

University Seminar 703: Modern Greek

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Between Two Patriae: Transnational Patriotism in the Ionian Islands and the Adriatic, 1800-1830

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Attendees: Karen Van Dyck (Columbia), Alvaro Garcia (Columbia), Lygia Georgiou (New School), Eleonora Vratsikidou (Princeton), Suzy Vuljevic (Columbia), Petros Siammas (New School), Gerasimus Katsan (Queens College, CUNY), Fay Zika (Athens School of Fine Arts), Kostis Kornetis (NYU), Evelyn Pappas (CUNY)

Summary of Presentation:

Setting out from the paradox that three Zakynthian poets of the early 19th century were to become “national poets” of two different countries, Zanou explores the biographies of Ugo Foscolo, Andreas Kalvos and Dionysios Solomos as a means to analyze some of the larger social-historical processes that occurred in the Adriatic region during the end of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century. This period, she argues, is marked not only by a slow and uneven passage from empire to nation states but also by a radical transformation of the concept of “patria.”

Ugo Foscolo, the oldest of the three poets, was born as Niccolò Foscolo in Zante in 1778, at a time when the island was still part of the Venetian Republic and when the larger Adriatic region was conceived of as a space of political unity, interconnectivity and shared experience, with Venice as its dominant economic and cultural center. In 1793, four years before the fall of the Venetian Empire, Foscolo moved from Zante to his “adopted patria” Venice, leaving behind the world of his childhood. His first years in the metropolis proved difficult – both economically and due to his problems with the Italian language – but also formative: Foscolo became increasingly familiar with a rich cultural and literary tradition and was actively immersed in a vibrant cultural scene, eventually composing his own first verses, which he signed with his Italian name Ugo. It is precisely this immersion in Venetian cultural life and in a well-established literary tradition, Zanou argues, which made Foscolo decide to become an Italian, rather than a Greek, poet. No comparable cultural scene or tradition existed yet in the Greek-speaking part of the Adriatic.

In 1797, the Venetian Republic fell. What followed was a period of revolutionary upheavals, sparking new ideas about society and nation, but also bringing a succession of new imperial rulers to the Adriatic region. The break with the past, in any case, was radical. In that year, however, Foscolo not only witnessed the revolution but, as Zanou

argues, also discovered women and first presented himself publicly as a poet. The very marriage of the themes of Romantic love and love for the patria subsequently helped him to produce, between 1798 and 1817, his most famous work, *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, and established him firmly as one of Italy's greatest poets. *The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*, a tale of a double amorous disenchantment – the loss of patria, and the loss of a woman – became a prime example for the Risorgimento “myth of exile”: a myth with a long literary tradition which Foscolo, as Zanou argues, turned national. Wedding the notion of exile to the question of the nation, the poet suggested that wherever people cannot express their national spirit freely, no freedom exists and consequently no patria either. The protagonist of the novel personifies, Zanou contends, this desperate sense of loss and homelessness. What is more, in her words: “Ortis was Foscolo.” Not only because the poet chose the road of exile himself in 1815 but, more importantly, because his dual, transcultural existence had no place in the new world of competing nationalisms that was now emerging. A product of the empire, Zanou concludes, he could not live in the world of nations but only as an exile.

Andreas Kalvos was born to Zakynthian parents as Andrea Calbo in 1792 when Venice had not yet fallen. In 1802, his parents divorced and his father took him to Livorno in Tuscany. If for Foscolo's career the crucial year was 1797, for Calbo it was 1812 and 1817 when he, respectively, met and broke with Foscolo. With Foscolo as his teacher, Calbo studied literature, helped him translate, and started composing his own verses, still in Italian. For unknown reasons, however, the two broke with each other while in England in 1816 and never exchanged a word again. By winter 1817, then, Calbo finds himself in London, where he starts giving lessons in Italian and Greek and becomes increasingly immersed in British philhellenic circles. It is in this environment that Calbo, “a native of Greece,” delivers his lectures advocating a modern Greek linguistic canon and the existence of a modern Greek literature. In 1819, consequently, he writes his first poem in Greek, under the name of Andreas Kalvos. The break with Foscolo, his advocacy of modern Greek literature, and British philhellenism, Zanou argues, made Calbo become the Greek poet Kalvos who was actively involved in the philhellenic movement and published, in 1824 and 1826, the two collections of Greek odes that would secure him a place in the pantheon of Greek literature. Yet two details in his biography, as Zanou argues, complicate the picture: Firstly, Kalvos continued to write and publish works in Italian, too, and additionally was put on trial in Florence, in 1820 and 1821, and subsequently sent to exile in Geneva and Paris, as a member of the Italian carbonari, a clandestine association that fought for the liberation of Italy: It was as an “Italian exile” that Kalvos wrote his Greek national odes – a powerful testimony, as Zanou argues, to the “kind of transnational patriotism” that inspired Ionian intellectuals of Kalvos's generation. Secondly, once Kalvos set foot in the Ionian islands and what was later to become Greece, he never wrote a piece of poetry again. Instead, in 1852, at age 60, he left Corfu and permanently moved to England where he also died.

Dionysios Solomos was born in Zante as Dionisio Salamon in 1798, at a time when the Venetian Republic already belonged in the past and people in Zante were celebrating Napoleon's triumph over the Adriatic. When Salamon, the son of a Zakynthian count and his maid, was ten, he accompanied his private teacher to Italy, which at the time was still

the educational center for the Ionian aristocracy. Salamon went to school in Cremona and studied at the University of Pavia, where he also started to compose his first poems, in Italian. In 1818, he returned to Zante for what he thought would be a short vacation, only never to leave the Ionian Islands again. It was in the British protectorate of the Ionian Islands, Zanou argues, that Salamon took the decision to transform himself into Dionysios Solomos. Among the reasons for this transformation she quotes not only the outbreak of the Greek Revolution, Solomos's own liberal convictions and his Romantic formation in Italy but also his encounter with the poet, historiographer and future politician Spyridon Trikoupis as well as a bad review, in 1824, of his collection of Italian satirical poems in a Florentine journal.

Solomos's dilemmas, however, were not fully resolved with his move to Zante. He never completely abandoned the Italian language, often composing in Italian prose what was later to be transformed into Greek verses. While Greek, then, gradually and consciously became the language of poetry for Solomos, Italian remained his first language for reflections and inner dialogue. Interestingly, Zanou argues, when Greek was finally adopted as the official language of the Ionian Islands in 1851, Solomos simultaneously turned to writing poems in Italian again. A creator of Greek language, Zanou contends, Solomos had nevertheless always stood outside it, oscillating between Italian and Greek. Solomos, she concludes, could still coexist with Salamon: it was the last opportunity for this kind of coexistence.

Concluding, Zanou argues that she tried, in her paper, to describe a transitional moment: the shift from a period in which multiple patriae could still coexist and transnational patriotism was a viable option to a new situation which was characterized by a series of distinct nationalisms that would eventually manifest themselves in separate nation-states. The three biographies she explores in her paper represent three stages of this very transition: Foscolo, Kalvos and Solomos emerge here as individuals at the crossing point between two centuries and two cultures, "trying to reinvent themselves and adjust to a changing world."

Summary of Discussion

Q.

These poets were Zakynthian? What do we understand by this term?

A.

All three were Zakynthian by birth. There existed mobility within the Venetian space at the time but what I mean when I say "Zakynthian" is that their families had been there for at least a couple of generations. I want to underline the fact that they are Zakynthian – and I insist on the term – because the idea of patria itself was different. The term "Zakynthian" – and not "Greek," which is politically and nationally charged – can still recall the local and cultural attribute of the identity. People could be Zakynthian and Greek and Venetian at the same time. It wasn't exclusive.

Q.

What does a historian want this material for? What are you doing with it? The identification of Foscolo with Ortis would be a categorical mistake for a literary theorist but I can see why you are doing it. You say that his dual existence didn't fit into that moment – but it could happen in literature, right? He couldn't be Foscolo but Ortis could do it in literature. This kind of world you want to be able to describe at the end: are you trying to say that you can't really make this argument except in the heterotopias of the literary text, that that's the space for these two patriae? What do you want as a historian from this material?

A.

I want to understand as a historian what the mechanisms were of the transition from Empires to nation states, and how people, intellectuals, expressed it. The Ionian islands are ideal to study this because the blurring during the transition is very clear. The making of the nation wasn't a linear process. I arrive at the question of poetry through the question of intellectuals. My subject is not their poetry. It is a means to understand the macrohistorical processes, I don't approach them as poets in an ahistorical sense. These were intellectuals who had to express themselves in their cultural universe, and I'm interested in how that changes. I'm studying intellectuals who are trying to adjust themselves in a changing world. And some of them made it: Solomos, even Kalvos perhaps at the end, even though they never felt they made it. Foscolo is another choice, another period, he didn't have many choices but was successful, too. There are many other, failed examples, for instance Pieri—a kind of lost generation of the Ionian elite. This is what I am trying to bring forward: they were in-between, they could not fit into any scheme. There is this feeling of incompleteness. Their patria, after all, was the Venetian Empire. But this is the ingenious thing: Foscolo managed to do it in literature. And Solomos has often been said to be outside the Greek language, and that was exactly what made him so great. The identification of Foscolo with Ortis, by the way, is not mine. Foscolo was discovered by historians who study the discursive modes of the Risorgimento as cultural historians, and Ortis was the founding text for the Risorgimento.

Q.

You seem to sketch out a clear path from Empire to nation states, and then read these authors as paradigmatic for their attempts at coming to terms in their 'failure' or 'success.' So, my first question is: What is failure or success here? And the second question: at the end, you do look at the texts and treat them as literary texts, in terms of their internal inconsistencies etc. Aren't these textual practices, for instance in Solomos, constantly undermining the much clearer story you're telling about the historical thing? Are success and failure the right terms to discuss these questions? Is it a failure for Solomos, doesn't it make him a much more interesting author? You put the "transnational" in the title of your paper: Isn't the interesting point that the clear path from Empire to nation states is thrown into question here?

A.

Yes, this is precisely my point. As for success and failure: There is a certain double perspective here. Firstly, it is seen from the point of view of a national world: in a

national imaginary, they were successes, they gained a place in the pantheon. Look also at Kapodistrias, who is in the pantheon too, yes, but in what terms? So the success/failure terminology is adopted from a national discourse, and I'm at a distance from that. The second level is that of the author's self-perception as successes or failures, in their biographies and writing. Pieri and Mustoxidi, for instance, consider themselves failures. Pieri wants to contribute to the Greek struggle but can't write in Greek: he feels he's lost. There is this failed perception of self.

Q.

So Solomos considered himself successful?

A.

I don't think so. The national and personal perception of success need not be the same. What I'm trying to say: I think the fact that he returned to writing in Italian said something – maybe he was tired of writing in Greek. Kalvos, too, was disappointed in Greece at the end. This is another aspect I have: These authors were related to their national identity in a nostalgic way, which meant they would always be disappointed. The patria was a utopia. Their identity perception was nostalgic, from the outside – this will always led to a sense of failure. I don't think anyone was feeling they had succeeded, they were all feeling they had failed. The nation and collective memory made some of them into successes later, but, yes, their own feeling was that of total failure.

Q.

I'm also thinking of the issue of success and failure. It's interesting that it's *those* three figures who are successes even if they didn't think so themselves. As transnational figures, they were unsuitable to the syntax of this new world, in between a dead and a new world to be born. They *should* be losers in this new world, so it is a surprise that they became national poets.

A.

Yes, but there were also 50 or so others who didn't make it.

Q.

Yes. I am also wondering if this is a 18th and 19th century story. You said that they thought about the "patria" in a different way. Could you unpack this? What was the concept of "patria" at that time? I guess it was a Romantic notion, not territorial, that could be adopted by people who hadn't been to the patria, who didn't speak the language. I'm trying to think of the 20th century and similar issues of collapsing empires, for instance the Austro-Hungarian or Ottoman citizens after 1919, or even Yugoslavia after the 1990s.

A.

I started my research from two directions: Firstly, the in-between zones and dead zones in Cyprus; secondly, the diaspora. My PhD was on Mustoxidi as a diaspora Greek, how identity was created from a position of distance to the country. The idea was, as Karen Van Dyck also writes in her article, that national identity in the diaspora is much more open. It was the diaspora intellectuals who were the creators of national identity, so the

nation per se is always also a nostalgic construction. There isn't much research on issues such as nostalgia, immigration etc. in the 19th century; most of it, in various disciplines, is on the 20th century. So I'm adapting this to the 19th century. With respect to the question about empires and nations: No, this wasn't only the case then. I am, in fact, thinking about organizing a conference with a title along the lines of "The Transition from Empire to Nations States and Its Side Effects," which would include the 18th to the 20th century until the collapse of the Soviet Union. There are common patterns in every collapse of this kind. In the Ottoman Empire there was the same effect, there is, for example, Nicolaos Piccolos. The three poets never set foot in Greece (except for Kalvos), they became Greeks, as Vangelis Calotychos has written in his book, through the European philhellenic discourse. Piccolos was a Vlach who constructed himself as Greek and was taught Greek.

Q.

One way of laying your emphases would perhaps be to think about the *form* of these stories. The form of national discourse is linear and often deals with moments of revelation and shifts. This seems to be the kind of language you use, esp. with respect to Foscolo, but what about Solomos (e.g. his move to Italian)? Is this the form of a national narrative where the truth comes out at the end? There are moments when I want to disentangle the narrative that moves from Empire to nation states. Your version of Solomos comes a little too close to the national version of Solomos. An attention to the *form* of Solomos's writing goes against this kind of linear development – it's later that he becomes nationalized. So perhaps one needs to think about the *form* of narrative, the trajectory of linearity and shifts. For example, Foscolo: There was an institution of Italian literature but not Greek? But what was Modern Greek literature like at that time? Your argument is that he chose Italian literature because it was a firmer identity. But I'm questioning that. It's the way we look for shifts, for moments where something changes. You look for these moments for turns in these stories, and I wouldn't easily say that about Solomos. There is a tendency of narratives to look for moments of change that lead to an ending. But looking at their poetry, it's very difficult to talk about that kind of progression.

A.

Foscolo is not a linear example. He started when the landscape was still very clear: As the son of an educated family, he was supposed to study in Italy etc. My reason for looking at Foscolo is that from a certain point onwards, there were different choices not offered yet by the field of Modern Greek literature that was not yet established. The choice was the idea of revolution and of the nation that was forming then, and he was one of its components. He didn't feel he belonged only to one. I see him through something that is not linear because he wasn't linear.

Q.

Maybe the reason for this confusion is that we, as historians, are projecting what we're trying to question. We consider the return to the Italian language as similar to the idea of "patria." But it is very difficult to say if for these people language and nation was similar to what the nation state means to us today.

Q.

Solomos is interesting as an ambiguous case. He's writing for his mother in Italian, and yet has a nostalgia for the Greek language. We can read things into his relationship with his mother and the importance her low standing in society has for his Romanticization of the people. But he still writes in Italian – Greek is a nostalgized language. So it becomes difficult to determine what the use of Italian means.

A.

But he uses Italian not because it is a nostalgic construction but because it is the only language he can freely write.

Q.

No, it's not nostalgic. The emotional impact of Greek is nostalgized. And the impact of his mother is important but the language he speaks to her is Italian. So how do we then read the fact which language is used as any kind of factor in a personal universe that is so complex.

A.

There's a letter of Foscolo to his sister about his mother, in Italian. But when he addresses his mother, he uses Greek.

Q.

Yes, so it doesn't become binary oppositions of Italy and Greece or even empire and the nation, but there are all these other things that keep coming up and trouble that.

Q.

We haven't talked much about this question of exile. Foscolo had this hard Italian shell but underneath there was a layer of Greek. So there is this exilic transnational identity. I wonder to what extent we find this in the other two? My understanding of your argument is that they are all exiles. What makes it possible for them to navigate all the historical changes is that they are exiles.

A.

Foscolo is the founder of this discursive vocabulary of exile. Many patriots, even Greek patriots, adopt the same vocabulary and express themselves in national terms as exiles. Mustoxidi, for instance, the first Prime Minister of Greece, is interesting because he is a man who after 30 years goes back to Greece (like Kapodistrias) as a philhellene and classicist. After one or two years he starts writing "this is not Greece. I don't like Greece." In one letter – these letters are always in Italian – he writes, "I am an exile on this rock." Before that, in Italy, he would say, I am an exile, I want to go to Greece etc. But not many of them were literally exiles; they weren't condemned to exile but went there for studies, they were chosen exiles. For Ionians, it was even the natural route. But from a certain point onward, they started feeling like exiles.

Q.

But exile always implies a home away. Was their home Zakynthos or Venice?

A.

The Venetian Empire was home. They were exiles from the Venetian Empire, which didn't exist anymore, the universe of the Venetian Empire. There are psychoanalytic explanations, too, it was the universe of the childhood.

Q.

I think the question of exile is a useful angle: How does the notion of exile change with changing historical circumstances? This may be a useful way of presenting the issue. There seem to be different notions of exile at play here. I would find useful a historical contextualization of different notions of exile. Exile and death are also quintessential notions in the folk tradition. Songs of exile are like songs of death, they share similar metaphors. These are notions people understood. There is a literature of exile that came with Romanticism, which conditioned the way they understood their place in the world, and at the same time, there is a change of historical circumstances. I find it interesting that you say that going to Venice is not quite exile for them but part of a grand tour. But this gets disrupted, and then there is a new kind of exile.

A.

And then Athens becomes the center. Solomos marks the passing from Venice to Athens as the center. I have used the notion of exile a lot. But in this case it is not a central element that could unify all three of the writers. It's not very present in Solomos or even Kalvos's writing. But it is a *topos* in Mustoxidi and Foscolo.

Q.

But showing that exile is one of the narratives of Romanticism doesn't offer anything to an analysis of this transition from a historian's point of view.

A.

Yes, it does.

Q.

It's a different experience of exile that is being understood. You have to ask: What is the narrative or paradigm of exile going on. It's odd here. But in literature it's not odd. So there needs to be a little more explanation, framing, and a framework that biography does not provide.

A.

When there still was a tension between philology and history, the philologist would say that biography doesn't matter. And the historians I read said, "start from the biography." I don't believe in these vertical distinctions between literature and history. The idea was to use these biographies to reach to the historical context, to study these people as a means to understand the context.

Q.

Do you consider the expression “national poet” in the singular or the plural, for one country?

A.

In Greece, there is more than one national poet. In Italy, too. So yes, I’d say plural.

Q.

It’s fascinating that you are contrasting a world in transformation, with extreme contingency on the one hand, with talking, on the other hand, about these figure in terms of a lot of agency. So despite this extreme contingency, there is also a lot of agency. Sometimes there is even cost-benefit analysis, like: is there a Modern Greek canon? So my question is: Are they typical or exceptional?

A.

I don’t believe in the idea of the canon. What should we consider a full national subject with all these contradictions?

Q.

But it’s important that you start from describing them as national subjects – most people consider them as such. Then it is important to take a position across these three examples and to arbitrate how much they fall on the continuum that you described. But the starting point is three important national subjects – that’s very neat for a book.

Q.

So are they exceptional or typical?

A.

They had very clear dilemmas, and the dilemmas are not usually posed in that way. In that sense, they were not typical. But they were very typical for the Ionian islands. And they are very similar to the Cypriots today.