The Aesthetic Ideology of the Greek Quest for Identity

VASSILIS LAMBROPOULOS

IN THIS PAPER, I INTEND TO DISCUSS THE MODERN GREEK search for identity (or the Greek search for a modern identity) from a viewpoint that, I believe, has been often overlooked: that of aesthetic ideology.¹ My subject is the convergence of the national and the aesthetic in the quest for Greekness. Until the late 1970s, the only critical explorations in this direction appeared in the Athenian literary periodical Simioseis, co-edited by a group of intellectuals who have collectively and successfully resisted the tyranny of the modernist ethnocentricism of the 1930s over Greek culture. During the last ten years, however, an increasing number of scholars with poststructuralist affiliations (Alexiou, Chouliaras, Constantinidis, Danforth, Diamandouros, Dimiroulis, Herzfeld, Jusdanis, Kakavouli, Karavidas, Kitroeff, Layoun, Seremetakis, Tziovas, Tsianikas, Valaoritis, to mention only people working outside Greece) has started investigating aspects of this crucial ideological juncture. As questions of institutionality, canonicity, authority, discursive formation, cultural constitution, and historical contingency acquire importance in the field, we can confidently expect to see a substantive growth of research interest and scholarly sophistication in this area. I should hope that my analysis contributes to current discussions of such issues.

First, a point of explanation. I take aesthetic ideology to refer to the construction of an ideology according to aesthetic principles, an ideological formation of any kind whose rules are based on norms derived from an acclaimed artistic tradition. The aesthetic ideology finds in (high) art standards of quality, strength, harmony, or redemption that seem transferable to other areas of practice and adaptable to

different searches for success or order. In such cases, the ideals of art
are deemed exemplary and are applied to enterprises of inquiry or pro-
fit for which they were not originally meant, on the assumption that
their original value possesses originary power. Thus we can speak about
the aesthetic ideology of religious fundamentalism, the health and fitness
industry, or the field of philology.

In our specific case, the debt of nationalism to aesthetics has been
adequately explored with regard to a few European countries (especially
Germany, Russia, and England) and is often discussed today in
studies of certain Latin American cultures (from Cuban film to Argent-
ine fiction). I propose that Greek history presents a very special op-
portunity for a case study of this modern phenomenon. We are well
acquainted with the aesthetic ideology of the Third Reich (through
Heidegger’s poetic ontology), of Russian Panaslvism (through
Dostoievsky’s daemonic parables), or of the Italian Communist Party
(through Gramsci’s critique of culture). But how about similar in-
fluences on Greek debates about the Language Question, Irredentism,
or the Civil War? Let me suggest some broad lines for future inquiry.

The quest for the artistic and the national share the same formalist
assumptions: the belief in the organic, the self-instituted, the self-
regulated, and the independent. Greece, like an accomplished artwork,
is portrayed and envisioned as an independent entity of organic unity,
which establishes and governs itself according to its own intrinsic laws,
without any reference to external conditions or in glorious transcendence
of adverse circumstances. For example, a stylistic comparison of the
PASOK government policy with Odysseus Elytis’ To Axion Esti would
show that the former’s populism owes more to the poetics of the
“Generation of the 1930s” than to the social theory of any socialism.
The formalist ideal draws its legitimacy from arguments about struc-
tural coherence, unity in diversity, indigenous stability, and organic
homogeneity.

2On the influence of aesthetic principles and standards on nationalism, see Benedict
Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism
(Verso, 1983); Carol Avis, Border Crossings: The West and Russian Identity in Soviet Lit-
erature, 1917-1934 (Berkeley, 1983); Francis Barker — Peter Halme — Margaret Iversen
— Diana Loyley, eds., Europe and its Others (Essex, 1986); Robert Coles — Philip Dodd,
eds., Englishness. Politics and Culture, 1880-1920 (Croom Helm, 1986); “National Myth
and Literary Culture,” special section in Comparative Literature B (1980); Franz Fanon,
“On National Culture,” in his The Wretched of the Earth [trans. Constance Farrington]
(New York, 1977); George L. Mosse, The Nationalization of the Masses. Political Sym-
bolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third
Reich (Howard Fertig, 1975) and Nationalism and Sexuality. Respectability and Abnor-
mal Sexuality in Modern Europe (Howard Fertig, 1982); Gerald Newman, The Rise of Eng-
Cultural Despair. A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology (Berkeley, 1961);

3Athens, 1959).

Another set of assumptions that the nationists share with art-
istic practice has an idealistic bent: I refer to the faith in the pure,
the unique, and the eternal. According to this model, the Greek denotes
a unique race and place whose essence consists in a defiant purity and
whose mission spans without interruption the centuries of human civil-
ization. As an illustration, I would argue that not only the poetic oeuvre
of Kostis Palamas but perhaps even more eloquently the operatic work
of Manolis Kalomiris could help identify the aesthetic preferences that
shaped the policies of Eleftherios Venizelos. In this area, the incom-
parable uniqueness, the untainted local character, the ethnic idiolect
of language and custom, and the survival of the communal practice
and ethos are concocted to prove the suprahistorical constitution.
Greece, like all great art, remains timely and timeless.

These formalist and idealist assumptions informing the Greek ide-
ology of national identity lead to a number of dialectical contradictions
that repeatedly block the path toward reconciliation with the past and
synthesis. I shall mention only three.

The Greek ideal, like the aesthetic one, is founded on standards
which are at the same time discriminatory and universal. When we look
at a painting by El Greco, let us say, in an aesthetic disposition, we
project and we appreciate two kinds of validity — one based on unique-
ness (what we perceive as Greco’s inimitable style) and one on catholics
(what we praise as its universal appeal). We therefore discriminate and
we generalize. This is exactly how Greece is depicted (and not only by
its Greek dreamers): a site that excludes and includes every foreign ele-
ment and person; excludes by claiming unique constitution and contin-
uity, and includes by claiming a universal relevance and importance.
Thus artists from Pericles Yannopoulos to Dionysis Savvopoulos have
had no difficulty in asserting that the Greek is the exclusive category
which includes everybody, that indeed what makes it universal is its
ability to discriminate wisely, differentiating itself from everything alien
to its true nature.

Another dialectical contradiction that Greek nationalism borrows
from aesthetics is its paradoxical axiology.4 In the market of artistic
values, labor as creativity seems the supreme standard, while use is

4For recent discussions of axiology, see Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “Contingencies of
Value” (Critical Inquiry 10.1, September 1983); G. C. Spivak, “Scattered Speculations
on the Question of Value” (Diacritics 15.4, Winter 1985); Terry Eagleton — Peter Fuller,
“The Question of Value. A Discussion,” New Left Review 142 (November — December
1983); W. J. T. Mitchell, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Three Theories of Value,”
Rhetoric 6.2 (Fall 1986); David Wiggins, Needs, Values, Truth. Essays in the Philosophy of
Value (Oxford, 1987); Cornelius Castoriadis “Value, Equality, Justice, Politics. From Marx
to Aristotle and from Aristotle to Ourselves” [1973], in his Crossroads of the Labyrinth, trans.
sacrilege and exchange inconceivable. Take Van Gogh. The labor of the creative artist seems to bestow on his paintings their inestimable value. The works themselves are destined, of course, for contemplation, not consumption, and could never be part of an economic transaction. Interestingly, the record price at a recent auction was an indication of the high value of the presumably use-less, un-exchange-able artistic labor, even in our postmodern culture. The same high value is attributed regularly to the sublime authorial labor of the Greek national poet, Dionysios Solomos, to the village characters in the prose of Alexandros Papadimitrakis, or to the anonymous makers of the dithyrambic songs. Even in the Greece of Marxist thinkers like Kostis Moskoff, labor is inherently artistic because it is its own justification as a genuine expression of the national soul, uncontaminated by vulgar uses or selfish exchanges. Greece the motherland, like the sacred office of art, redeems all labor spent on its virgin soil. Production and consumption become again one in a pure act of Genesis; the return to the origin is accomplished, the curse of commerce cancelled.

This pronounced theological dimension extends further into a third major contradiction, which opposes the prophetic destiny to the historical predicament. Since the prophetic pronouncements of Romantic bard like Klopstock and Blake, aesthetics has defended the notion that art announces, evangelizes, a future of spiritual transfiguration to this material world, while at the same time, by being totally contemporary with itself, it remains present in every age. This position has been adopted wholeheartedly by the aestheticians of a Greek resurrection (from the historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos to the General Ioannis Metaxas to the philosopher Spyros Ramfotos) who have argued that, by being a secular representation of the divine, the race possesses an urgent intellectual contemporaneity with any idolatrous age. Thus the historical is not annulled but transcended. Greece, like the great artwork, is in history but not of history. Being divinely ordained, it belongs to a divine order. It could not be modernized because it is eternally and fully present; and its historical vocation is a contemporary prophecy, an evangelical presence, a present future. Greek culture, like high culture, is the other of this world, this world as other, the shame of the same.

As dialectics itself has taught us, however, the logic of the same and of the other is the logic of identity. It is also the rhetoric of difference. Unavoidably, this rhetoric haunts the quest for Greek identity. When we analyze its various discourses, we discover over and over again not much else beyond a monotonous litany of differences. Trapped in this ritual of identification as self-differentiation, the high priests of Greekness are condemned to talk only about its opposite, the champions of its essence are forced to ask continuously what is not Greek. Obviously, if essence, as posed by dialectics, is its own difference, then Greece, for those who search for it, is difference from the non-Greek — which of course could be adequately defined only if we knew first what is the Greek. But then again the history of aesthetics reminds us that the logical, insurmountable priority of the non-artistic has fatally thwarted all efforts to isolate beauty on a score, page, or canvas.

In conclusion, I want to propose that Art as the phenomenon of absolute beauty, and aesthetics as the theory of this phenomenon emerged prominently in the eighteenth century when the need for mediation between the hierarchical and the organic, the theological and the secular, the messianic and the historical was felt by that group that was caught in the middle between the dwindling oppression of the aristocracy and the looming threat of anarchy — the middle class. I also want to propose that the middle as mediation was an ideological construct and necessity for that class. As the continuing decline of aesthetics reveals, however, the very articulation of opposites prevented dialectics, the science of the middle and of the middle class, from resolving its constitutive differences. The search for Greece, for any Greece — arguably the archetypal middle class pilgrimage — has been an integral part of this enterprise. (After all, the Greeks were the last ones to start looking for her!) It is a futile dialectical exercise that exorcises the other in order to recover the same; and it retains a distinctly aesthetic ideology in that it pursues an idealist goal through formalist approaches. All this (like the uneasy Greek membership in the Common Market) results in a self-consuming labor whose use is severely limited and whose exchange value quickly evaporates. But then again it has always been a basic...


premise of aesthetics that there is no market for a product of genius. Capitalist ideology in general is concerned with the other, the other side of the coin, its nominal value, oblivious to the fundamental double-sidedness of any currency and the inflationary nature of difference.8

Still, is there any point in rejecting this difference, in abandoning the search for identity which leads to the desire for the other? There appears to be a fatalistic consensus that, even though the quest for Greece produces only more versions of the non-Greek (from the Turk and the Slav to the Jew and the Yankee), it simply cannot stop. You have to talk about the other because you have to search for your same. This whole negative hermeneutic of bourgeois nationism, though, leaves one wondering: what happens if you start looking directly for the other? not for the other of the same but for the other-than-the-same? for the alien, the extraneous, the disparate, the irrelevant? What if there is a possibility to talk, not about the Greek or its supplementary other but rather simply about the foreign — say, the foreigner in Greece or the foreigner on Greece. What if the only Greece, the historical Greece, that is, the Greece of culture, is that of those who read and wrote it, of those who sold and bought it, of visits to the Acropolis by Renan, Freud, Hofmannsthal, and Henry Miller — the Greece of (its) foreigners? Let us not forget that what is foreign to both aesthetics and to the tautological ideology of Greekness is the practices of use and exchange, the labor of commerce. I am tentatively suggesting that there may be a way to talk about the foreigner and his or her Greece — the commerce with the stranger, its contact and context; phrasing it differently, to talk about the political economy of the production of Greece: the hegemonic interests involved and the discourses of the resistance they encountered. Only then might we be able to approach identity not as a metaphysical human need or an aesthetic requirement for unity but as a relative and flexible local political strategy.9

On the Impossibility of Greek Literary History

GREGORY JUSDANIS

RECENT THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS SEEM TO INDICATE THAT literary history has fallen into a state of disrepute at least in Western Europe and North America.1 The greatest achievements of literary history, according to Hans Robert Jauss, belong to the nineteenth century when the composition of a history of a national literature was hailed as a philologist's crowning achievement. The highest goal of scholars such as Gervinus, Scherer, De Sanctis, and Lanson was to provide an account of the development of a national literary canon towards self-realization.2 The task of these scholars was not just to codify the literature of a nation but also to stabilize its identity. We, however, the inheritors of this identity have lost the urgency for such a nationalist enterprise. Furthermore, our distrust of what Jean-François Lyotard calls grand narratives has led us necessarily to question the viability of literary history, that is, the possibility of representing the national identity of a people in the history of its literature.

Literary history, as we have come to realize, was based on the conception of history as a teleological progression towards maturity and perfection and on the belief that one could produce an objective and comprehensive narrative of its evolution. Yet, far from being all-inclusive, literary histories were quite often based on a canon which excluded the works of ethnic minorities and women. Although written in the name of a supposedly national identity, they were placed into the service of the dominant ethnic group or social class. By concentrating on the past, literary historians also neglected the present, the ideological and epistemological presuppositions supporting their discipline. They presumed uncritically a concept of literature and a system of aesthetic norms. This lack of reflection on the discipline's own

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8 On the interactions between literary and economic production, see Marc Shell, The Economy of Literature (Baltimore, 1978) and Money, Language, and Thought. Literary and Philosophic Economies from the Medieval to the Modern Era (Berkeley, 1982).


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2 "Toward an Aesthetic of Reception," Trans. R. Baht (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 3.