

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

October 13, 2010

Speaker: Nikolaos Mavrellos (University of Thrace)

Topic: “ ‘Narcissistic’ techniques in 18th and 19th century Greek Fiction as vehicles of modernity”

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Dimitris Kousouris (Princeton University), Nelson Moe (Barnard College), Elena Frangakis-Syrett (Queens College, CUNY), Gerasimos Katsan (Queens College, CUNY), Mona Momescu (Columbia University), Maria Kalantzopoulou (Queens College, CUNY), Nikki Leger.

Summary of Presentation:

Mavrellos’s talk drew on Linda Hutcheon’s theory of “narcissistic narrative” to discuss the metafictional aspect of two Greek fictional texts of the 18th and 19th centuries, namely Nicolas Mavrocordatos’s *Philotheou Parerga* (1716-1718) and Adamantios Corais’s *Papatrechias* (1811-1820). He began with an outline of Hutcheon’s coining of the term “narcissistic narrative,” which allowed her to move backwards from “metafiction,” generally considered a characteristic of 20th-century literary production, to forerunners such as Cervantes and Sterne. Narcissistic narrative invites the reader to recognize the narrative act as such, thus erasing the line between life and art. Texts of this sort are often both playful and serious, criticizing the societal status quo as well as traditional literary genres, leading Hutcheon to call their technique “parody without ridicule” that involves a criticism of tradition or the “old”; she notes the relation between this kind of serious use of parody to the mock-heroic genre of the neoclassical era.

In his discussion Mavrellos turned first to Mavrocordatos’s *Philotheou Parerga*, the first (and only) part of which was written between 1716 and 1718, while its author was in jail. The “novel” is actually a consciously experimental mosaic of different genres, which aims at a representation of real life that contains all different genres of speech. While there is a fictional frame to the text, it also incorporates “serious” tools such as essays, treatises, and so on, and the genre of “parergon,” or hobby, allows Mavrocordatos to invent a form that avoids both the genre of the romance and that of the treatise or rhetorical speech by combining both in a new genre that also brings together high and low styles and genres, or “serious” and “ludicrous”

ones (in Genette's terms). Mavrellos went through several quotes from the text and traced the appearance of the characteristics of narcissistic narrative, including the mixture of generic and stylistic modes, and the dialogic relationship with ancient as well as Byzantine forerunners, as well as a mixing of the description of characters and their actions and feelings with theoretical or philosophical considerations on the possibilities of depicting life.

Mavrellos then turned to Corais's *Papatrechias*, which has been largely overlooked in Greek literary criticism to date. It was printed as a prologue to the *Elliniki Vivliothiki* edition of the *Iliad* that Corais edited, and should be understood as part of Corais's larger attempt to organize ancient Greek thought for "consumption" in the new Greek state, as part of a nation-building effort that sought to solidify a political or ethnic identity through the shaping of culture and cultural production. With one letter from Papatrechias's story preceding each book of the *Iliad* as it appeared, the narrative as a whole when all 24 sections were published would offer a "Modern narration" that would embed the central epic of ancient Greece; this dialogue between the two already qualifies it, Mavrellos argues, as an early example of narcissistic narrative. This element is intensified by Corais's intertextual references to personas he had developed in previous works, making obvious to the reader the fictionality of the world Corais develops in this paratextual work. And like Mavrocordatos's text, Corais's text works with multiple speech genres, including philological, fictional, and scientific ones, and, of course, the embedded Homeric epic. Also like Mavrocordatos's text, Corais's combines the serious and the playful (or ludicrous), this time using a playful means of getting at the very serious purpose of furthering the education of the Greek populace, of making ancient texts palatable and accessible. At the same time, the letters that precede each book of the *Iliad*, outlining the work of the philologist and editor of the *Iliad* and the education or formation of the priest Papatrechias, are consciously self-conscious, thus offering a kind of *mise en abyme* also characteristic of narcissistic narrative. Corais thus attempts to construct a text that will use "modern" techniques (or genres), but ones that exist in continuous dialogue with ancient ones; in the process, he experiments with a new genre of narrative fiction.

Summary of discussion:

Q. You said quite a bit about Corais's intellectual development and his response to the challenges of modernity. But I think we should also not neglect to consider his mercantile interests and pursuits and their role in forming his ideas.

A. Yes, Corais's father was a wealthy businessman. And Adamantios in turn certainly involved himself in business affairs while in Amsterdam in the 1770s. He put companies in the directory there, as he was not content to work solely on the basis of personal contacts. In the course of these affairs, he bought multiple times without much leverage and was not very successful.

Q. The *Philotheou Parerga* offers a generally positive image of the Ottomans, is that so?

A. Yes. But it is less positive about Arabs, Jews, and Persians. It compensates by being approving of the Sultan. Perhaps we should remember that Nicolaos's father, Alexandros, was the first dragoman to the Sultan and was a prince in Moldavia. Following his father, Nicolaos is generally viewed as a progressive figure, who sought to open the minds of his adopted subjects in Wallachia. He was open to *francophonie*, established libraries, and contributed greatly to the establishment and success of the Princely Academy.

Q. You expressed a dissatisfaction with the editorial choices made in the presentation of *Papatrehas* in the edition published by the *Nea Elliniki Vivliothiki* series. Can you describe those choices and tell us how these change our perspective on the text? How would you like to approach the work differently?

My objection is not limited to the *Nea Elliniki Vivliothiki* edition. In fact, I have problems with the whole textual tradition surrounding *Papatrechas*. The four letters were extracted from their original context: originally, they served as a preface to the *Iliad*, which followed the letters. It in turn was accompanied by a supposed appendix by the priest, who was commenting on the text. The sequence was as follows:

Letter A, *Iliad* Rhapsody A

Letter B, *Iliad* Rhapsody B etc.

The priest's comments came after the 3rd Rhapsody but they are not included in the edition (they are only included in the second volume of the

Prolegomena M.I.E.T. edition by Emm. Frangiskos). The commentary on the 4th rhapsody is, as mentioned by the narrator, burned by the hero himself and thus is not included. So we have here the fictionalization of the whole philological “universe” with the lost manuscripts of commentaries etc. Towards the end of the second half of the 19th century, editors took out the four letters only and they put them together as a continuous narration used as a school textbook for modern Greek language. Since then, this text has come to be widely known by the name *Papatrechas*, a title not given by Korais himself but by the 19th-century scholars. Angelou followed this "tradition" and published the text on its own.

Q. In the context of discussion about *Letters to Alexandros Vassiliou* (1804) there was one question specifically about Korais and the letters he wrote to Dimitrios Lotos. You had made specific point or two about the connection between the history and romance ('mythistoria') concerning these texts, that is if the above mentioned letters to Lotos can be considered as a somehow elaborate narrative (not just a chronicle but a novelistic type narrative).

The letters by the Chief Cantor (Πρωτοψάλτης) of Smyrna, Dimitrio Lotos, refer to the French Revolution and were written in fact as events were unfolding in Paris (considered by French historians as source). These letters may be viewed as a unified narration very much in the vein of a chronicle or an attempt at a novelistic form, as its generic character shares something of a journal or diary entry, a chronicle, and a letter. In 1804 Corais writes to A. Vassileiou about the theory of ‘mythistoria’ up to the seventeenth-century, but he does not mention anywhere the issue of the “novel,” or “mythistorima” (a term invented later than Corais for the new kind of novel in contrast to the older form of romance, that remains till our days). He does not name it as such, but we can find some elements of the ‘mythistorimatikou’ (novelistic) and not ‘mythistorikou’ (romance) genre in both *Papatrechas* and the Letters to Lotos as forerunner.

Q. There was a section in our discussion where you referred to the persona in Chios, in Volissos and the publisher in Paris, and about the priest writing his own commentaries. Can you reconstitute what that was all about.

The interplay of personas in the work is very complex. The philologist in Volissos sends a letter to Z. L., his publisher in Paris (Z.L. is a pseudonym that Corais also uses in other works). This Z.L. does not write the

prolegomena for an edition of the *Iliad*; instead, he inserts the letter from the philologist in Volissos. At some point, our hero Papatrehas himself aspires to (almost) become a philologist and he writes notes on Homer («Επιστάσεις εις τον Όμηρον») as well as some sermons, mentioned at the end of the 4th letter (pg. 145) but not published because the hero decides to burn them. He, too, becomes a writer, a ‘συν-γραφέας’.