

University Seminar #703 : Modern Greek Seminar
Speaker : Maria Oikonomou
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Attendees: Fotios Kaliampakos, Helen Dimos, Alvaro Garcia, Chloe Haralambous, Elektra Kostopoulou, Karen Van Dyck

Title: **On the Clinical Picture of Nostalgia – and a Remote Literature**

Summary of Presentation:

Oikonomou's talk considered first the clinical nature of nostalgia as invented by Johannes Hofer, then homesickness in Greek literature by considering specifically two texts: *The Homesick Wife* (1894), a short story by Alexandros Papadiamantis and a novel, *The Wildflower* (1924), by Pavlos Nirvanas. While Oikonomou recognizes Odysseus as the first great nostalgic, she quickly identifies Johannes Hofer as a "discourse founder" (in Foucault's terms), who made up the word "nostalgia." In his *Dissertatio medica De Nostalgia, Oder Heimwehe*, composed in Latin and published in Basel in 1688, Hofer refers to this new sickness: known as "Heim-Weh", "home pain", in France as "mal du pays", the humanistically learned Hofer coins the term *nostalgia*.

The symptoms indicating the presence of the disease vary, and consist particularly in a lasting sadness, incessant thoughts of the native land, restless sleep or lingering wakefulness, a decline in strength, decreased sensations of hunger and thirst, feelings of anxiety or even intense heart palpitations, frequent sweats, and a mental lethargy able to muster an interest in almost nothing beyond thoughts of home: such people are then susceptible to various illnesses. For example, they may suffer from persistent fever or febrile attacks, often quite serious, if the longing of the victim cannot be assuaged.

She is interested in this narrative of sickness and that Hofer doesn't look at medicine, but just uses case studies. For the case study is not simply a way of empirically demonstrating his thesis; it must itself be seen as a story, which makes accessible a new knowledge. For the complex of nostalgia as pathology can only be understood through narration, a strategy which celebrates its final triumph in the written reports of medicine, clinical psychiatry, or law in the 18th and especially 19th centuries. For Hofer, nostalgia is curable through a return to the homeland.

Oikonomou draws attention to the shift from Hofer to Karl Jaspers' *Homesickness and Crime* (1909). Jaspers posits that nostalgia deals with the psyche. Drawing on medical and forensic sources, Jaspers presents and analyzes cases in which girls from poor village families in Switzerland are sent to work as maids or household servants in distant towns and hamlets. There, they fall ill with homesickness, and – in order to be sent home – set fire to the farmstead on which they work, suffocate or drown the infant with which they are entrusted, and so on. The novelty and modernity of Jaspers' description of homesickness is its displacement of that ailment into the realm of the psychological illnesses, for which the body is only a medium.

In the analytical part of her paper, Oikonomou shifts from medical to literary history, a shift facilitated by the fact that the sciences themselves have already adopted the narrative as a way to make their theses comprehensible. The literarization of knowledge is inherent in the text of the

case study; literature is the medium of knowledge *in all discourses*. Moving to homesickness in the two Greek texts she studies, Oikonomou highlights that from the 19th century onward, homesickness appears as a physical malady in Modern Greek texts, marking a discursive ‘import.’ This does not necessarily result from the direct influence of European literature but rather implies a cultural ‘echo.’

Papadiamantis’ text gives insight into the intertwining in Greek literature of homesickness and medicine. It introduces the term ‘nostalgic’ into the Greek language. Symptoms in the protagonist can either be read in the sense established by Hofer or as secondary characteristics of an illness caused by the imagination, established by Jaspers. As a psychosomatic clinical condition, nostalgia weighs heavily on the physical condition of Papadiamantis’s protagonists. Lialio, the protagonist, shows both physical symptoms but also illness caused by the imagination (Jaspers), it is difficult to disentangle corporeal and psychological elements of the disease (though this is not the case in other stories by the same author). Ljaljó is precisely the phenotype most susceptible to the onslaught of nostalgia. She also harbors a petulance which combines with childish innocence to form a sinister complex, constitute a contradiction found also in Ljaljó. Though she commits neither murder nor arson, her cruelty and “crime”, her status as a figure of ethical and even legal deviance is manifested when she secretly steals the boat in which she would flee from under the very nose of her husband, accompanied by a young stranger. This violation of both the law of property and the law of marriage displays what one could call a certain suppressed criminal energy, a tendency toward careless yet desperate transgression that stems directly from homesickness and can at best be distinguished quantitatively, but not qualitatively from the list of crimes compiled by Jaspers. Therefore, nostalgia appears as a merging of incongruent character traits, of psyche and soma, of home and abroad. This phenomenon of transgression makes homesickness the “threshold state” par excellence.

Thus, nostalgia as a medical syndrome or transgressive force leaves a distinct trace in the Greek literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries. However, while the discourse – sometimes as scientific knowledge, at other times as an almost unconscious undercurrent of thought – is circulating throughout European culture, one notices an idiosyncratic tension between appropriation and distancing: Greek literature is not just marked by the comparatively restrained pathologization of homesickness at a time when German, French, and English literature have long since appropriated nostalgia as illness and turned it into a topos. Moreover, at the very moment of the concept’s transference, Greek cultural instances seem to object to the complete subsumption of homesickness into the discourse of medicine.

In Nirvanas’ novel, two visions of homesickness collide:

-medical, recognizable as the perspective of a sciences imported from Europe,

-late romantic conception which assumes an equivalence between Nature and the human individual, micro- and macrocosm, and postulates the merging of the one with the other.

As a writer and doctor, Pavlos Nirvanas possessed all the characteristics needed to act as the agent of a seamless transmission of the concept to Greek literature. The novel was published at almost the same time as the first edition of the *Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια*, the *Great*

Greek Encyclopaedia, put out by the Athenian Phoenix publishing house, which clearly placed “nostalgia” in the sphere of (psycho) somatic illness:

Nostalgia: Such is named the great sadness, accompanied by a general ebbing of strength and mental and physical weakness, observable in individuals dwelling far from their native lands and their family and social environments and wishing to return home. It [...] manifests itself in depression, in combination with a slowing of various psychological and physical functions, i.e. in a state of melancholia, accompanied by a sharp decline in appetite, anorexia, exhaustion, and an inability to work, phenomena which frequently lead to death, unless a timely return home eliminates the cause of the nostalgia and brings recovery. (Μεγάλη Ελληνική Εγκυκλοπαίδεια 1928-29)

The novel understands nostalgia as a syndrome – and then describes it as a rupture of the mystical bond with the Earth. The resulting tension between psychiatry and Romanticism does not lead to the exclusion of either; instead, it suffuses the text to its very end. Oikonomou concludes that this may be due to the fact that, with respect to nostalgia, Greek literature produces a certain “dislocation”; it seems to alternate between the will to appropriate and a critical distance, as though some of the concepts of European scientific and literary history can only find acceptance in a distilled, yet attenuated form, in the paradoxical form of a “diluted concentrate”.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: In which language is Hofer’s text written?

A: Hofer’s text is in Latin.

Q: If he refers to something equivalent to feelings, then he sees nostalgia as a somatic condition, so don’t feelings connect us to the psyche?

A: The question is: How is it possible for nostalgia to be thought as a physical disease? Can Johannes Hofer be seen as a person who invents that very peculiar turn from a condition which concerns mainly the soul to a condition that is physical? In that respect, I think he is no inventor at all. He only does with nostalgia what has been done with other and possible related concepts either since antiquity or at least since early modernism. There is for example Svetlana Boym who reminds us that nostalgia is a subcategory of melancholia, that melancholia is an ailment with a catalogue of symptoms befalling the intellectual or philosopher. Nostalgia according to Boym is its democratic counterpart because it is diagnosed with sailors and soldiers. And mainly the connection between melancholia and nostalgia is realised by the differences. The positive connection they have is the projection of a state of mind onto the body. This of course has already happened with love, another condition of the soul which in the 14th century with Petrarca or Dante becomes an illness. What Hofer does is *repeating this special movement of turning a condition of a mind into a physical disease which he has seen in the discourses of melancholia and love*. He “invents” the turn but not necessarily its dynamics.

Q. Why is Hofer a “discourse founder”?

A: I took this term from Foucault (“What is an Author?”). An author is only responsible for the books he writes. But a discourse founder does not only write books but *is the author of laws of constructions of following texts by other authors*. This, for example, makes him similar to a founder of a genre. Because the latter also invents the laws for the texts by other authors (i.g. A. Radcliffe inventing the gothic novel, E. A. Poe inventing the detective story...). But these genre-founders only give room to a series of similarities. A genre is characterized by the variation of the same. A “discourse founder” by contrast gives room to differences. The following authors can work in the theoretical field established by the discourse founder. They can follow him, they can contradict him, they can find other directions, but still inside the discourse (i.g. following the discourse founder Freud one can do psychoanalysis without being Freudian at all). So this is the first feature, he makes differences possible. The second feature is the necessity of the discourse to return to its founder. In the development of one such discourse or a concept/term inside the discourse the origin is forgotten. So every now and then the representatives of the discourse return to the originally concept in order to revise it critically. In this sense, Johannes Hofer appears as the founder of a discursive field of nostalgia. Obviously his invention opens up a sphere of differences, let’s say he makes Karl Jaspers possible, and on the other hand the scholars dealing with the concept of nostalgia (be it medical, philosophical, in cultural sciences) have to return to Hofer to find the term’s substance and to define their difference from it.

Q: I can not help thinking of a long tradition of speaking about the “humors” that goes back to antiquity. Or the prevalence of “hysteria” –I’m not sure what its relation is to the “vapors” in the Victorian. There are all these conditions related to love, unrequited love, and its physiological or somatic consequences. This all makes me questioning of the exclusivity of the discourse of nostalgia that you are proposing. How can one assuredly speak of its development absent of a relation with some similar discourses (though, perhaps, not the ones I’ve alluded to here, quite ahistorically).

A: Some words on the diachrony of nostalgia. As I have already said at the beginning of my talk it is only with early modernism that nostalgia enters the physical realm. Before – from Odysseus to the end of renaissance – it may be a condition from which one suffers. But this concerns the soul, it is an imaginary suffering. When I speak of nostalgia (which since Hofer is constituted by bodily symptoms), one has to keep in mind two main aspects: The first one is the aspect of a rather astonishing stability of the “illness” from 17th to the early 20th century. And the second aspect is that nostalgia touches on so many different discourses, for example as a disease of military and naval life, of soldiers and sailors, nostalgia often became a prohibited illness. During the 17th and 18th centuries one can even speak of epidemics of nostalgia in wartime military camps. Of course the authorities could not just lead their armies home as a mass therapy. Thus, they had to find a way to make a perverse delusional and literary dislocated imagination work within the military and political imperatives of warfare and commerce. There is that story of F. Schiller being a military doctor and diagnosing nostalgia in one of the soldiers – but his report states that the man suffers from melancholia. This happens in order to avoid the severe punishments for soldiers who fell ill with nostalgia. (And even in the First World War we have picture postcards showing soldiers that suffer from nostalgia.) This shows, as I said, the diachronic stability and on the other hand the transfer of nostalgia from medicine into the areas of jurisdiction, politics or military strategy. And even the discourse of national identity. Then with the 20th century one can notice a relatively sudden change in the notion of nostalgia. Late and

postmodernism nostalgia does not so much concern the homeland or Heimat; it is no spatial concept but a temporal one.

Q. There is however an interconnection between the Greek discourse of *xenitia* and your description of a discourse of nostalgia here. If we look at folksongs of death, for instance, where metaphors of exile (*xenitia*) and death elide, there is a n unmistakable somatic aspect to the protagonists' condition in the songs: a wasting away of the body, parched mouth, a fire and heat of the body etc. When Papadiamantis introduces forms, in his fiction, as we know, he does so with a consciousness of the blending of Greek equivalent forms to those he is acquainted with in the European fiction (that he was reading and also translating). It is not clear to me that one can so easily distinguish between the native discourse of *xenitia* and this imported, European discourse of clinical nostalgia.

A: Papadiamantis *introduces the word nostalgia* in concert with its usage by Europeans. We know how Papadiamantis was a translator of English at that time. The Victorian novel is the prominent residue of nostalgia in literature and there are quite a few books about nostalgia and Victorian literature. One can think of Emile Bronte or of Charles Dickens' Little Dorrit from 1857 where the heroine speaks of her longing as a physical homesickness and at the same time as a longing for the past. The proliferation of nostalgia in the Victorian novel seems at odds with the spirit of progress, energy and enterprise of the age. But this is exactly due to the oscillation between the cultural hopes of the Victorian era and its fears and pessimisms. So when I treat nostalgia in Greek literature I will probably do that on the background of the English-Victorian period or at least while remembering this period...

Q:. There is a modern clinical aspect. How to define it? Is this nostalgia a subset of melancholia? In the story Lialio knew Uncle Monahakis when she was a child and in some ways it is a return home because she later marries him. What is happens with medical texts in Greece at this time?

A: As I said, Papadiamantis was a translator of English at that time. He's aware of this discourse in the press. He translated Sarah Grand, there was a lot in that on syphilis. The medical biological vocabulary was there. What happens in the press at the same time might be connected to other conditions.

Q: How is this discourse relevant within that time period in some larger, more collective sense? The way Greece is presented, that is, are there are similar symptoms assigned to the nation? Is this individual affected by talk of a collective nostalgia? Nirvanas is writing just after the Catastrophe of 1922?

A: I can only think of the poem "O Michalios" of Kostas Karyotakis... The nostalgia of the soldier as parody of the nation ...

Q: Don't you think Papadiamantis's *The Murderess* fits well into your paper's concerns?

Q: How did you get to this project? Did you work back from your current work on migrants and their suffering?

A: The project “Transcribing Borders: Towards a Poetics of Migration” aims at delineating the aesthetic (i.e. topical as well as formal) characteristics of literary texts dealing with or reflecting the experience of migration. Conceptualized as a series of case studies which focus on Greek literature from the nineteenth century to the present, the project compiles and analyzes recurring motifs, metaphors, and narrative elements such as the migrant’s corporality (his/her depiction as “living dead,” “machine,” “animal”...) or the equally significant representation of cultural spaces, zones, and frontiers. Moreover, the specific structural and linguistic features of a possible “literature of migration” are taken into consideration: its often serial, episodic or fragmentary build-up and general composition and also the typical instances of “deviating” language (parataxis, code switching, hyperbole, dialect...). In the process, the study intends to prepare the groundwork for a comprehensive description of a literature of migration as (sub-)genre central to contemporary culture...