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Literary Canons and Promising Challenges: Greek and Turkish Novels

The existence of canons related to literature presupposes the existence of some texts that are ignored and excluded. In other words it is assumed that there is a process of selection. The texts that survive compose a canon: a body of literary texts that represent something of a symbolic importance. These works are promoted and handed on to the new generations. The ones that are excluded are left to oblivion.

Here I will try to show, mostly based on novels published during the periods of nation building, two aspects of canon-making: (1) The canons, the dominant corpus, can be created by another dynamic too: by controlling and/or dictating what is to be written and published. The story of the Turkish novel at its dawn presents some illuminating examples. The Greek novels show the same tendencies too. In these cases the 'canon' – if this word can be used for such cases – does not work by 'selection' but according to the 'demand'; or using a term of Darwinian terminology, by 'adaptation'. The demand can originate from the state, from the leading elite and/or from the public. (2) Only in the last few decades this dynamic of adaptation is being replaced by the process of selection with the intention of creating canons in the usual meaning of the word.

The homogeneity of Greece

The Greek 'nation' was characterized by a relatively ethnic homogeneity from its start. This unity was accomplished, starting quite early, with the Greek Revolution of 1821-1829 and the process of nation-building (ethno-genesis). On one hand, groups and communities that did not fit to the description of 'our nation' were either expelled from the new country and/or were killed during the Greek War of Independence or were assimilated after the creation of the new nation-state. The assimilation process was both enforced by the state but was also in some cases initiated willingly by the assimilated ethnic groups.

This process of ethno-genesis and the creation of a related national grand narrative was completed on two axes: (1) on the academic and ideological level – as symbolically is accepted – by the historian K. Paparrigopoulos and his monumental work *The History of the Greek Nation* in the second half of the 19th century, and

(2) on the demographical level with the Population Exchange between Greece on one side and Bulgaria and Turkey on the other (1919, 1923). The last step of this process was the expulsion of undesired ethnic groups in the end of the Greek civil war in 1949.

When the appearance and development of the Greek novel are viewed having this historical framework in mind, its relative consistency *vis a vis* some issues, i.e., its canonic form, may be

better understood. Conventionally, the first Greek novel is accepted to be

Leandros

by P. Soutsos published in 1834, four years after the establishing of the Greek nation-state. The intelligentsia and the novels that were its creation played a part in nation-building which could only be in consistence with the general political and ideological views expressed during those decades. Almost all the novels written in the decades of 1840-1880 by writers such as A. Soutsos, I. Pitzipios, G. Paleologos, A. Rangavis, P. Kalligas, A. Leventis, S. Xenos, S. Zambelios, D. Vikelas expressed some basic common sensitivities and interpretations.

The grand national narrative inherent in these texts bears the following characteristics: The nation is perceived as a continuation of the Ancient Greeks, as the historical victim of a centuries-long Turkish oppression, and as a unity that deserves a glorious future anew. Greeks were mostly viewed through rose-tinted glasses. There are no novels that oppose or contradict these basic approaches. Therefore there was no real need to select a body of novels and exclude others forming a canon to satisfy social needs. It is, of course, understood that the novels were appreciated by the public in different ways: Some were popular, less so. However, all together they formed a consistent body that served a social and ideological purpose. In other words, the nationalist body of novels were developed in an environment where discrepancy from and disagreement with the prevailing master narrative were practically impossible. There were no opposing views. The wider community from the start accomplished the national minimum consensus in these issues. The literary texts were almost all in accordance and in harmony with the official political, ideological and academic views of the time. The 'harmony' was real and 'willingly accepted' – even though there were political disagreements on many issues.

This does not mean that there were no writers who would have written something different if they had had the opportunity to publish their works. However, this kind of a different novel would have faced insuperable obstacles at a very early stage, at the stage of production. I can imagine publishers or foundations that voiced their unwillingness to sponsor a novel because it was not 'good enough' - a characterization that today can be interpreted as 'not in tune with the main trend of the time'. Put differently, the kind of novel that dominated in the market at that period was controlled and directed at the point of its creation according to some norms, rather than being the result of a selection process after their appearance in the bookshops.

The multiculturalism of the Ottoman/Turkish society.

In some aspects the case of Turkey is different. Neither ethnic homogeneity nor ideological harmony had been accomplished in the Ottoman Empire when the first novels appeared in the 1870s. Actually, not even a nation-state had been established at that time. The first novels of this period were written in Turkish but they neither reflected a nationalistic worldview, nor was there a fully formed national identity in their discourse (Millas: 2001 and 2005). The ideal of nationalism first appeared with the Young Turks in the last decade of the 19th century who managed to control the Ottoman parliament starting from 1908. Their social influence on the political and social life was heavily felt after 1910 and during the World War I, which ended with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. In 1923 a new nation-state was established after a war of liberation against invading foreign powers.

Ethnic and ideological uniformity was neither secured with the domination of the Young Turks, nor with the establishing of the nation-state, after 1923, even though specific steps were taken to 'free' the nation from the non-Muslim citizens. Two big population 'movements', the first in 1915 and the second in 1922 secured an Anatolia free from the Armenians and the Greeks. The communal harmony was somehow established by the presence of a powerful and prestigious state apparatus. It was this mechanism that also managed to control the literary production and circulation in the 1930s, 1940s and even 1950s. 'Harmony' was established due to this direct and/or indirect control by a power center, the state.

Looking closely at the production of novels in the years 1910-1930 we can state the following: (1) The prominent writers of the Ottoman period - and we can safely identify them as writers of a pro-nationalism period - stopped producing and publishing novels after the domination of the Young Turks, precisely after 1910. These writers are the following: Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil, Şemsettin Sami, Samipaşazade Sezai, Recaizade Ekrem, Safvet Nezih, Ebubekir Hazım Tepeyran. These authors lived another twenty to forty years after 1910 but they refrained from writing novels (Millas 2005, 49). (2) It is difficult to find writers who represented the Ottoman/imperial worldview and continued writing and publishing their works after 1910.

Actually, when the political/ideological climate changed, the body of writers followed suit. The old writers were excluded before they produced their texts and were replaced by new writers.

The reason for this is not easy to detect. Esthetically they were not outdated - it is absurd to think in such a way for Halit Ziya for example, one of the best authors writing in Turkish). There was no direct legal prohibition either. It is also difficult to assume that the whole society changed so drastically and suddenly in 1910, so that no one was left to enjoy the 'old' writers. Probably there were complex forces that discouraged those publications. (3) Viewing closely the new literary production of novels, a probable explanation may be the following: The new prominent writers that came forward at the time of the Young Turks (1908) and the new Republic (1923) were ideologically close to the elite that led to the new political formation. Halide Edip Adivar and Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu for example, were quite close to Mustafa Kemal, the founder and leader of the new Republic. Ömer Seyfettin, a writer of the years of 1910-1920 was close to the Young Turks.

One can infer that the political climate was not favorable for some and was more encouraging for some others. Some were in general discouraged and others supported and promoted. With this dual interference the whole production of novels changed 'paradigm': Ottomanism gave way to nationalist discourse. The same end result as in the Greek case is encountered once again: The kind of novel that dominated the market was determined at the point of its creation, not as a result of selection after its appearance.

A primal mechanism of forming a body of novels

From the above we can tentatively conclude that literary canons were formed both in Greece and in Turkey in accordance to the particularities of the two settings; however, in both cases this

was done by a process that can be described as adaptation, rather than as selection. In the Greek case, the homogeneity of society and the relatively early achieved national consensus secured the production of a kind of novel that was in tune with the prevailing ideological climate of the early years of the Greek nation-state. In the Turkish case, it was the state, a prestigious power center, and the leading cadres that ensured a climate that encouraged or discouraged particular kinds and ideologically distinct novels. The body of novels that prevailed in both societies was the result of this political/ideological presence and influence.

In both cases, a canon was not formed in the sense that some texts were promoted and others ignored. The texts that dominated the literary society were in a sense enforced. This enforcement was not however, dictated by legal or political force but it was the outcome of a dominant and internalized ideology. The society adjusted to the new political situation, sensing the new direction of the wind that secured approval, appreciation, harmony with the prevailing system, but also personal interest – that is, income. In practice, in both cases paradoxically the result looked alike: For many decades, literary production presented trends and characteristics as if they followed a predefined norm. In the Greek case, for example, it is almost impossible, until the 20th century, to find a novel that contradicts the national narrative which is in accordance the ideological framework of the historian Paparrigopoulos. Much later, even Marxist writers produced a discourse where the nationalistic paradigm was reproduced, even though sometimes disguised as a humanitarian and/or a class analysis.

The Turkish case is not different and is even more illuminating and revealing. The Turkish novels, for some decades after the prevailing of nationalism, presented a striking consistency in reproducing the official national paradigm. All other views were superseded. In both cases, a need to select a canon of novels was not felt; the production of literature adapted itself 'automatically' to the new social situation. Even though there were substantial differences between the Greek and the Turkish cases in terms of the relation between state and society, as well as social homogeneity, the mechanism that determined the ideological content of the eventually prevailed novels show similarities. It was a process of adopting the dominant ideological currents, as well as the political conjuncture – overall, it was a process of adaptation.

Civil society, differentiation and the multiplicity of canons

The story of the Greek and Turkish novels given above is a résumé of the first stage of their existence. The canon formation of these stages shows similarities: The norms that the novels should follow are set at the stage of production. This canon formation procedure changes at a later stage. That is to say, the situation is quite different when the societies matured and the literary production obtained new dynamics. As democratization proceeded and a civil society developed and made its presence felt, literary production diversified, too. Actually, it was the diversification of political and ideological views that triggered the new dynamics in novel writing as well.

It was after the completion of the first stage of nation-building and the appearance of the signs of a civil society with a variety of opinions that the need of a canon made itself felt. More precisely, it was the existence of different points of views - different ideologies, paradigms and so forth - that made the canons needed and functional. The formation of a canon in this second stage operated on the principle of selection since the diversification of opinions was a fact and could no longer be controlled. This was a very complex situation that was related to new social developments: the appearance of world-wide political and ideological movements (such as fascism, socialism, communism, liberalism, and the like.); new forms of regimes (authoritarian, parliamentary system, and so forth); new ethical and philosophical trends (democratic, egalitarian understanding), let alone esthetic and the artistic diversities.

Within this confused environment each 'group' tried to form its own canon to set the limit of its identity, but also in order to secure the promotion and the preservation of its own paradigm. The state and/or the dominant elite in each case tried to form its literary canons, too. If one tries to describe and define these canons basing his observation on the selected texts as these appear in the textbooks, for example, or on the anthologies of the time, one will find variations and differentiations over time and even with changes of governments. Some changes are small – which means that some canons present a continuum in time – while others are of more importance. This complex phenomenon of change and continuum is beyond the scope of this article. I will only add that a canon is a sign of concern and fear due to the existence of an opposing point of view. It is a mechanism of defense, rather than of offence. Canons are a reaction to a real or imaginary threat. It is not a mechanism of establishing ideologies but rather a mechanism of preserving them. After all, one should be in power in order to have the means to compose and preserve a canon.

Rewriting old texts

I have pointed out some general tendencies and mechanisms related to the canons. The first was the adaptive nature of the canons that appeared in the first stage of nation-building. Later, with the diversifying of public opinions, a second mechanism and tendency was to select literary texts and adapt them as 'our own'. In this respect, the existence of canons is an indication that the literary world in a country presents diversification, different tendencies and approaches in various fields, but mostly in ideological issues or other issues which are perceived as such. A third mechanism is the 'method of distortion': Texts are being rewritten to satisfy a certain paradigm. This is a very common approach which mostly skips our attention because it is done in secret. This method presents an opportunity in seeing quite clearly how the use of a canon is perceived by those who set forward in creating one: They feel authorized and justified to use any means in order to achieve an end. The means are legitimized because they are conceived as necessary for an indisputably holy purpose. I will give three examples, two from Turkish texts and one from Greek texts. The phenomenon of adapting the past to our modern needs, however, is widespread and covers many fields of human activities. [\[1\]](#)

A) Namık Kemal and *Cezmi*:

N. Kemal (1840-1888) was an Ottoman writer who is famous for his patriotic novels, plays, poems and articles. *Cezmi* (the name of the hero) is a novel written in 1880 in the old (Arabic) script. This novel circulated in 1975 in modern Turkish written in the Latin alphabet. As I was

reading this new transliteration I suspected that the original text had been changed. Upon checking the original text it became clear that N. Kemal had been metamorphosed from an Ottoman citizen to a modern Turkish nationalist! All his references to ultans, to armies etc., had been adjusted so that they read as 'Turkish Sultan', 'Turkish army'. However, the Ottomans almost until the twentieth century did not use the word 'Turk' and 'Turkish', unless it was to denote 'illiterate peasant'. The purpose of the distortion is obvious: to demonstrate that the Ottoman legacy was 'Turkish' after all. [\[2\]](#)

B) Sait Faik and the Turkish Textbooks

Sait Faik (1906-1954) is a well known Turkish writer. He was politically leftist and famous for his liking for the non-Muslims of Istanbul, about whom he wrote many short stories. One of these short stories ('Son Kuşlar') appeared in a Turkish textbook (Demiray 55-57). It was mutilated however, to suit the understanding of the editors. The short story presents a Greek of İstanbul who does not respect the environment and treats the migratory birds badly. The author adds a sentence so as not to give the impression that this attitude is special to Greeks: 'God knows how many of this kind of people exist in every country'. However, in the textbooks the short story stops just short of this last sentence. The short story stops just short of this sentence giving a wrong impression. Moreover, several words are also deleted in order to hide the leftist attitudes of Saik Faik. The hero dreams of a world where everybody is happy, without hunger, and ambition, in peace. The editors deleted three words: hunger, ambition and peace (Millas 2000).

The Greek publishing house *Kaktos* has translated into Modern Greek a great number of Ancient Greek texts. These books are bilingual, showing on the facing pages the original text as well. By sheer coincidence I noticed that in *Alexander's Anabasis* by Arrianos the editors tried to stress the Greekness of Macedonians, by distorting the text twice. The original refers to 'the Greeks and the Macedonians' whereas the translation reads 'the Macedonians and the other Greeks' (Arianos 60, 72).

Some Promising Challenges

A canon is an expression of a desire to limit diversity of opinion and multiculturalism. Even though its historical dynamics and the social need for such an enterprise can be understood, they can not be appreciated since the structure of the community that such an understanding will create is far from attractive. It is not only the authoritative directives themselves that are repelling, but also the idea of excluding whatever is different from what is popular or supposedly 'correct' – all according to an authority. It propagates, or rather intends to preserve a monolithic society.

However, in the last decade both Greek and Turkish novels show such a great diversity that all conscious efforts to incorporate them in a canonic specification seem destined to fail. Both societies have lately presented novels that are fresh in inspiration and discourse and especially rich and courageous in dealing with issues that were considered taboo only a few years ago (Millas 2005 417-439). Many novelists show an interest in questioning old values and issues. Especially the topic of migration, expulsion and population exchange - all topics that were directly connected to historical events resulting from acts of nation-building - are covered in a series of new novels in Turkey as well as in Greece.

Apart from tackling these issues, the approach of the writers is very critical, too. Of interest is

that, in various cases, they deal with the entire traditional historical enterprise with concern and skepticism. This new literary style should be a case of worry for those who are interested in reproducing the old official historical myths. Some may try *now* to form a canon to preserve the old taboos. In this respect, the new novels are a promising challenge directed to a past paradigm.

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[1] Considering how the photographs of Lenin were re-shaped to include/exclude comrades contingently, or how history is rewritten according to new needs, the question is whether the distortion of old texts is simply a ‘wrong’ method, or whether such a practice is a human characteristic encountered every time the past is ‘re-interpreted’. Ignoring texts while re-interpreting history is not a cause for indignation, whereas the distortion of texts is perceived, not as a practice serving a need but as an unethical act.

[2] Upon a newspaper article the publisher committed himself to publish a new version of this novel (Millas 1996b).

