

Questioning Greek-American Literature

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The Greek language was neglected by the Poseidonians,
Mingling for so many centuries With Tyrrenians, Latins
and other foreigners. The only thing ancestral that
remained Was a Greek festival, with beautiful rituals
With lyres and flutes, competitions and garlands. And it was their
habit at the end of the festival To talk to each other about
their customs of old And to repeat the Greek names That
few of them still recognized. And so, their festival always
ended sadly Because they remembered that they also were
Greeks, They, too, were once members of Greater Greece.
O, but how they had declined now, how they had changed,
Living and speaking like barbarians, Cut off-o cursed
misfortune!-from Hellenism.

Constantine Cavafy

Greek-American Literature is perhaps the most important Greek periphery literature. Unfortunately, it has not been studied systematically, so our knowledge about it remains rather limited. As one scholar noted:

No scholar can know for sure, at this stage of research, how many Greek Americans can qualify as writers by virtue of having published worthy poems, stories, or essays. In the 126 issues of "Athene" magazine, the leading American journal of Hellenic thought, a couple hundred more or less minor authors were represented during the twenty-seven years of publication from 1940 until 1967. Many others have published in Greek newspapers, written privately printed booklets, and so on. The Greek press has often published poetry and short fiction. These scattered and rather slight works may have some value for term and seminar papers – that is, if one can locate them to begin with; they have not as yet been gathered and cataloged at any central location. Even many books by the forty or so relatively important Greek-American authors are so long out of print that they cannot be readily assigned as texts. In time, no doubt, the archives of

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Greek Americana will be as complete as money and effort can make them. Then, on microfilm and through inter-library loans they will be available to students throughout the country¹.

Greek scholars in the United States, unlike their Australian counterparts, undervalued and underestimated their compatriots' creative work. Only these last years has there been any effort to research and study Greek-American literature.

Of course, for many years Constantine Cavafy was seen as the only poet of the diaspora worthy of interest. Even today, scholars usually focus on writers using English. Those who wrote or write in Greek are generally ignored. Besides, there is confusion over language because the tendency is to call Greek-American literature everything written by people of Greek descent. This characteristic also contrasts with the Australian experience. Is it really necessary to distinguish between those writers belonging to mainstream American literature, who only by their origin have Greek, and those who have strong bonds with Greece, Hellenic culture and the American-Greek Community? Is Elia Kazan therefore a Greek-American writer? Even if we consider some of his characters Greek, are we going to consider Greek every writer creating Greek personages? If we take his ethnic origin as a criterion, then why not consider Jean Moréas who wrote in French as a Greek poet?

For certain scholars, some Greek-American but also some from mainland Greece, it is hard to see writers like Irini Spanidou or Olga Broumas as part of American literature only. Yet is it enough to consider Broumas a Greek poet because she "links herself with the goddess of the Hellenic age"²? The case of Broumas and Spanidou is complicated by the fact that both were born in Greece, where they received their education in Greek. They went to study in the United States as young women and adopted English. There is, of course, the interrelation of Greek and American culture in the poetry of Broumas and in the prose of Spanidou. Moreover, Broumas, who was born in Siros, Greece, wrote her first collection in Greek. That linguistic fact reminds us that Jean Moréas also wrote his first collection of poems in Greek before becoming a French poet. Broumas attended the University of Pennsylvania (B.A. in architecture, 1970) and the University of Oregon (M.F.A. in creative writing, 1973). She has taught at many colleges and universities. There can be no doubt that today Broumas has established

herself as an American poet. She made the passage from Greece to America and from Greek to English. Spanidou, arrived in the US in 1964, settled in New York, and published her first novel *God's Snake* in 1986. She too adopted English as her language of expression. The story begins and ends in Greece and in a way evokes her childhood there. Again, is this enough to characterize the author as a Greek writer? If we consider the criterion of relationship with Greek culture and Greece as one of the characteristics of an ethnic literature, we could include her in a corpus of Greek-American literature, but in no way we can include her in the national body of the Greek literature. Here the answer is evident: the language of that literature as a national literature would necessarily be Greek.

There are other cases of Greek-American writers which are more clear and do not present the dilemma of categorization. One example is Byron Vazakas. He was born in the US, writes in English and has little to do with Greek culture and Greece. His is a clear-cut case of a mainstream American poet. Others, such as Antonis Decavalles and Paul Nord, for instance, have written in both languages and we could consider them both Greek and American poets. There is, of course, the case of all those who wrote in Greek only. Normally they would belong to the national body of Greek literature. This is the case of Nikos Spanias, the poet "maudit", Eleni Païdousi, Theano Margari-Papazoglou, and others. The problem with Greek-American authors writing in Greek is that they are marginalized or even not accepted as part of the national body of Greek literature. Seen as writers of a periphery literature, they receive little attention from the Athenian literature establishment.

Karen Van Dyck refers to those authors and suggests «to focus on the critical categories of immigration and translation. Whereas categories such as nationality, ethnicity or language usually divide literatures, those of immigration and translation thematically and formally unite them. They make impossible the fetishization of a pure, national literature which informs so much of Greek and Greek American criticism. Such categories allow all sorts of hybrid texts to come to the fore. Not only is Greek American literature, as one might expect, thematically and formally structured by the experience of immigration and the practice of translation». In a sense some authors live «between languages and cultures, either in the sense that they lived and wrote in more than one language, both English and Greek, or that they used the cadences, idioms, or syntax of one language in the other».³

In the same category we have also Nicholas Kallas (1907-1988), an important author of the famous generation of the 30s. He wrote first in Greek, but his mature writing notably essays and art criticism, was in English. This gave him an important place in American culture. A non-orthodox Marxist, surrealist, modernist poet and essayist, Kallas was born in Switzerland and raised in Athens. He lived in Paris during the 1930s until 1939 when he moved to New York. Stratis Haviaras is another case of a Greek-American writer who wrote in Greek before settling in America in 1967 to escape the repressive military régime in Greece. Haviaras published four collections of verse in Greece and wrote novels in English once established in the US. His novels have earned him a place in mainstream American Literature.

We must, therefore, deal with writers who use English, although it is not their native tongue. There is a parallel situation for some Greek-Australian authors who also use English as their language of expression. Helen Nickas called them «loosely first generation writers, meaning that they were not born in Australia, but came in a later stage». This is the case in the States of Spanidou, Broumas, Decavalles, Kallas, and Haviaras. We can find similar cases in other parts of the diaspora, for exemple Vassilis Alexakis in France or Theodoros Kalifatidis in Sweden. These authors opted to write in the language of their host country. What is peculiar is that we have other Greek writers who made the opposite choice. In the United States, for instance, the poet Nikos Spanias was able to compose in English but did not. A Canadian example, Nikos Kahtitsis put some poems to paper in English before even leaving Greece, but once he had settled in North America, he decided to write his novels in Greek.

The situation is different for writers born in the United States and thus belong to the second or third generation. This is the case of Harry Mark Petrakis (b.1923). In his novels, Petrakis has created characters from the Greek-American diaspora, especially from the Chicago area. He portrayed the Greeks who tried to integrate American society without losing their Hellenic soul. To some extent, Petrakis is the Greek writer of the American diaspora expressing her dreams, ambitions and struggle for survival; however, he is also a writer of the American mainstream.

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-American literature. Research is necessary to examine the similarities and peculiarities of the broader Greek literature of the periphery.

NOTES

1. 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).
2. Stanley Kunitz, Foreword Notes in Olga Brumas, *Beginning with O*. New Haven, Ct. : Yale University Press, 1977. See also, Alexander Karanikas, *op. cit.*, p.6-7.
3. Karen Van Dyck «Grek Poetry Elsewhere», in *Gamma*, Vol. 8, 2000, pp.81-98.
4. Helen Nickas, in her article in the present issue, p.35.