The Aesthetic Ideology of the Greek Quest for Identity

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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, Kakavoulia, 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

[1]On aesthetics and ideology, see "Art and Ideology," special issue, *Praxis* 5 (1981); Michele Barrett, ed., *Ideology and Cultural Production* (New York, 1979); Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* [1972] (Telos, 1981); Jorge Larrain, *The Concept of Ideology* (London, 1979); Michael Sprinker, *Imaginary Relations. Aesthetics and Ideology in the Theory of Historical Materialism* (Verso, 1987); John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley, 1985).

different searches for success or order. In such cases, the ideals of art are deemed exemplary and are applied to enterprises of inquiry or profit 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)[2] and is often discussed today in studies of certain Latin American cultures (from Cuban film to Argentine fiction). I propose that Greek history presents a very special opportunity 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 Panslavism (through Dostoevsky's daemonic parables), or of the Italian Communist Party (through Gramsci's critique of culture). But how about similar influences 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*[3] 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 structural coherence, unity in diversity, indigenous stability, and organic homogeneity.

[2]On 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 Avins, *Border Crossings. The West and Russian Identity in Soviet Literature, 1917-1934* (Berkeley, 1983); Francis Barker — Peter Hulme — Margaret Iversen — Diana Loxley, eds., *Europe and its Others* (Essex, 1986); Robert Colls — Philip Dodd, eds., *Englishness. Politics and Culture, 1880-1920* (Croom Helm, 1986); "National Myth and Literary Culture," special section in *Comparative Literature* 8 (1986); Frantz 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 Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Howard Fertig, 1975) and *Nationalism and Sexuality. Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Howard Fertig, 1985); Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism. A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (London, 1987); F. R. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair. A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley, 1961).

[3](Athens, 1959).

Another set of assumptions that the nationist quest shares with artistic practice has an idealist 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 civilization. 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 incomparable 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 ideology 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 uniqueness (what we perceive as Greco's inimitable style) and one on catholicity (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 element and person; excludes by claiming unique constitution and continuity, 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

[4]For 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," *Raritan* 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" [1975], in his *Crossroads of the Labyrinth,* trans. Kate Soper-Martin H. Ryle (Cambridge, MA, 1984).

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 Papadiamandis, or to the anonymous makers of the demotic 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 bards 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 Konstandinos Paparrigopoulos to the General Ioannis Metaxas to the philosopher Spyros Ramfos) 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.[5] 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

[5]On the dialectical impossibility of identity and the self-cancelling project of totality, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* [1966, trans. E. B. Ashton (Continuum, 1983) and *Aesthetic Theory,* [1970, trans. C. Lenhardt (London, 1984); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality. The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley, 1984).

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.[6] 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.[7] (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

[6]For current discussions of difference and otherness, beyond Hegel's section on "Absolute Difference" in *The Science of Logic* and Heidegger's deconstruction of "The Principle of Identity," see Jacques Derrida, "Différance" [1968], in his *Margins of Philosophy,* trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982); Eric Gans, "Differences," *MLN* (96.2, Spring 1981); Charles E. Scott, *The Language of Difference* (Atlantic Highlands, 1987); Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Minuit, 1983); Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago, 1988); Michele Barrett, "The Concept of Difference," *Feminist Review* 26 (Summer 1987); François Hartog, *The Mirrot of Herodotus. An Essay on the Representation of 'the Other,'* trans. Janet Lloyd (Berkeley, 1988); Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies. Discourse on the Other,* trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986).

[7]For recent examinations of the ideologies of Hellenism, see Timothy Webb, *English Romantic Hellenism, 1700-1824* (Manchester, 1982); David Constantine, *Early Greek Travellers and the Hellenic Ideal* (Cambridge, 1984); Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, 1984); Martin Aske, *Keats and Hellenism. An Essay* (Cambridge, 1986); John Pemble, *The Mediterranean Passion. Victorians and Edwardians in the South* (Oxford, 1987); Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, 1980).

premise of aesthetics that there is no market for a the products 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 irrelative? 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 contest; 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]

[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).

[9]On strategy and power, see Michel Foucault, "Power and Strategies" [1977], in his *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977,* ed. Colin Gordon (Harvester, 1980); Meaghan Morris — Paul Patton, eds., *Michel Foucault. Power, Truth, Strategy* (Feral, 1979); Ernesto Laclau — Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* [trans. Winston Moore — Paul Cammack] (Verso, 1985); Abdul R. JanMohamed, "Humanism and Minority Literature. Toward a Definition of Counter-Hegemonic Discourse," *Boundary 2* (12.3/13.1, Spring — Fall 1984); Mary Louise Pratt, "Interpretive Strategies/Strategic Interpretations. On Anglo-American Reader-Response Criticism," in Jonathan Arac, ed., *Postmodernism and Politics* (Minneapolis, 1986); Nancy Armstrong, "Introduction. The Politics of Domesticating Culture, Then and Now," in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction. A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford, 1987); Barbara Harlow, guest ed., "Theory and Strategy in the Third World," special issue (*Critical Exchange* 22, Spring 1987).

On the Impossibility of Greek Literary History

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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 very 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

[1]For various perspectives on problems besetting current literary history, see the articles in the special issues of *New Literary History* 3 (1985) and of *Poetics* 14 (1985). For an investigation of the theoretical problems involved in literary history, see: Gerhard Plumpe and Karl Conrady "Probleme der Literaturgeschichtsschreibung" *Literaturwissenschaft Grundkurs* 2, eds. H. Brackert, J. Stückruth (Hamburg, 1981).

[2]*Toward an Aesthetic of Reception,* trans. R. Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982), p. 3.