

# *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*

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three orphaned girls growing up in their father's derelict manor-house, listlessly incapable of interacting with the hostile world outside, until they gradually become physically and emotionally derelict themselves. The rural setting still owes something to folkloric realism,<sup>83</sup> while the suspicion and distrust between social classes that blocks any happier outcome to the story looks forward at the same time to the socialist novel. But the real achievement of Hatzopoulos here has been to convey the shifting moods and perceptions of the three central characters, with a powerful overall evocation of helpless passivity and boredom.

Boredom is still more in evidence in *Autumn*, a love-story without beginning or end, and so elliptical and understated as to leave the reader knowing more about the weather than about the lives of the characters. The setting is a seaside town in autumn, and the reader is left with a predominant impression of a vague and mysteriously frustrated yearning by the characters to be able to express themselves fully and to lead full lives. The evocation of the season in the title implicitly stands for the wasting-away, implicit in the Greek word for 'autumn', not only of the individual lives described but also of the middle-class society to which they seem to belong.<sup>84</sup>

These two novels, and particularly the second, later became the precedents for more radical innovations in the genre. But at the time when they were written, such external impulses as contributed to them derive in about equal measure from Symbolist poetry and from the Scandinavian theatre and novel.<sup>85</sup>

novels: 'Love in the Village', 1910 (Αγάπη στο χωριό) which curiously applies this writer's idiosyncratic, almost telegraphic mode to the village setting beloved of the previous generation of folkloric realists, and the urban satire 'Superman', 1911 (Υπεράνθρωπος).

<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Hatzopoulos himself subtitled the novel (perhaps ironically): Ηεσπέρια.

<sup>84</sup> This symbolic function of autumn is also common to much of the poetry of this period that has links to French Symbolism, including the poetry of Hatzopoulos himself.

<sup>85</sup> Plays by Ibsen had been performed by the newly formed New Stage company in Athens between 1901 and 1905, and made a significant impression on Palamas among others. Hatzopoulos' interest in the novels of Knut Hamsun and J. G. Geijerstam is well attested.

*The 'Ideological' Novel.* An overriding interest in social conditions, conflicts, and change does not necessarily imply that the writer has a particular view of how society might or should change. By the 'ideological' novel (and short story) is meant a type of fiction in which the writer either explicitly or implicitly indicates that he holds such a view, whether or not that view is actually propounded in his fictional writing. Ideological in this sense are the three novels of the politician, patriot, and diarist Ion Dragoumis (1878-1920) published between 1907 and 1911, the first of which, *Blood of Martyrs and Heroes*, tells in rousing terms of the Greek struggles in Macedonia; and the most successful Greek children's novel of all time, *In the Time of the Bulgar-Slayer* (1911), by Penelope Delta (1874-1941).<sup>86</sup> This novel, which appeared only a year after Palamas' *The Emperor's Reed-Pipe*, re-traverses some of the same ground in an entirely different mode, but obviously shares with that poem a concern to strengthen Greek morale in the continuing duel with Bulgaria over the future of Macedonia. But the most important development in the direction of the 'ideological' novel at this time is the rise of a socialist consciousness in fiction.

Socialist ideas had been discussed in Greek intellectual circles since the late 1880s, although it was not until 1918 that the Socialist Labour Party (soon to transform itself into the Communist Party of Greece, or KKE) was founded. We have already noted the impact of socialist thinking on Palamas, and the early interest in the plight of the urban poor in Kondylakis' *Les Misérables of Athens* (1894), as well as in many of the novels and stories of Xenopoulos.<sup>87</sup> A socialist perception of individual and class relations plays a more fundamental part, as we also saw, in two of Hatzopoulos' novels, but really comes into its own in Greek fiction in the four novels of Konstandinos Theotokis (1872-1923), who was a friend of Hatzopoulos and shared many of his ideas.

The scion of an illustrious aristocratic family of Corfu, Theotokis studied in Germany, and between his return to Greece in 1896 (to fight in the successful Cretan revolt of that year) and his last foreign visit in 1908 he became a committed socialist, finally even giving up his landed property in Corfu. His literary career,

<sup>86</sup> *Μαρτυρών και ηρώων αίμα. Τον καιρό του Βουλγαραπόλεμου*

<sup>87</sup> See in particular *Rich and Poor*, 1919 (*Πλούσιοι και φτωχοί*, Xenopoulos 1958-71. ii. 9-317).

like that of most of his contemporaries, began in the folkloric tradition (although he had previously published a novel in French), and his early short stories are marked by an unflinching portrayal of brutality and human degradation that builds on the precedent of Karkavitsas in *The Beggar* and anticipates the later novels of Myrivilis and Kazantzakis. The four novels are very different from one another, and although the author's socialist commitment is evident in various ways, the implication that human beings *could* order their society differently serves to heighten the tragedy of lives which the author leaves without interference to run their 'natural' course in the real world of Corfu in the early years of the century. The four also effectively straddle the divide between the folkloric, rural tradition and the new urban novel. The second and third are set in the world of the village, the first and last in the town.

The two novels which exploit the folkloric setting that had dominated at the end of the nineteenth century, and with which that tradition is generally considered to end, are *Condemned* (1919) and *The Life and Death of the 'Hangman'* (1920).<sup>88</sup> Each is built around an exemplary central character, and this rather unpromising 'recipe' is saved in each case by the wealth of realistic detail with which the central portraits are adorned. Tourkoyannos in *Condemned* was particularly admired by writers of the 1930s, who recognized his generic resemblance to Dostoevsky's *Idiot*; the old man nicknamed the 'Hangman' (*Karavelas*) in the novel named after him, by contrast, exemplifies all that is cruel and perverse in human nature. But what gives point to this grisly tale is the subtle way in which the character's instinctive potential for evil is deliberately worked on by his fellow villagers, and particularly by the two relatively wealthy brothers who cunningly play on his miserly nature to deprive him of his property and finally even of his life. The description of the brothers and their family in the early chapters of the book implies that the unhealthy, sweaty Argiris, who is the brains of the family but may not have much longer to live, represents capitalism, while the happy-go-lucky Yannis, who is much stronger than he knows, stands for the proletariat. In the novel the model of society represented by the brothers successfully destroys its

primitive victim, the peasant branded with the nickname 'Hangman'. But the only person that 'Karavelas' ever hangs is himself.

Theotokis' first urban novel, *Honour and Price* (1912), a compact story about a young penniless aristocrat and the hard-working daughter of a working-class family, is essentially a rehearsal for the much larger novel that occupied him for a decade before it was published in 1922: *Slaves in their Chains*.<sup>89</sup> The titles of both Theotokis' urban novels prepare the reader for a *roman à thèse*, but this is only really true of the first. *Slaves in their Chains* stands, alongside the Zakynthian novels of Xenopoulos, as the belated fictional expression of a society that had undergone rapid change since the islands became part of Greece in 1864, and which in 1922 was fast disappearing. It may not be accidental that the genre of the novel, whose rise is traditionally associated with the rise of the middle class in Europe, was slow to emerge in the Ionian islands, and reached its most developed form in the work of an aristocrat who had espoused the cause of socialism, and who, from a socialist standpoint, charted the decline of the old ruling class to the benefit of the rapacious *nouveaux riches*.

In fact, for all its socialist commitment, *Slaves in their Chains* offers little comfort for the idealist. The character in the story who shares the author's beliefs, Alkis Sozomenos, despite his name which means literally 'being saved' or 'saving himself', is not in the event saved but dies of tuberculosis and a broken heart, after the aristocratic girl he loves has been forced to sacrifice her love for him in a vain attempt to maintain the fortunes of her family. And the feckless pride of the various members of that family, the Ofomachi (or 'Dragonslayers'), is presented in the novel with sympathy and nostalgia. The decline of the old aristocracy is charted with a sharp eye for detail, but the novel betrays a very aristocratic disdain for the rising middle class, represented by the whinging money-lender and the self-made doctor who ends by stealing the heroine from the idealistic socialist hero, a lover from one of her brothers, and estates and money from the family, and finally gains political influence through pandering to a corrupt party machine.

This novel is also remarkable for its conscious elegance of style (an 'aristocratic' trait?) and structure. Alongside direct speech

<sup>88</sup> Respectively: Theotokis 1979 (critical edn.); 1990 (reprt.).

<sup>89</sup> Respectively: Theotokis 1978; 1981.

and racy description it contains many elaborate sentences of Proustian length, and for the first time in Greek exploits the technique of the 'leitmotiv' or repeated phrase which triggers particular associations. This is especially effective in a scene where a character plays a piece on the piano and another listens, while the reader is given mainly the thoughts of the listener. A few pages later the player plays the piece again, and the *thoughts* of the listener are repeated word for word, just as the notes of the music would have been.<sup>90</sup> The same stylistic technique, on a larger scale, sets the seal on the structure of the novel: all the events narrated take place during the space of a year. The opening scene and the closing scene are almost identical, describing Alkis Sozomenos' illness, with the difference that in the opening scene he recovers while in the closing scene he dies. But not only are the situations closely parallel, even the *words* of the final scene are wherever possible identical to those of the opening.

These technical innovations alone would be sufficient to rank *Slaves in their Chains* as one of the formative Greek novels of the twentieth century (the same innovations were taken up and developed later by Kosmas Politis in particular). But in its panoramic view of a whole society in a time of change, and its large cast of characters, it also looks forward to the urban novels of the 1930s and later (particularly Theotokas' *Argo*), while the character and fortunes of the socialist hero, Alkis Sozomenos, together with the parallel case of Popos Dagatoras in Xenopoulos' *Rich and Poor* (1919), established a character-role which would be taken up again and again in Greek fiction in the twentieth century: that of the young socialist whose beliefs find no outlet in action and who becomes finally the victim of society and his own human weakness. Variations on this character-role reappear in such diverse places as Kosmas Politis' *Gyri* (1944), the post-war stories and novels of Dimitris Hatzis and Menelaos Loudemis, in Tsikas' trilogy *Drifting Cities* (1960–5), and Maro Douka's *Fool's Gold* (1979).

With the founding of the Socialist Labour Party in 1918, and its transformation into the Communist Party of Greece in 1924, an explicitly socialist perspective becomes more common in fiction during the 1920s. This is evident in many of the stories

and novels of Demosthenis Vouyras (1871–1958), who in the early years of the century had extended the limits of the folkloric short story in the same direction as Hatzopoulos, towards an evocation of the inner state or mood of a character. Much of Vouyras' later fiction depicts the conditions of the urban poor, with both pessimism and indignation. Although prolific and widely read in his day, Vouyras has suffered from neglect, to the extent that none of his work is available in a reliable modern edition. There has recently been a call for a reappraisal of this writer, and for his stories and novels to be made available once again.<sup>91</sup>

More explicitly socialist are the stories and novels of Kostas Paroritis (1878–1931) and Petros Pikros (1900–56), the latter a pseudonym which translates another literary pseudonym, *Gorky* ('bitter'), into Greek. Paroritis, like Vouyras, began publishing fictional vignettes of the harsher aspects of life in small communities in the periodical *Noumas* from its inception in 1903, and in 1910 published his first novel, *Before the Mast*, in which the author's later socialist commitment is for the first time explicit.<sup>92</sup> In the 1920s Paroritis wrote regularly (under a pseudonym) for the Communist newspaper *Rizospastis* and published two more novels with an overtly socialist perspective. Pikros' collection of short stories, *Lost Bodies* (1922), and the novel *Keep Your Trap Shut* (1927) use the techniques of realism to portray, uniquely in Greek fiction, the urban subculture of hashish dens, brothels, and prisons that gave rise to the music and lyrics of the Greek equivalent of the blues, *rebetika*.<sup>93</sup> Although the same age as Yorgos Seferis, whose literary debut in 1930 is traditionally taken as one of the landmarks inaugurating the 'generation of the thirties', Pikros' writing career hardly extends beyond the 1920s.<sup>94</sup>

This survey of Greek fiction up to 1928 should not end without a brief mention of two new departures of the 1920s, which might perhaps be grouped together under the heading 'escapism'.

<sup>91</sup> S. Alexiou 1990.

<sup>92</sup> *Στο δάμροβο*. Paroritis' early short stories have been reprinted with an informative introduction on the author's career (Paroritis 1982).

<sup>93</sup> *Κουβέρτα κοπούλα*. *Touyzneti*. On the significance of the title of the second (from Athenian street slang) see Pikros 1979: 9–12.

<sup>94</sup> During the 1930s Pikros published a historical novel and a book for children; Paroritis died at the beginning of the decade.

Both, however, have important sequels in the following period. Fotis Kondoglou (1897-1965) is the first of the refugees, uprooted by the Asia Minor catastrophe of 1922, to establish a literary career in his new homeland. His first novel, *Pedro Cazas* (1923), makes a decisive break with the exclusively Greek settings and preoccupations of fiction since Roidis' *Pope Joan* half a century before.<sup>95</sup> *Pedro Cazas* is a spooky tale of treasure-hunters and buccaneers on the high seas, its characters are Spanish and Portuguese, not Greek, and Kondoglou makes explicit his admiration for Defoe and other foreign writers of adventure stories.

Kondoglou's escapism has its serious side, however, and is not so remote from the realities of his time and place as might appear. The whole of his large output (mostly of short stories) is made up either of adventure stories set in distant lands, or of nostalgic evocations of the simple life of the peasants of his native Anatolia, described not so much with realism as with the religious colouring of an earthly paradise. Religion plays an important role in Kondoglou's work (he was also a highly regarded painter, and in that medium did much to revive the traditional art of icon-painting), and he frequently insisted on the fundamentals of Orthodoxy as a system of practical belief and worship that had been exemplified by the rural communities of his childhood. Although he is often likened to Papadiamandis, whose religious outlook he shared, Kondoglou strips human nature down to its primitive essentials, whether for good (as in his Anatolian peasants) or for evil (as in his buccaneers and other representatives of western culture in his adventure stories); and this is far removed from Papadiamandis' vision of the vagaries of human nature and a merciful but unknowable Providence.

Escapism takes a different route in the novels of Thrasos Kastanakis (1901-67). Born in Constantinople, Kastanakis lived for most of his life in Paris. His first novel was published a year after *Pedro Cazas*, in 1924, and was followed by many more in the inter-war years.<sup>96</sup> Although he gave to a trilogy the title *Greek Soil*, Kastanakis' lasting contribution was to lift the Greek novel out of the exclusively Greek setting to which both folkloric and urban fiction had become indissolubly attached, and to entice his readers into contemporary settings outside Greece. Kastanakis

<sup>95</sup> Kondoglou 1967: v. 5-79.

<sup>96</sup> *The Princess*, 1924 (*Οι πριγκίπισσες*).

was not an innovative writer in terms of technique, but in the cosmopolitan settings of his novels he reminded his readers (who included the writers of the 1930s and beyond) that Greece was part of a larger social and political world, in which Greeks had a part to play. And this widened horizon will be taken up again, to a limited degree during the 1930s and more confidently from the early 1960s onwards.

#### THE SUCCESSORS OF PALAMAS

The expression 'under the heavy shadow of Palamas', coined by the historian of Modern Greek literature K. Th. Dimaras, has become something of a cliché. Under this shadow Dimaras (writing in the 1940s) grouped all the writers of poetry and prose of Palamas' generation and younger. The characterization is therefore somewhat sweeping, and it also implies that Palamas continued to occupy the dominant position in letters that he won for himself between about 1890 and 1910, beyond the first decade of the century. In fact there is little to connect the developments in fiction we have just been considering with the pre-eminence of Palamas, and the parallels between Palamas and Cavafy that we looked at in the section before make more sense as parallel responses to a common intellectual climate than as the direct response of the one poet to the work of the other.

But when we come to the poets who began to publish in the first and second decades of the twentieth century the position is rather different. This generation was by no means uniformly cowed by the towering presence of Palamas, as Dimaras' phrase implies, but produced no fewer than four poets of major stature, each of whom implicitly challenged the synthesis achieved by Palamas by extracting one or more of the elements from the whole and testing it, as it were, to destruction. For Sikelianos that element was the unity of the Greek past with the present; for Varnalis as (for a time) for Kazantzakis it was the hint that the creative forces that would build the future were to be found in the proletariat; for Kazantzakis it was the idea of the poem as all-inclusive synthesis; while Karyotakis drew both on the Symbolist legacy of Palamas and his contemporaries and on the vein of introspective despair cultivated by Palamas, to shape a poetic career that culminated in suicide. The first three—