



Marinos Pourgouris*

Mediterranean Modernisms: Towards a New Mediterranean Identity

Lecture at the University of Michigan

January 27, 2009

(excerpt)

I would like to dwell briefly on the nature of modernism since the reverberations of this debate are still felt today perhaps more so than ever. We are living in a time that as Rey Chow, Gayatri Spivak, and Pascale Casanova have aptly observed the term 'World Literature' has become a standard category. What does this category mean? Whether we are looking at it from the perspective of poststructuralist "textuality," or postmodern fragmentation, or modernist subjectivity, it seems that entering this category of "World Literature," or as Pascale Casanova puts it "The World Republic of Letters," presupposes the existence of a "universal aesthetic"—this is a cosmopolitan republic which, much like colonial spaces, it renders literary space as post-national, benign, a happy conglomeration of writers writing in the Universal Colors of Benetton. The claim to cosmopolitanism is an important one. Since the 19th century and through Modernism it constituted one of the great defenses of colonial hegemony. Consider, for example, this statement by the Lord Cromer, the infamous consul of Egypt:

The only real Egyptian autonomy, therefore, which I am able to conceive as either practicable or capable of realization without serious injury to all the various

interests involved, is one which will enable all the dwellers in cosmopolitan Egypt, be they Moslem or Christian, European, Asiatic, or African, to be fused into one self-governing body (Cromer 568).

Or consider this short claim by Albert Camus who on the one hand was recognizing the colonial impositions on Algeria and on the other he was stating that, “There has never yet been an Algerian nation. The Jews, the Turks, the Greeks, the Italians, the Berbers would have just as much right to claim the direction of that virtual nation” (Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* 145).²¹

If the assumption is that world literature today is cosmopolitan, and that modernism developed in cosmopolitan cities such as Paris or Zurich, then we must be weary. I do not mean to reduce a term that has provided much fruitful exchange recently between Martha Nussbaum, Bruce Robbins, Antony Appiah and others—it is important though to delineate the genealogy of a term that was used, it would seem, in a humanistic context when in reality it masked colonial hegemony and the claim of the colonial masters over their much too static, traditional, and local subjects. The importance of this consideration in the Modernist context in general, and in considering Elytis’ turn to the Mediterranean in particular, however is paramount. At the time when Modernism was already being defined as an urban and cosmopolitan phenomenon, Elytis and other Greek Modernists followed the opposite trajectory—they wrote about the islands and the folk tradition of the Aegean.

When Elytis was asked in an interview to clarify this contradiction between his surrealist background and his use of tradition and the Aegean islands in particular he said the following:

²¹ Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, trans. Justin O’Brien (New York: Vintage, 1988).

In many people's eyes, my dedication to "Greekness," on one hand and to a modern revolutionary movement on the other seemed like a contradiction. But deep down it wasn't. At the precise moment...when we were looking to find the true face of Greece, to purge it from the distortions brought about by the Renaissance, the revolutionary inheritors of the Renaissance emerged and attacked the negative part of their inheritance. This was certainly of great help to us.... What I am trying to say is that the courtyard of a house, with its stone steps, with the whitewashed walls, with the geraniums in the tin cans, or the yard of a monastery with the well, the cells, and the arches, is closer to the spirit that gave birth to Apollos and Winged Victories or Theometors [Blessed Virgins] and Saints than the pastoral scenes and the pink little angels made by the Renaissance masters (Elytis, Self Portrait [Αυτοπροσωπογραφία σε Λόγο Προφορικό] 21-22)

The turn to the Aegean is simultaneously a turn away from the much too classical Athens, the navel of Western imaginings of Greece. As in Camus, the problem, as Elytis saw it was the exclusive and overwhelming impact of Northern Europe on Greece. This is a point that deserves some thought since, as I already mentioned, the problem that many scholars today find with Elytis is his unequivocal attachment to the Greek space, his Greekness, which is reduced to the term nationalism (that great monster that caused Eric Hobsbawm to say that "no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist"). When Greeks today embrace their Balkan identity, demonstrate against NATO involvement in the Balkans, when they identify with the Palestinians (and they overwhelmingly do), they are also expressing a reaction against Western hegemony. It is remarkable to consider how such reaction is ignored when we approach Greek modernism and the work of Elytis. It is certainly true that Modern Greek Studies as a field feels much more comfortable working on Balkan studies rather than on the Mediterranean or the so-called generation of the 1930s. Though I count myself in that group of scholars, I must also add that the same principles that motivate the exploration of a field that seems poststructuralist by nature (it is Balkanized) are at play when we consider the Mediterranean in general and the Aegean in particular. Elytis reminds us that

the Mediterranean, and especially the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, is the space where tensions between the West and the East, the North and the South unfolds and is acted out. Consider the following excerpt from a 1946 article by Elytis. He is talking about the lack of “a sensitive measure” in Greek art, in the decades following the establishment of the Modern Greek State:

It is certain that such an absence is due to our not nearly complete absorption by the West, to the expense, to be more precise, of our great counter-support that has always been the East. That is why we feel the need to defend the role of the East today, not simply concerning painting but our civilization in general; that is why we find more natural, more beneficent, for our youth to be influenced by a Matisse, for example, who represents an in-depth antithesis to the monodogmatic Europeanism, than a Lytras or an Iakovides, painters who, despite their possible personal merits, are victims of the North (Elytis 548-549).

Elsewhere, he speaks of stilted truths,

A “stilted” truth regarding Greece, for example, is its history as the official Greeks present it to us; another, also “stilted,” is its history as the Europeans present it to us (Elytis 18).

His reaction is simultaneously against the European and the Greek Canon. The Aegean—more Eastern, more vibrant, and less affected by Western hegemony—becomes the background of much of his poetry. This poetry is as Greek as Mahmood Darwish’s is Palestinian or as Naquib Mahfuz’s is Egyptian. The paradox in the marginalization of Elytis (as well as the so-called Mediterranean Humanism which is far from Humanistic in the proper sense) lies, as I have already noted, in our discomfort with the term nationalism. Gregory Jusdanis has aptly noted this paradox: on the one hand nationalism is the cause of violence and, on the other, it is the motivation behind all emancipation movements particularly under colonialism. I would further add two points to this. First, poststructuralism, at its worst, and as it’s often used in the academia today silences the discourse of difference and alterity. To put it rather bluntly, the western Academia likes

to think that it has overcome the need for a structuralism that seemed like a natural trend in the aftermath of the Second World War, but in truth, the war, in the rest of the world is still a sad reality. It is in this sense that Poststructuralism—again, at its worst—preemptively strikes and silences all those who still wish to talk about margins, peripheries and nationalities. As Rey Chow observes, “time and again, the contrast between those who specialize in the West and those who specialize in the Rest comes to the fore at international conferences...” (13). Second, I would suggest that this discomfort with the specter of nationalism becomes symptomatic of a complete conflation between nationalism and national identity. Consider for example the following poem by Elytis, from the collection *The Little Seafarer* (1985):

I resided in a country that came from the other, the real one, as the dream comes from the facts of my life. I too named it Greece and I drew it on paper so I could look at it. It seemed so little; so elusive.

As time went by I kept trying it out: with certain sudden earthquakes, certain old thoroughbred storms. I kept changing the position of things to rid them of all value. I studied the Vigilant and the Solitary so that I might be found worthy of making brown hillcrests, little Monasteries, fountains. I even produced an entire orchard full of citrus trees that smelled of Heraclitus and Archilochus. But the fragrance was so strong I got scared. So I very slowly took to setting words like gems to cover this country I love. Lest someone see its beauty. Or suspect that maybe it does not exist. (Elytis, *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis* 424)

The poet's Greece is neither a romantic notion nor a nationalistic construct. It is an idea, a dream, little, elusive—poetry is the space where ‘Greekness’ is constructed but also deconstructed: challenged with storms and earthquake—not by others—but by the poet himself. I would go so far as to say that Camus' description of the Algerian landscape and Elytis' construction of a Greek *topos* emerges in a complex discourse of postnationalistic (not post-national) or even antinationalist explorations into an identity that relies more on a reevaluation of the Mediterranean landscape and that is framed by an

existential quest. Again and again, both Camus and Elytis reiterate their opposition to patriotism and nationalism. To say that they both invoke the Mediterranean and its sun is as much of a simplification as saying that Nietzsche is a classical Greek scholar. The sun, in both, emerges as a symbol that it's intricately linked to the Absurd—that can be simultaneously the object of desire and the cause of destruction, that can be both beneficial and destructive, both luminous and scorching. This is precisely what Sartre is hinting at when he writes that “one can speak of ‘the Mediterranean’ as a real symbiosis of man and things...” or when Derrida places it in the context of the *arche* [principle] of Light (*Phos*).

The constant misinterpretation of Greek Modernism through the dual lenses of optimism and nationalism has affected our study of the Aegean as a contested space to a remarkable extent. The movement from Jules Dassin's *Never on Sunday* to Angelopoulos's *Ulysses Gaze*, to juxtapose two well-known films, seems to be an absolute one. What I am suggesting, is that the Aegean, like the rest of the Mediterranean, remains a ‘contested space’; a space where Greek and Turkish national aspirations are negotiated; where uninhabited islands, like Imia and Pharmakonisi, bring the two countries at the brink of war; where, among the cruise ships and the yachts, one finds fishermen who are struggling to make a living and immigrants who are crossing from Asia to Europe in inhumane conditions; where one even finds camps set up on Greek islands, like Lesbos, to accommodate the hundreds of political refugees and immigrants who are caught in the process, and who remain suspended in between; and among a musical, linguistic and culinary amalgamation—as well as the standard claims of exclusivity—one finds, as in the rest of the Mediterranean, the beginning and the end

of Europe.

I will conclude, then, with a brief reference to the newly founded Mediterranean Union, or more precisely, the Union for the Mediterranean, which came into existence on July 13, 2008. Those who followed the story will remember that this was the ambitious plan of French president Nicholas Sarkozy—to create a Union that would address the concerns of all Mediterranean nations. This was seen by many as an attempt to offer Turkey an alternative membership to that of the European Union and, in fact, Turkey asked and received assurances that its membership in one would not affect its potential accession to the other. The day this new entity came into being, the French president triumphantly declared that “we will build peace in the Mediterranean together, like yesterday we built peace in Europe....[it would not be] north against south, not Europe against the rest ... but united.” (BBC).²² One can hardly see why President Sarkozy is so enthusiastic. After Germany and other European countries protested against the creation of a Mediterranean Union, it was finally agreed that *all* current member states of the EU will also belong to this Union for the Mediterranean—currently the UM includes, among many other European countries, Austria, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In a sense, the change of its name from “Mediterranean Union” to “Union *for* the Mediterranean” is a more precise term. Perhaps it should be, to be even more precise, the “*European Union for* the Mediterranean.” In essence, what we see here is the perpetuation, the acting out, of the old stereotypes and fantasies about the Mediterranean that I described earlier in this lecture. And, paradoxically, the only voice of reason came from the Libyan president, Muammar al-Gaddafi, who called this project just another

²² BBC, “Mediterranean together, like yesterday we built peace in Europe,” 13 July 2008, BBC NEWS, 5 January 2009 <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7504214.stm>>.

form of colonialism: "There are imperialist maps and designs that we have already rolled up. We should not have them again." (Waterfield).²³

The problem with the anthropological approach to the Mediterranean and, indeed, with this ambitious political attempt (that ended up becoming a farce) is the discourse around *unity*. What I suggest instead, is that in approaching Modernism from a Mediterranean perspective, what is revealed is quite the contrary. The best analogy to this is the concept of the "Abrahamic" as elaborated by Gil Anidjar in his introduction to Derrida's *Acts of Religion*. The "Abrahamic" is that impossible mythical concept that unites the three major monotheistic religions (Islam, Judaism, Christianity) under the single figure of Abraham. It suggests, Anidjar writes, "the reclaiming of territorialized roots, the reoccupation and gathering of a site of welcoming togetherness..." (Anidjar 3).²⁴ But to follow the Abrahamic, he continues, is "to witness and experience—to read—the irreconcilable and if not quite the explosion of the Abrahamic, then undoubtedly, and more precisely, the Abrahamic as explosive" (4). Instead of seeking the ancient unity of the Mediterranean, we should instead witness in the Mediterranean the explosiveness of the irreconcilable: an explosiveness which is also a testimony to the shortcomings of Western Humanism. If, as Anidjar suggests, Judaism is the theological other of Europe, and Islam its political other (5), the Mediterranean is that in-between space in which the tensions between the theological and the political become manifest; and in doing so, they reveal both the limits and limitations of Europe and the West.²⁵

* Marinos Pourgouris is Visiting Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University. He received his Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Rutgers University where he taught, as a lecturer, for seven years. His specialization is 20th-century Greek literature and his research interests include European Modernism (with an emphasis on the Modernist lyric), psychoanalytic criticism, the classical subtext, and film. He has published articles on a variety of topics including the metaphysical theories of Odysseus Elytis, the Homeric subtext in the poetry of Yiannis Ritsos, the politics of history in Friedrich Nietzsche and Georg Lukács, and the influence of Nietzsche on Nikos Kazantzakis. He has completed a book-length study on the poetic metaphysics of Odysseus Elytis in relation to European Modernism. His current project examines literature between Mediterranean contact zones.

23 Bruno Waterfield, "Gaddafi attacks Sarkozy plan for Union of the Med," 10 July 2008, *The Telegraph*, 5 January 2009 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk>>.

24 Gil Anidjar, "'Once More, Once More': Derrida, the Arab, the Jew," Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion: Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002).

25 See also Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); p. 131.