Greek language. Yet for Greeks in the United States, religion and ethnicity remain intertwined. Originally, the immigrants enabled the Greek Orthodox

Church to establish itself, purchase real estate and prosper. The language which united the immigrants is fading out. The recent creation of the SAE (The World Council of Hellenes Abroad) will not save the Greek ethnic element abroad.

The Greek language is fast losing its ethnic element. We are not worried about the language and culture of ancient Greece. They do not need any modern guardian to survive as Americans have kept and adopted the works of ancient writers in translation (together with the original texts) word by word as their own western culture, whether in science, medicine, philosophy, literature or theater, the libraries, the universities, and their own home with a set of encyclopedia. It is modern Greek that needs help. Today, first and second generation Americans of Greek descent speak little or no Greek either in their daily routine or in their homes. This is particularly evident where mixed marriages are involved. Due to the need to mix with other ethnicities and earn a living in a melting pot like New York, the only Greek they might hear is in the church psalms. To aggravate an already sad situation, the psalms are often sung in American English, instead of Greek, in order to attract more people to church services.

### **Last but Never Least, Literature**

Although modern Greek writers in America are few, their works form the capital or heritage of the Greek presence in America. These authors and poets will become modern guardians of a "Greek heritage" in America.

However, the contribution to modern Greek literature by writers in the USA is underestimated by both homeland and American Greeks. Most academics of Greek origin or educators involved in Greek studies at the Universities fail to appreciate the value and power of the American literature in Greek.<sup>4</sup> Such academics may lack the knowledge or confidence to introduce little known writers into the curriculum; moreover, such a step may not be advantageous to their careers. In Greece, American-based writers using Greek have been underrated because judged not by their writing but by the work they do to earn a living. Most Greek-American writers are self-taught, have no affiliation to any school and pay to publish their work for no profit. Since these writers do not belong to any Athenian group, their

work is not yet accepted in the Athenian literary journals. Basically, the Greek writer in America is not judged by his merits or his historical place, but by whom he may happen to know.

How can the work of Greek writers in America be maintained as an ethnic literature if there are no means and ends to promote this literature?<sup>5</sup> It is a true dilemma as Greek-Americans are increasingly alienated from the very language in which this literature is written. This leads to the rarely asked question: Will the broader society ever recognize the Greek-American writer as its poet or writer? Perhaps, but only if his works are translated some day. However, Greek American writers who write in English must be considered as writers *of America*, not as Greek writers *in America*. The example of Geoffrey Eugenides springs to mind immediately.

Do these writers continuing in Greek have the stamina to compete in the broader competitive English language? Only time will tell. Regardless of the future, Greek writing in America must be recognized as a historic fact for it expresses the beginnings of a large group of immigrants before they started to be absorbed into the greater faceless American society. One could try to compare Greek literature in America with the Jewish or Latino literatures which began as immigrant literature and have blossomed in the US. There is also the example of a healthy Italian-Canadian literature. There are obvious similarities in terms of a writer choosing Greek, Yiddish or Spanish, respectively, over English. However, various differences, such as the broader Shoah literature, and Chicano or Tex-Mex hybrids, as well as the difference in population age and size, prevent any truly quantitative comparison or further discussion here.

Regardless of future assimilation of Greek immigrants, twentieth century Greek literature in America remains a historical fact that will endure. Let us hope that as a powerful expression of modernity, it will overcome the obstacle of the interests of the Greek Orthodox Church in America and that the future Greek State will indeed incorporate it into a broader definition of Greek literature.

All in all, it is high time that literature in Greek, be it a literature developed in the USA and Canada<sup>6</sup>, or even elsewhere in the English-speaking world, be included in university courses and promoted wherever possible. Otherwise, we may soon be discussing the archeology of a distant Greek literature in America.

## NOTES

1. The Greeks were not in the US immigration quota for they were considered Ottomans under Turkey's yoke.

2. The Egyptian Greeks did not follow the Greek examples of the homeland's as Cavafy proved to be independent of any influence of his period; he followed the British admiration for anything Greek in the arts of the present and future. He did not care what the Greeks considered art then. While the English world was admiring the "Grecian Urn" or the vast steps of the "Ozymodias", in Greece, Drosinis, Poet and general secretary of culture in Athens, promoted the simple childish poetry.

3. Even the Greek immigrant, by not having any connection daily with his tongue, isolated in his daily endeavor to survive, little by little forgets his language.

Thus, for example, in 2003, the Archbishop Dimitrios after the Greek Parade on Fifth Avenue, said in an interview on Greek TV (in Greek), has the freedom to speak of "Orthodoxy parades". What he did not see was a magnificent Greek parade of about 100,000 people marching from all walks of life. He did not see that these proud marchers carried blue and white flags. The tired immigrant, hearing it, had no way to object and no ability to react.

In 2004, on the Greek language celebration day (30 January), the Archbishop spoke in front of the Greek representative (Under-Secretary of Culture) in English rather than in Greek. Instead of celebrating the Greek language, he showed a film about the return of the Hierarchs' bones to Constantinople, from the Pope of Rome, so that Greek language day became a 'human remains day', in the basement of his Cathedral in NYC. Unfortunately, the modern Greek State did not find this odd.

4. Of course, much of the writings are not worthy of publication, especially some poetry by people who think that rhyming words create poetry and songs or the acceptance of a letter in any daily newspaper make writers of prose. Professional literary researchers have never bothered to look for the real literature written by the immigrants in America and Canada. In addition, the Greek Ministry of Culture never cared to assess the quality of this literature. The Ministers come and go, spend their time in receptions, and never go out of their way to discover who are the keepers of the Greek language in America. The Church does not smile upon the writers in Greek who do not comply with the Church's interests and the Clergy's respect.

5. In October 2003, the University of Crete, which is also the Greek Institution that is responsible for the elaboration of education material in Greek for the children of the diaspora, had a conference on Greek literature abroad. At the conference, a

discussion took place on which texts of this literature, could interest these children in learning Greek. The Institution published an anthology with literature created by writers living overseas, in the children's societies.

6. Similar studies have been made in Australia by Dr. G. Kanarakis, Dr. Helen Nickas and others, and to a lesser extent in Canada and Dr. Evangelos Mantzaris in South Africa. In the USA this field is virgin and still untouched. Language researchers and Americanists have made studies of writings in English by Greek Americans, e.g., Dr. G. Kalogeras. However, writing in English or on Greek themes does not imply that this is Greek literature in America. We return to the problem of definitions.