

# The Criterion of Greekness in Modern Greek Literature

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This lecture is not an English translation of my inaugural lecture. In making the English version I have found that there is a host of things which may be taken for granted in delivering a lecture in Greek which cannot be assumed before a general audience, even one gathered under the auspices of the Arts Association. On the other hand, there are other questions which I may address more directly, away from the heavy symbolism of the Great Hall and full academic dress. So, the wine is the same, but the bottle is of a fundamentally different shape as well as linguistic colour.

The most important addition is an introduction to outline essential facts of Modern Greek history. You will need two earlier dates, 1821 and 1922, and a narrative of events in the 'thirties and 'forties of this century, the decades on which the lecture will focus. In 1821 there occurred the famous uprising of the Greeks in the Ottoman Empire, and a decade later, after enormous acts of heroism and endurance, a small Greek state was formed, covering the southern part of present-day Greece. During the rest of the nineteenth century that state grew slowly northwards, with the vision of including within its boundaries all the Greeks of the Ottoman Empire – not only the present Greek state, but also Constantinople/Istanbul and the towns of the coast of Asia Minor which had a Greek majority. This policy, which became linked with dreams of restoring the Byzantine Empire, was called the Great Idea.

After the Balkan Wars and the defeat of Turkey in the First World War it seemed that the Great Idea was likely to be fulfilled; in 1922 Greek armies were advancing into Asia Minor to try to secure a large area of the peninsula awarded to Greece in the peace settlements. However, abandoned by their erstwhile allies they were eventually smashed by the rising tide of Turkish nationalism under Kemal Atatürk. Casualties were high among the Greeks of Asia Minor, but more than a million survived to be exchanged for the much smaller Turkish population of Greece in the subsequent settlement. This Asia Minor disaster created problems and tensions in Greek society and its economic structures which lasted until the Second World War and after.

Greece in the 'twenties was demoralised and preoccupied with the absorption of the refugees. Only at the beginning of the 'thirties, in spite of the economic crisis, did Greek writers and intellectuals actively begin to look for new national goals to replace those which had disappeared with the Great Idea. The first years of the decade allowed comparatively free debate amongst all shades of Greek opinion. But

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a rapid succession of short-lived governments moved further and further to the right, under the influence of the palace and of European Fascism. In 1936 General Metaxas came to power with a regime which may accurately be described as fascist, and a rabid anti-communist policy. Greece was not, however, included in the fascist Axis, and in fact in 1940 was attacked by Mussolini through Albania. At the most inspiring moment of modern Greek history the Greeks won the campaign in appalling conditions on the Albanian mountain-tops, the first substantial check to fascist armies during the war. Soon after, however, in spite of some support from the British, Australians and New Zealanders, Greece was unable to sustain its defence against a German attack on a broader front.

The period of Occupation was harsh in Greece, with widespread brutality and starvation. Several resistance forces sprang up, of which the strongest and most effective by far was based on the Greek Communist party. The Allies, and especially Churchill, who was always personally involved in Greek affairs, intervened in the resistance with as much interest in the shape of the post-war government of Greece as in driving out the Germans. To cut a complex story short, the British and the Americans, in alliance with the palace and other conservative Greek forces, including those which had collaborated with the Germans, succeeded in saving Greece from Communism in a long and bitter Civil War, which lasted, in two rounds, from 1944-1949. The forces of the left twice seemed about to triumph. In fact they failed as much through their own indecision and the lack of support from Stalin, who had agreed at Yalta to leave Greece in the Western bloc, as through the operations of the conservatives. Even for those like myself who are opposed to Communism, it is difficult to deny that the right-wing governments of Greece after the war were imposed against the wish of the majority of the population. The lack of freedom in political life, the concentration camps, and the total subordination of Greek interests to foreign pressures could not have been much worse had the communists gained the upper hand.

This is the period during which I propose to examine Hellenism and Greekness – Ellinismos and Ellinikotita – in Greek Literature. Why two words? you may ask. After ten years' residence in Australia I have yet to come across one abstract noun for the quality of being Australian: why should Greece have two? (In fact, there is also a third, Romiosyni, which I shall not discuss now to avoid confusion). Of course they are used in rather different ways. Hellenism, Ellinismos, in many circumstances equals the Greeks themselves: the Hellenism of Australia, for example, means in Greek just the Greeks in Australia. As an abstract noun for the quality of being Greek, Ellinismos tends to refer more often to the historical continuity of Greek civilisation, Greece as a civilising force, the active, cultural side of the Greek presence on the world stage. There is a considerable overlap in meaning with Greekness, Ellinikotita, but the latter is a more neutral word which may descend to trivial details. It is easy in Greek to talk about too much Ellinikotita – as in the concentration on food and dancing suggested by some aspects of the policy of multiculturalism in

Australia. To talk about too much *Ellinismos*, however, is impossible within the national framework. I shall use the words tonight more or less interchangeably.

There is in fact a very good reason why these twin ideas should be very prominent in the discourse of Modern Greek studies, so prominent that I am not the only English professor of Medieval or Modern Greek to have chosen them as the subject for an inaugural lecture. In contrast to the situation in most of Western Europe, Greekness as an individual's cultural identity existed in Modern Europe well before the appearance of the Greek state or even Greek national consciousness. In spite of the great antiquity of Greek language and culture, Greece as a state is a phenomenon only of the last two centuries. Before the Revolution of 1821 there had certainly developed a Greek national consciousness among the intelligentsia, especially those resident in the Greek communities in Western European cities like Paris and Vienna. It is a matter of great debate, both inside and outside Greece, how much the ordinary countryman in the armies of 1821 was fighting for the idea of a Greek nation or state, or was simply struggling for freedom on a local scale, from local oppressors, the great majority of whom were Turkish and supported by Turkish armies. This debate is irrelevant to our present concerns.

Whether or not there was a recognisable identity on a national scale before 1821, everyone knew whether somebody was Greek or not. The question could not be answered geographically, for the Greek population of the Ottoman Empire was scattered all round the Eastern Mediterranean. Present-day Greece was only one of its concentrations. The Greek identity was cultural, designed for survival within a multi-ethnic empire, with some common elements with the Jewish identity. This is one reason, incidentally, why Greeks in Australia remain one of the most cohesive and least assimilated of ethnic minorities: they have had many centuries of practice in the role of minority, and the defensive structures, psychological and institutional, are all well in place.

In the Ottoman Empire, anyone who spoke the Greek language and was Orthodox in religion was Greek; it was an important administrative criterion for the Empire. Both defining elements were important: at times the language played the major role, for after all orthodox Slavs could hardly be regarded as Greeks. However in the criteria for the exchange of populations in 1922 and 1923, religion played the larger part, and Turkish-speaking Christians were often deemed to be Greeks and sent to Greece as part of the exchange of populations. These variations, however, are just details: Greekness on an individual and cultural level was a much more secure definition than whatever degree of *national* identity existed before 1821.

In 1821, of course, this changed. When Greece became a nation state, it had to decide upon a national identity with which to take its place in the community of nations. For a variety of reasons, the identity chosen was based on Ancient Greece rather than contemporary religious and linguistic factors. Modern Greece was to be

the state of the descendants of the glorious ancients, who kept alive their spirit and could be relied upon, now that freedom had been won, to emulate their achievements. It was on this basis that Greece demanded support from Western Europe in its struggle for freedom, and the demand did not fall on deaf ears – it was, after all, the heyday of Neoclassicism. The Great Idea which followed was an attempt to make the two identities co-terminous – to spread the *national* identity to all those who shared the cultural identity.

It was inevitable that some tensions should develop between these two sides of the Greek identity. In most Western European countries the geographical entity had appeared long before the national identification. France and England existed geographically before the French and the English developed a definition of what it was to be French or English: the same can be said, with less precision, even for the areas of Italy and Germany. Greeks, however, had a well-trying definition of what it was to be Greek long before it was securely connected politically with any particular area on the map.

Furthermore the change of identities was a gradual one. In the nineteenth century, the Greeks in the Greek kingdom were fewer in number than the remaining Greek inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire. Constantinople/Istanbul, the capital of the prerevolutionary Greek world, remained a larger, more developed city than the small and provincial Athens. Thus the two identities, the national and the cultural, survived together, both still needed in different places, without the new excluding the old. Much of the twentieth-century Greek crisis of identity may be ascribed to this double heritage.

The balance of identities was destroyed by the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922. Of course, the geographical expansion implied by the Great Idea became impossible. In another way, however, and in the most painful possible circumstances, the Idea had been fulfilled: for the first time since antiquity the great majority of 'Greeks' lived in 'Greece'. The need for the cultural definition of Greekness in a minority situation was much reduced, and the Greek state became the unchallenged guardian of Ellinismos and Ellinikotita, taking on an unusually large range of cultural and ideological functions which had before been fulfilled by other agencies. The assumption of these new functions, moreover, took place at a moment of crisis in national ideology. Without the Great Idea the Greek state was in need of a new direction.

When we turn to the main subject of this lecture, therefore, to think of Hellenism and Greekness in literature, there are many possible subjects and motifs which could come under those headings. A novel, for example, may have a plot set in the marketplace of Ancient Athens, the court of the Byzantine Emperors, the Greek War of Liberation or a prewar Athens slum courtyard; any of these increase its level of Hellenism and Greekness. Modernist poetry may use symbols, images or metaphors from any of these periods of history, or more likely from the traditional life of the

Greek countryside, and this too will gain it acceptance as Greek, Hellenic. Some critics protest that Hellenism should not be confined to such external, decorative considerations, but consists of a particular stance towards life. Such an approach, however, involves difficulties of definition and is in danger of degenerating into meaninglessness. Finally, of course, there are questions of the nationality of the writer and the language in which he writes. From some standpoints, every work written in Greek, or written in some other language by a Greek, comes within the definition of Hellenism and/or Greekness. The definition which we are sketching is becoming looser and looser, and it is becoming almost impossible to say of any problematic work that it falls definitively outside the criteria under discussion.

You will be pleased to learn that I do not propose to try to make these definitions any more precise than this. The importance of such ideological constructs is not how they should be defined, for each user of the words is likely to give them a slightly different meaning. The significant thing is how they are used, by whom and with what purpose. These will be the subjects of the rest of this talk. I shall take one major literary group, the Greek generation of the 1930's, which still, in spite of the death of many of its members, makes up the establishment of Greek letters. The generation of the 'thirties, incidentally, is a label used by all criticism on the period, and has been accepted by most of the writers themselves. The development of the group was strongly influenced by historical circumstances along the axis of Hellenism and Greekness. Some of the particular aspects of this influence, as I shall try to show, are somewhat anomalous, and have led to a rather one-sided view of Hellenism in the vast range of work produced by writers of the generation or influenced by them. The conclusion will not be surprising: that Hellenism and Greekness, in spite of their great importance in Greece and in various areas of the history of European civilisation, are not eternal verities but ideological items which have been used, exploited and distorted by a variety of people for a variety of purposes, like all other ideological constructs. This fact does not, of course, mean that the ideas are unimportant, or that they should not be used: it simply imposes on thinking people the obligation of analysing the circumstances in which they are used.

The generation of the 'thirties is represented in the area of poetry by Seferis and Elytis, both winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature, by Ritsos, who has been awarded every prize available to a communist in the post-war Greek situation, and Embirikos and Engonopoulos. In the area of the novel there are rather more names, of less international distinction: Myrivilis, Venezis, Theotokas, Kosmas Politis, Karagatsis, Terzakis and Prevelakis. The demands for renewal, for escape from the restrictions of the previous decade, appeared first in poetry. The formal proclamation of the new generation was the publication in 1931 of Seferis's collection of poems *Sirofi*, which means in Greek both stanza, 'strophe', and turning point. But to understand more clearly the atmosphere in which the new generation began its creative work, we should go back one year to 1930 to the publication of Theotokas'

essay *Free Spirit*, which is a kind of unofficial manifesto. I shall read you a characteristic extract, in which Theotokas speaks of the future poets of Greece.

Don't forget that we are talking of boys and girls of the twentieth century, most original creatures. Their youth, if it is ever expressed in poetry, may amaze us. Sometimes I imagine tomorrow's Greek poets as very different from those you have known up till now. I imagine them strong and athletic, with free movements and vivid colours. They play games, drive cars, of course, and find that 100 kilometres per hour is a very sensible speed. Some also fly planes. They find much beauty in the great sweep of their century, and since they find beauty, you may be sure that at some stage they will also find art. Who can predict now what sort of art it will be? It will certainly be something deep and intense, an excitement for those who are alive. An aeroplane, in the Greek sky, above the Parthenon, provides a new harmony which nobody has yet conceived.

Theotokas had grown up in Constantinople, in a wealthy family with the means to send him for study first to the University of Athens and then to Paris. He returned to Athens in 1929, full of enthusiasm for introducing contemporary European ideas into Greece and adapting them to Greek conditions. He brought with him the manuscript of *Free Spirit*, which was written in France. In the extract I read he speaks of youth, originality, physical strength and health, speed, cars and planes. In literature, he proposes a clean break with the rather anaemic and pessimistic Greek work of the 'twenties, and the complete renewal of the subjects and methods of poetry. His message, in Greek terms, meant the acceptance in Greece of Western ideas and models, together with their cars and planes. Theotokas complains that Greek thinking and Greek creativity have played no role in the transformation of European civilisation after the Great War. This situation may only be remedied by radical change, though he issues a warning against accepting everything new just because it is new. It is natural that Greekness plays only a subordinate role in his essay – the Parthenon is used just to hellenise the plane which is flying above it in the Greek sky.

Seferis too had studied in Paris, but he sought a solution to the same problem without going so far from Greek traditions. In the collection *Strofi*, there are some poems which would fit well into Theotokas' plan, for example a poem called 'Car', together with others with more traditional Greek themes which show Seferis' attempts to renew the form and language of poetry. However, Ancient Greece and its myths make up one of the collection's most significant nexuses of subjects. When we read the wide range of diary material which Seferis has left to help us chart our way through his life and work, it is obvious that for him, even before he returned to Greece from Western Europe, Hellenism would be the cornerstone of the new literary direction. English and French influence would help him to write more complex, more modern poetry, and at the same time could be used to lessen the

distance between those poems and their readers by allowing the use of the language and style of everyday conversation.

Seferis' next collection, published in 1935, *Mythistorima*, is Hellenism and Greekness from beginning to end. It is full of statues and other objects and ideas which lead straight to Ancient Greece. In the words of the Italo-Greek critic, Mario Vitti, who has written the best study of the generation of the 'thirties, these objects and motifs are:

the physical signs of the past life of the Greeks, and by an idealised identification, of the past life of Seferis himself. This leads to a distinction: on one side we have today's life, mediocre and not authentic, and on the other, beyond a kind of pane of glass, all the rest of life, past and authentic, to which the statues and the sea-settings bear witness . . . . Thus the coasts of the Trojan War, the Asia Minor Disaster and his lost friends coalesce into one common memory, leaving the poet with an unending sense of yearning.

But for this most Hellenic of compositions Seferis uses means of expression which are anything but traditional. To these we must now turn. Vitti said that for Seferis contemporary life is not authentic, that his authentic world is found, as it were, behind a pane of glass, in the domain of the Greek past. In heroic ages, the Greeks wrote long heroic poems, like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But modern man now cannot get beyond mere scraps of poetry, fragments of human experience mixed up together without obvious logical connection. In one of his diaries, ten years before, Seferis had expressed a wish to write the *Odyssey*, but backwards.

It must be admitted that *Mythistorima*, as a collection of fragments, creates many problems for the inexperienced reader. Both *Strofi* and *Mythistorima* were printed in very small runs, and the first critical reactions show a good deal of bewilderment. A typical comment is that of Kostis Palamas, the most prominent poet and critic of the previous generation:

The poet must surely help his reader or listener in his attempt to collaborate with him. But things are progressing and getting out of all proportion. The aristocratic versifiers of the type of Seferis do not regard this assistance as essential. It is as if they are not seeking votes.

But in connection with the undoubted difficulty of the poets of the generation of the 'thirties, we must point to one basic contradiction: these difficult poems are expressed in a simple language which sounds like that of daily conversation. The sequence of thoughts may be so obscure as to demand a good deal of study on the part of the reader, and to justify the comment of Palamas about 'aristocratic poets', if not aristocratic versifiers. But the expression of those thoughts occurs in the most

democratic of language, and refers to objects and ideas known in the daily life of every Greek reader. This fact is repeatedly pointed out by the poets themselves, who are anxious to defend themselves against the charge of exclusiveness. To examine the reasons which led to this contradictory situation, it will be necessary to include in the discussion two more writers, the poet Odysseas Elytis and the novelist Elias Venezis.

The best way in which to examine the linguistic theories of the generation of the 'thirties is to start from the model which several writers of the generation held up as the ideal for the language and style of all Greek literature, the *Memoirs* of General Makriyannis. This book plays a large part in their theoretical discussions, and I think it is fair to examine their reactions to it as a group. Makriyannis has two things to recommend him: first, as a virtual illiterate, his style is concrete, spare, and 'guileless', as it is often characterised; this was a powerful antidote to the rather wordy and self-conscious Greek literature of the 1920s. Second, as a self-made hero of the Revolution of 1821, Makriyannis' determined stand against anything undemocratic in political terms and affected in personal terms makes him an excellent model for Ellinismos and Ellinikotita, especially for those who see in those words a reference to a particular stance towards life. This second point is well made in the following words of Theotokas, written in 1961:

He is the free citizen of a country which he dreams of as just and well-governed, free but at the same time socially aware, fully conscious of his rights and the rights of his people, with confidence in himself and an unshakable national and personal self-respect.

This side of Makriyannis would make him, for the generation of the 'thirties and their successors, till this day one of the most powerful symbols of Hellenism and Greekness, or, as it is often put, one of the most important sources of the Modern Greek spirit.

But Mario Vitti's acute observation has shown that this Hellenic and democratic side of Makriyannis' nature appears in the articles of the generation of the 'thirties rather late, during and after the Second World War. Before, what drew them to Makriyannis was much more his style. We may see the change between an article on Makriyannis written by Venezis in 1938 and a lecture given by Seferis on him in Egypt to the Greek forces fighting there at the side of the British. For Venezis,

The value of this work lies chiefly in the way in which it is written, in its simple, dense expression, free from ornamentation, in the wise proportions with which he distributes the weight of his phrase, in his absolute condemnation of all literariness.

For Seferis, speaking to soldiers during the war, Makriyannis' style is still important,



but you will not be surprised to learn that he gives equal space to Makriyannis the fighter and his quintessential Hellenic virtues.

Basing himself on these and other texts, Vitti comes to the following conclusion:

We must not ignore the fact that Makriyannis the fighter, not merely the writer of 'guileless' prose, came to the notice of the generation of the 'thirties when they were overcome by historical circumstances and were awakened out of their social indifference. That which recommended Makriyannis to them before was above all his language and style.

Beside Makriyannis, several representatives of the generation of the 'thirties discovered another Greek democrat and artist, the painter Theophilos Chatzimichail, who appears in articles by Seferis, Elytis and Venezis, among others. Theophilos was a naïf painter who decorated houses, cafes, whatever commissions he was able to get, on the island of Mytilini-Lesbos, and in urban centres in Northern Greece. His work was discovered in the 'thirties, around the time of his death. Seferis says to him:

After Theophilos, we no longer look in the same way. That is his great virtue, something not achieved by many renowned representatives of great academies. Theophilos gave us a new eye. He cleansed our sense of sight like the breaking of early dawn, like houses, red earth and every tiny leaf on the bushes after the air has been washed by a shower. He may not have been a technician – his ignorance in this respect may have been profound. Yet he gave us something extremely rare, something not achieved before him for the Greek landscape: a moment of colour, a breath of wind motionless before us yet retaining all its internal liveliness and the flash of its movement.

It is obvious, from the way in which Theophilos is referred to here and elsewhere, that the generation of the 'thirties found him an excellent example of Greek popular tradition, and so he is often bracketed with Makriyannis as splendid examples of Greekness. But it is equally obvious that the criteria which originally led the Greek writers of the 'thirties to him derived from their own literary and artistic needs. In both these cases they were attracted by the immediacy of untrained artistic creativity, and attempted to imitate the guileless point of view from which their models observed the world. Only later, when, as we shall see, they were compelled by the pressure of events to search for pure symbols of Hellenism, did it strike them that these popular, naïf artists were excellent candidates.

We began this excursus on Theophilos and Makriyannis in connection with the means of expression adopted by Seferis and Elytis. These two great innovators brought to Greek poetry their own combinations and interpretations of a number of Western poetic strategies. In Seferis' case, the major influences were Paul Eluard and

T.S. Eliot, and for Elytis, Eluard again together with Breton and the surrealists. All these models were exploited for their modernist complexity of reference and image, but also for the attempts which all made to clear the paths of communication between the writer and reader. The pure lyricism of Eluard, the experiments of Eliot with the metaphysical poets, and the attempts of the surrealists to liberate the sources of the unconscious, were transformed into a new Greek poetic language, which immediately drove out the closed, self-consciously poetic language of the past. Seferis and Elytis naturally looked for Greek models of linguistic purity and clarity, and settled on Makriyannis, together with the naïf visual contribution of Theophilos. Other works were also used to a lesser extent, like the popular Cretan renaissance romance, the *Erotokritos*. As I have tried to explain, purity and directness later were joined by Hellenism as motives for concentration on these models. Perhaps it would not be unfair to insinuate that the popular models were also employed as a form of defence, an alibi for the difficult and rather aristocratic kind of poetry which they wrote? Who could accuse of exclusiveness the disciples of Makriyannis and Theophilos?

We have already referred to pressures which drove the generation of the 'thirties to turn towards Hellenism and Greekness, and we have seen some of its results. This change was perhaps the greatest crisis of twentieth-century Greek literature. The first six years of the decade of the 'thirties were years of comparatively open dialogue among all shades of Greek opinion. But as the years passed the power of the right became increasingly dominant. In 1936, with the beginning of the fascist dictatorship of Metaxas, dialogue ceased. Writers of the left were silenced. The best example to study in this connection is the third of the great trilogy of poets of the generation of the 'thirties, the communist Yannis Ritsos.

The Greek communist party in the first years of the decade was the least 'Hellenic' party in Greece, with the sense of the adjective which we are using this evening. It followed the Moscow line very faithfully, and its proclamations use the terminology and symbolism of international socialism, pointedly ignoring any Hellenic equivalents. This charge was often made at the time, and not always rebutted by the communists themselves. But a little before the rise of Metaxas, the party's line changed a little. When it was already too late, it decided to seek alliances among other non-fascist parties to form an anti-fascist coalition. Later, during the limited resistance made to Metaxas, which led to the massive communist-led resistance against the German occupation, Greek communists came to understand the power of nationalism, and became the most consistent users of Greek national ideologies.

Ritsos' first collection of poems, published in 1934, was entitled uncompromisingly *Tractor*. The title accurately reflects its ideological position in the camp of socialist realism. But during the years 1935-1936, as his party changed its stance on cooperation with others, Ritsos too seems to have decided to adopt at least some of the weapons of his bourgeois confreres. He began to write regularly a more

democratic version of the 'aristocratic' poetry of Seferis and Elytis, using a similar language and style, but with reference to the Russian modernism of Mayakofsky rather than Western models.

Ritsos is a desperately difficult poet to analyse and encapsulate in a general lecture like this one: he has written so much, in such disparate styles, and the haphazard postponement of publication of his work resulting from the unpredictable role of the censor makes it very difficult to make pronouncements about his development. Unlike Seferis and Elytis, who have taken great pains to inform their readers about their own opinion of the forces which have shaped their poetry, Ritsos has refused to provide any kind of systematic assistance. However it is plain that it was during the Occupation that Ritsos began to write a whole series of poems encapsulating his idea of the Greek national identity, culminating in one called 'Romiosyni' (the third name for Greekness which was mentioned before, after Ellinismos and Ellinikotita). These poems contain the whole range of symbols of Hellenism from the ancient world to the modern Greek state, updating them with the latest chapters on the Albanian campaign and the Resistance. After the war we were to have the unedifying spectacle of right-wing governments, following policies of total subjection of Greek interests to those of the West, imprisoning Ritsos in concentration camps as an anti-Hellenic poet, while he continued to use against them all the symbols of the national ideology. The persecution of Ritsos is an example of the use of the criteria of Hellenism to exclude from the canon any work whose author is politically unacceptable to the establishment of the day.

The change in the poetry of Ritsos, from *Tractor* to 'Romiosyni', is reflected in the work of other writers of the generation of the 'thirties. The example of Venezis is specially interesting. In his novel *Galini*, published in 1939, a group of Asia Minor refugees settle in a corner of Attica, where they try to reconstruct their lost homeland. Their cultivation unearths an ancient statue, which they call a buried god. They also find some human bones. Their only reaction is an obsession with selling the statue and growing rich. There is no reference, direct or indirect, to any feeling that they see in the statue or the bones any civilisation with close connections with their own. In *Galini* in 1939, therefore, there is no sign that the idea of the continuation of Greek civilisation from the Ancient World to Modern Greece was present in Venezis' mind, even though the novel's plot would encourage such a thought.

Four years later, Venezis, during the Occupation and after, was to become the greatest prophet of Hellenism in the generation of the 'thirties. His next novel *Aioliki Gi*, whatever the severe differences in critical reactions which it produced, is full of Hellenism. Another short story written during the Occupation, *Theonychos and*

*Mnisareti*, now found in the collection *The defeated*, presents interesting contrasts with *Galini*. It is set in the archaeological excavation of the Keramikos cemetery in Athens, and the centre of the plot is the anguish of the guard of the site, who senses the agitation of two ancient corpses whose tomb is disturbed in a violent storm. The stance of the guard, who feels in the most painful way his racial link with the ancient corpses, is totally different from the complete indifference to this issue which may be observed in *Galini*.

Theotokas underwent a similar change. Do you remember the harmony of the aeroplane flying above the Parthenon, cars and speed? He tells us that he had tired of the futurist elements in his manifesto long before the war. But during the Occupation he made an even sharper change of direction, and we find him writing dramatic scenarios based on the plots of traditional Greek narrative folk-songs. In the introduction to the volume, published after the war, he explains why:

In 1941, the enemy Occupation deeply disturbed our spiritual and intellectual equilibrium. It made many of us different from what we had been before. Quiet men, timid even in their approach to life, suddenly found themselves thrown into bloody conflicts and heroic deeds. Others completely changed their beliefs. Writers and artists began to express themselves differently, sometimes without themselves knowing why. A number of thinking Greeks felt then the need to deepen their consciousness of their oppressed and wounded national existence, to acquire as complete a knowledge as possible of their collective selves and of their popular culture, to find, they said, their roots. I was one of them. I turned to the study of popular songs, folk traditions, Makriyannis and other sources which satisfied this need.

The generation of the 'thirties set out with an attempt to renew the subject-matter of literature, not only its means of expression. It is no exaggeration to say that in ten years, while the language of their poetry had been radically changed and brought up-to-date, the themes of their writing had changed in a totally different direction, and had turned into an almost complete concentration on Hellenism and Greekness. After the war, the same tendency continued with undiminished intensity. Two examples will suffice: the national poems of Ritsos, about which something has already been said, and Elytis, who from the poems about the Greek sun and sea which he wrote before the war, progressed after the war to an elegy on a dead officer from the Albanian campaign and then to one of the most complex of nationalist poetic structures, *Avion Esti*. The reasons for these changes are many and obvious, and seem to have worked with varying intensities and degrees of directness on the different writers; we may mention the pressures of the pre-war dictatorship, the excitement of the Albanian success, the agony of the Occupation and the Civil War, and the frenetic preoccupation of all political sides in postwar Greek society to claim the position of patriot 'Ethnikophron'.

The aesthetics of Hellenism which were created during that period are still the dominant orthodoxy in connection with the criterion of Greekness in Greek literature. A major role is played by the enormous prestige of Seferis and Elytis, based nearly as much on their critical work as on their poetry. The influence of Ritsos, whose poems have at times served as anthems of the left during periods of right-wing intolerance, is equally great. Moreover, all work basically in the same direction. In spite of their political differences, they make up a combined establishment, with a common choice and deployment of national symbols. But this national ideology of the generation of the 'thirties is now only the loudest voice out of many. The search for identity, for roots, continues at many different levels.

It is time to state a few conclusions from the breathless gallop around one period of the Greek literary scene. First, Hellenism and Greekness are ideological constructs, existing to fulfil a need. When there is no need for ideological underpinning, the intensity of speculation on these subjects and the frequency of use of associated symbols decreases. At times of ideological crisis, the temperature of the debate increases. We should not be led astray by the nobility of the idea to think that it is ideologically innocent or neutral. Like all ideological items, this can sometimes be used wrongly, even maliciously.

The particularly complex place of these concepts in Greek life is owed to the binary nature of the Greek identity: the national identity for use in international relations, the cultural identity for keeping the cohesion of the Greek people in a situation of minority, as in the Ottoman Empire or in Sydney. These identities do not completely coincide. For example, the very existence of the modern state tends to destroy the subtle local variations in language and custom which are essential in keeping alive the cultural identity.

Sometimes the criteria for Hellenism in literature develop in unexpected ways. I have tried to show this in the cases of Makriyannis and Theophilos. I do not mean to say that the populist general and the naïf painter are not worthy symbols of the Hellenic ideology, merely that they reached that status by a roundabout route. They were first appreciated for literary reasons before their suitability as Hellenic symbols arose, at a moment of crisis when the need for such symbols was imperative. By fulfilling the needs of that moment, they have become deeply embedded in the national symbolism. As a result, there is still a noticeable anti-intellectual bias in the dominant view of Ellinikotita.

Seferis himself warned of the dangers inherent in the use of the words in his dialogue on poetry, carried on in the Athens press just before the war, together with his conservative philosopher brother-in-law, Konstantinos Tsatsos. The terms of his warning include a comparison with Katharevousa, the bureaucratic, learned Greek language which even these rather conservative intellectuals regarded as the greatest bane of Greek intellectual life. These are Seferis's words:

It is a splendid thing for somebody to speak about the 'Greekness' of a work of art . . . But when we want to define what this Greekness consists of, we shall see that the task is both difficult and dangerous. The supporters of Katharevousa were seeking Greekness, and nothing else. With determination and passion, with effort and labour they were trying to cleanse the nation from the stigma of barbarism, and hoped that gradually we would progress to reach the language and the literary quality of Sophocles and Plato. May they gain their just deserts! They have spoiled and dried up the best springs of Hellenism. I will not mention the countless other harmful absurdities which have been uttered in the name of Ellinikotita. It may happen to us too, as with the supporters of Katharevousa, that we may destroy pure Greek values in the belief that we are supporting Hellenic art.

You will have noticed, of course, in what I have said this evening an underlying tone of dissatisfaction that Modern Greek literature insists on continuing its obsession with national identification. This feeling is not unique to me, nor to non-Greek readers of Greek literature in general. The best conclusion I can find for this lecture is a remark by Alexis Dimaras, a historian of Greek education, a field which has been dominated by the pressures we have been describing:

With arguments about the alienation of our people from Greekness as a result of changes and outside influences, it is assumed that we will not lose our roots. But we are not aware that in this way there is a danger that we will create a monster Modern Greek plant, bristling with roots . . . but without flowers or fruit.

#### *Bibliographical Note*

The purposes of this note are two: to indicate an important debt, and to provide information for those who wish to read more of the subjects touched upon here but must do so through the medium of English.

Many of these ideas presented here are based on Mario Vitti's *The Generation of the Thirties – Ideology and Form*, Kedros, Athens, 1977 (in Greek), to which I make grateful acknowledgement.

The best English introductions to the historical background of Modern Greek studies and to Modern Greek literature are the following: Richard Clogg, *A Short History of Modern Greece*, Cambridge, 1979; Linos Politis, *A History of Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford, 1973. Some of the best of Seferis's critical writing is available in his *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism*, trans. Rex Warner and T.D. Frangopoulos, London, 1967. See also *The Memoirs of General Makriyannis*, trans. H.A. Lidderdale, London, 1966.

The following is a list of the most easily available translations of the works of poets of the generation of the 1930's who have been prominent in this lecture:

*Four Greek Poets*, trans. Edmund Keele and Philip Sherrard, Harmondsworth, 1966.

*Modern Greek Poetry from Cavafis to Elytis*, trans. Kimon Friar, New York, 1973.

Elytis, O. *The Sovereign Sun: Selected Poems*, trans. Kimon Friar, Philadelphia, 1974;  
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Ritsos, Y. *Selected Poems*, trans. N. Stangos, Harmondsworth, 1974; *The Fourth Dimension*, trans. Rae Dalven, Boston, 1977.

Seferis, G. *Collected Poems, 1923-1955*, trans. and ed. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton, 1967; *Three Secret Poems*, trans. Walter Kaiser, Cambridge, Mass., 1969.