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European Unity, Modern Greek Identity and Historicization of the Past: The ‘Greek Crisis’ as Perceived in Contemporary Literary Texts

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the Greek and international aesthetic reaction to the phenomenon of the economic crisis. By examining Greek and international literary texts that depict Greece during the era of austerity, I attempt to explain how crisis is perceived in the literary field. Thus, I aspire to analyse the way in which this literature negotiates the terms *economy*, *crisis*, *Europe*, *power* and *past*. At the same time, I discuss contemporary literary images of the Greek Other; through a comparative study of Greek and international relevant texts, I aim to highlight the political and ideological rhetoric of the texts under examination, as well as the perception of crisis as a global issue, rather than a ‘Greek adventure’. In that sense, the authors under examination do not simply dramatise the traumatic events of the recession, but they also suggest a broader definition of crisis, as a global phenomenon, discussing aspects of the contemporary European South and its balance with the European North.

Keywords

Crisis and literature, Modern Greek identity, European South, Greek Other

The recent economic crisis that erupted in Greece from 2010 onwards led to an intense cultural response, within Europe as a whole. The aim of this article is to explore the negotiation of Greece's images during the age of austerity in both Greek and European texts from the decade 2010–2020. Since the outbreak of the crisis, many studies have attempted to examine aspects of this aesthetic response, either by examining the artistic, visual and literary representations of the crisis,¹ by exploring the stereotypical discourses that arose in the Western imaginary regarding contemporary Greece² or by discussing the portrayals of the country in the international Press.³ Through this article, I aspire to contribute to the debate on European cultural responses to the phenomenon of the economic crisis, by attempting a comparative study based on Greek and international texts that examine contemporary Greece during the years of the memorandum. Thus, I focus on Greek and international relative literary texts, whilst I also discuss international non-fiction literature for auxiliary reasons.

Rather predictably, the central term of the texts examined here is the term *crisis*. But what are the connotations of the term *crisis* and how was the later perceived in literature? According to Eugene Hollahan, *crisis* in a literary text may refer “to a crucial point or situation in the course of anything, i.e., a turning point. It may refer to an unstable condition in political, international or economic affairs in which an abrupt or decisive change is impeding. [...] In literary criticism, it is the point in a story or a drama at which hostile forces are in the tensest state of opposition”.⁴ Despite the fact that the Greek literary production of the decade 2010–2020 is determined by the thematic of the economic crisis, and, moreover, the aesthetic reaction of the Greek writers to the above phenomenon proved to be immediate and manifold, the dominant, critical question regarding this numerous body of texts seems contradictory: Is there indeed a Greek crisis literature?

The critical concerns regarding these texts are well known: for instance, it has been argued that the economic crisis resulted in an a priori popular narrative framework, which was used mainly in order to achieve the goal of commercial success. In that sense, choosing *crisis* as the central narrative framework limited the writers' representational choices. On the other hand, the prompt response to the phenomenon of *crisis* led to skepticism regarding

1 See Tziovas (ed.) (2017).

2 Panagiotopoulos – Sotiropoulos (2019: 1–8).

3 See Tzogopoulos (2013). See in addition Milonas (2019).

4 Hollahan (1983: 249–250).

whether distance in time is necessary in order for truly ‘great literary texts’ to be created.⁵ Moreover, since the Greek artistic reaction to the crisis was a matter of international interest, Modern Greek literary production considered necessary both the representation of the phenomenon of the crisis, as well as the dramatization of the causes and results of the recession. As Dimitris Kargiotis explains, ‘literature of crisis’ often results in the identification of invention and narration.⁶ As for other researchers, crisis brought with it an old literary trend; moralization and didacticism, by reminding the reading audience what they had done wrong and what they should avoid so that crisis did not emerge again.⁷ Traumatic occurrences usually take time to appear reflected in novels, yet the genre of crisis literature in Greece has already produced a significant body of novels. One of the reasons that lie behind this literary production is probably that there were already some novelistic warnings regarding Greece’s economic system before the eruption of crisis, mainly tracing the country’s rising corruption.⁸

Before discussing the Greek and European texts that depict Greece in the age of austerity, I will refer briefly to the ways in which similar crisis-period texts have been examined globally. Moreover, I will discuss the images of the Greek Other in the early 2010s. Literary depictions of economic crises turn out to be a common narrative framework, as literary texts on similar themes can be found as early as the first decades of the 18th century, or even earlier. Probably inevitably, academic research has paid particular attention to the great economic disasters of the 19th and 20th centuries, as well as to British literature concerning the Victorian era. Margot Finn points out that as early as the mid-seventeenth century, literary texts explored the connection between debt and morality, personal desire and social cohesion.⁹ At the same time, the drastic changes taking place in the economic sphere in the 18th century – such as new regulations on credit and debt – led to the re-differentiation of literary characters.¹⁰ Moreover, conceptualizations of debt are found in texts written in the 17th century,¹¹ whereas in the same period literary authors consolidated concrete satirical traditions related to economy; for instance, we could refer to the

5 For a coherent presentation of the concerns recorded here see Chatzivasilieou (2018: 846–849). See also Ziras (2016).

6 Kargiotis (2017: 94–95).

7 Koumasidis (2019).

8 See in detail Dimitroulia (2020).

9 See Finn (2003).

10 Lynch (1998: 4–5).

11 See McClanahan (2018).

depiction of bankers as characters who are inclined to commit frauds.¹² At the same time, the Victorian novel often explores the interaction between economic failure – or bankruptcy – and morality,¹³ whilst Houston defines the Victorian economic novel using the terms *panic* and *crisis*.¹⁴ Furthermore, German literary texts that examine the hyperinflation period of the Weimar Republic prove to be extremely interesting. The literary texts of this period emphasise immediate political and social concerns whereas they examine the social relationships and values, aiming at political critique; according to Lisa Evans, these literary novels resemble political novels and they examine “a world in which the codes of ethics, of behaviour and of economic transaction have been distorted”.¹⁵

On the other hand, the Great Depression of the 1930s should be considered one of the most influential – if not the most influential – economic crises in the field of the arts; the Great Depression gave birth to texts that either confronted the economic disaster with humor, or focused on generalised despair, rural poverty, as well as the need for revolution and structural changes both in the political and social sphere of the time.¹⁶ In addition, most of these texts also highlighted a cultural and moral crisis relevant to the corresponding economic crisis. Arguably, the most important aspect of the literary texts produced during the Great Depression was the attempt to provide a collective cultural response to the phenomenon of the crisis; these texts promoted a revolutionary aura, while the representations of the Great Depression in American culture led to profound rearrangements both in American culture itself and in art as a whole, through a constant search for progress.¹⁷ Finally, before discussing the modern era and the 2008 economic crisis, I would like to refer to the case of Argentine national literature. During the 1970s, the popularity of the science fiction genre exploded; the dystopian discourse of the authors aims, on the one hand, at highlighting the problematic aspects of the political system and, on the other hand, at pointing out the ever-increasing economic power and social control.¹⁸

In the contemporary era and after the economic crisis that erupted in 2008, the aesthetic reaction proved to be intense globally. According to Annie Galvin – who suggests the term *post-crash fiction*, so as to describe the relevant literary production – the *aesthetics of austerity* developed, leading readers to perceive

12 Brantlinger (1996: 136–184).

13 Weiss (1986).

14 Houston (2005: 10–11).

15 Evans (2009: 193).

16 Peck (1976).

17 See in detail Brinkley (1999).

18 See Kurlat Ares (2019).

austerity not as a response to economic crisis, but as “a humanitarian issue with deep roots in the historical operations of colonialism and sectarian division”.¹⁹ Moreover, Christian Kloeckner suggests that the literature that emerged after the global economic crisis should be examined through the concepts of risk and nostalgia, as he believes that the relevant texts are characterised by “an aesthetic of uncertainty”.²⁰ In regard to the terms which have been used to describe the relevant literature, Eleni Yannakakis and Natasha Lemos stress the terms *credit-crunch*, *post-crisis*, *post-crash* or *post-Lehman’s novel*.²¹

At the same time Olga Bezhanova examines the Spanish aesthetic literary reaction to the global recession; as both Greece and Spain belong to the European South, and moreover, they were both linked with stereotypical discourses connected to the economic recession, Bezhanova’s inferences could be discussed in parallel with the main characteristics of the Greek texts produced during crisis. Bezhanova, among others, points out that Spanish crisis literature has challenged the myth of Europe, to the point of undermining the foundations of European-Spanish relations. More importantly, this literature diversified the historical perspective of the view of the past and produced a discourse of questioning the capitalist system; it is characteristic that some of the texts that constitute the researcher’s study material are believed not only to be characterised by a “rhetoric of resistance”, but also to form a “genealogy of activism”. In addition, Bezhanova underlines that the characters of the Spanish literature of crisis explore the changing definition of work, as they understand that the problems they are concerned with are related to a wider, collective community and do not fall within the sphere of the individual.²²

Keeping in mind that the images of Greece were especially controversial during the recent economic crisis (and specifically in the period 2010–2015), Dimitris Tziouvas believes that Greece has been rediscovered in the age of crisis and explores the image of Modern Greece in the wider historical context of the successive rediscoveries of the country over the centuries. He concludes that the depictions of the Greek Other in the previous decade corresponded to a mixture of idealism, stereotypes and exoticism.²³ In addition to the aforementioned, concrete stereotypical constructions emerged, according to which Greeks were perceived as guilty of a systemic crisis, as well as a people enjoying

19 Galvin (2018: 578).

20 Kloeckner (2015).

21 Yannakakis – Lemos (2015).

22 See in detail Bezhanova (2017: 1–20).

23 Tziouvas (2020).

a luxurious way of life at the expense of the EU. Regarding the international image of Greece during the years of austerity, Panayis Panagiotopoulos and Dimitris Sotiropoulos emphasise the varieties of the relative representations in the Western imagination and characterise those views as a “peculiar exoticism”; these controversial depictions, according to the researchers, proved to be highly negative and stereotyped throughout the first years of the crisis, but transformed afterwards to an “idealizing exoticism”, according to which Greece was perceived as a place of authenticity, acting against neoliberal globalization.²⁴

Even more interestingly, crisis reactivated the traditional East-West dilemma for Greece, as the relationships of the Greek state with European norms seemed once again a matter of further negotiation. Thus, crisis was often explained through two central narrations; either “as a result of Greece’s incomplete modernization” or “as a result of this phase of European modernity and modernization, in which Greece happened to be one of the weakest, more vulnerable links”.²⁵ As Dimitris Tziovas explains, “this, in turn, led Greeks to feel increasingly disillusioned with Europe and raised questions about the cultural orientation of the country and its identity. The crisis has indeed woken up the ‘sleeping giant’ of popular Euroskepticism, a latent force in Greece, which had previously failed to reach its full potential”.²⁶ Furthermore, the crisis activated narrations that emphasise the exotic elements of the Modern Greek identity, and in that sense, several scholars hastened to explain how this contemporary exoticism is associated with neo-Orientalist constructions. More in detail it has been argued that Orientalism characterises contemporary intra-European cultural politics and that the dominant discourse surrounding the odious Greek debt has an Orientalist structure. Thus, Anna Carastathis has attempted to show how the idea of colonialism survives in the age of austerity, expressing the opinion, according to which violence is inherent in the fantasy of European civilization.²⁷

Regarding the Greek texts written in the period of the economic crisis, the recession triggered a series of questions concerning Modern Greek identity and its contradictions, which much of the contemporary Greek literary production attempted to explore. Initially, the traditional East-West dilemma re-emerged in a modern form: this time West was replaced by the European Union and, through their narrations, Greek authors explored aspects of Modern Greek

24 See in detail Panagiotopoulos – Sotiropoulos (2020). See in addition Grigoriadis (2020).

25 See in detail Triandafyllidou – Gropas – Kouki (2013: 5).

26 Tziovas (2017: 24).

27 See Carastathis (2014). See in addition Bozatzis (2016).

identity, thinking not only from a national point of view, but also feeling part of the European whole. In addition, the economic crisis led to narrations full of doubts about the common features of European identity. In that sense, Greek writers often create a typology of the opposing identities within European Union and question the connection of the term *Europe* with the elements of progress and modernity, an idea already formed in the Greek fantasy from the early 19th century. In fact, writers such as Petros Markaris,²⁸ attempt to examine the position of contemporary Greece in Europe, whereas Markaris' crime novels also contain interesting depictions both of the European North and the European economic institutions, such as Troika. As the historical tension between the European South and the European North becomes the main narrative framework, Markaris' narrations incorporate explicit political and social concerns, such as, among others, the controversial elements of contemporary Greek identity or the actual level of unification in the E.U.

Many of the Greek writers historicise the crisis, by pointing out all kind of problematic aspects of the Greek state in the period of the previous four decades. Moreover, certain authors argue that Greece experienced a "bout of blindness" that prevented everyone from seeing the approaching disaster. Of course, the aforementioned aspects of the literature written during the crisis prove its strongly political, ideological – and rarely national – character, as there seems to be no room for apolitical approaches. In that sense, the Greek literature of crisis evinces a disapproval of the entire Greek post Junta political scene. Nikos Mantis' literature should be mentioned as a relevant typical example; in his work, Mantis perceives political power as a synonym for systemic corruption. His distrust of the entire Greek political scene is accompanied by an accusatory, political word. Thus, he examines the country's contemporary political past with an obvious tendency of general aversion.²⁹

In addition, a rather important issue is the negotiation of the extreme-right, which can be found in many Greek authors of the crisis, such as for instance, Rea Galanaki.³⁰ Galanaki's narration – between realism and dystopian, naturalistic discourse – not only condemns far-right ideologies, but also directly relates the phenomenon of the rise of far-right ideologies in Greek society to the country's economic crisis. Additionally, Greek writers also formulate a re-definition of the modern historical past under new prisms, either as missed

28 Among many, see for example Markaris (2010) and Markaris (2011). See in addition Markaris (2019) and Markaris (2020).

29 Mantis (2014).

30 Galanaki (2015).

opportunity for political, social and economic transformation, or by examining the past through a nostalgic gaze, taking it as a synonym of innocence.³¹ It is noted that authors such as Makis Karagiannis³² and Nikos Panagiotopoulos,³³ among others, offer highly negative perceptions of the ‘Polytechnio generation’. These literary texts pave the way for the production of alternative narrations of the past by creating new historical representations, which are added to the ones viewing the Greek 1980s as “a time of safety and prosperity”.³⁴ At the same time, Greek writers do not simply deal with the causes of the crisis; on the contrary, they discuss both the political and social problematic aspects of the Greek state, as well as the policies of the European Union, perceiving crisis as not simply Greek, but mainly as a European, or even global issue.³⁵

On the other hand, examining the collective request of this literary production, one should take into account the continuous demand to eliminate rising corruption. Simultaneously, Greek authors depict a highly diverse society in transition, whereas they perceive the fragility of the modern world as inescapable. In these representations, the Greek literary production rejects any xenophobic rhetoric, illustrating the gradual birth of a multicultural society and negotiating in parallel the emerging immigration problem in Europe. Moreover, the depicted postmodern society is characterised by new definitions regarding work, but also of existential anxiety. At the same time, several novels express anger and confusion regarding the austerity measures introduced in Greece. The Greek literary characters during the years of recession often fail to overcome the trauma of austerity and are, in addition, depicted facing both existential and ethical crisis. Authors such as Christos Oikonomou³⁶ or Giannis Tsirmpas³⁷ do emphasise the temporality of modern society discussing aspects of the new, in transition Greek and European societies, reminding us of the corresponding Spanish novel, according to Bezhanova’s aforementioned observations.

Additionally, some of the texts discussed here examine the idea of political power from a multifaceted perspective, mainly questioning the rising authoritarianism of European governments, most often through dystopian or post-apocalyptic narratives. For instance, we could refer here to the work of Giannis

31 Regarding the negotiation of the past in different aspects of the Greek culture during the years of crisis, see in detail Tziovas (2017).

32 Karagiannis (2011).

33 Panagiotopoulos (2011).

34 Zestanakis (2016).

35 See for example Kolliakou (2013) and Margaritis (2013).

36 Oikonomou (2010).

37 Tsirmpas (2013).

Grigorakis,³⁸ Nikos Mantis³⁹ or Michalis Modinos.⁴⁰ In the aforementioned texts, economy is perceived as a modern God, but also as a way of imposing and consolidating power. It should also be noted that part of the Greek literary production at the austerity era is characterised by the presence of economic and political theories, which often resemble a political manifesto or examine aspects of contemporary capitalism. Simultaneously, as these literary texts aim to discuss social and political problems of contemporary Greece, references to the immigrant issue occur; on the one hand, Greek authors represent the difficulty of refugees to integrate into the Greek state and, on the other hand, they strongly deplore the aggressive attitude of part of Greek society towards them.⁴¹ Last but not least, one should take into account narrations that discuss the Greek crisis through satirical prisms, aiming to offer a different aesthetic reaction to the recession.⁴²

Trying to focus on the foreign depictions of contemporary Greece, I examine mainly English and German texts which correspond to travel literature and novels. In the literary field, the international constructions discussed in this article, which concern heterogeneous depictions of the Greek state at the age of the memorandum, are characterised by a meeting of personal experience, political demands and collective reflections on the European project, but also by a constant exploration of the contemporary Greek identity. Authors such as James Angelos,⁴³ or Marjory McGinn⁴⁴ attempt to explore the contradictions of Modern Greece, and they often examine Greek identity through the prism of crisis. In part of their texts, these authors view the myth of Greece's identity as problematic and in need of further negotiation. In addition, one should take into account the depiction of Greek society as a society whose every aspect is experiencing a radical change, whereas Greek crisis is also perceived as a vital element for Greece to adapt to globalization.

As in the Greek literary production, these texts are also characterised by highly political and ideological tones, constructing narrations full of political demands regarding the European future, but also full of doubts regarding the actual level of democracy in the European Union. At the same time, many of the authors define crisis as a clear intersection both for Greece and Europe, as,

38 Grigorakis (2013).

39 Mantis (2013).

40 Modinos (2014).

41 See, among others, Tsirmpas (2013) and Mantis (2013).

42 See for example Theodoropoulos (2011) and Dimitriou (2014).

43 Angelos (2015).

44 See McGinn (2013), McGinn (2015) and McGinn (2016).

on the one hand they believe that crisis altered the Modern Greek identity, and on the other hand they narrate the birth of a new, diverse Greek and European society. In fact, it is characteristic that this postmodern moment of transition for Greece is perceived by some of the writers discussed here as ‘a moment of adulthood’ and ‘cut off from the recent past’. The discourse for the Greek Other at time of transition appears to be predominantly solidary⁴⁵ with some interesting exceptions, in which one can detect concrete stereotypical constructions.⁴⁶ On the other hand, authors such as Marlene Streeruwitz⁴⁷ or Fabian Eder⁴⁸ promote ideas that are in essence with the inherent political demand for a wider European unification. At the same time, these texts are full of questions about the West intentions in the political decisions made regarding the Greek debt. Very interestingly, it is a common pattern for the aforementioned authors to examine collective images and aspects of the European South, by placing Greece among other South European countries, such as Italy, Spain or Portugal.

So as to summarise, the contradictory discourses and images of Greece, as created in the European fantasy – on a political or cultural level, as well as in media – can also be found in the literary field. The Greek literary production during the period of crisis appears to be closely related to the political, historical, economic and cultural circumstances, providing modern perceptions of the term *crisis* in general, but also discussing terms such as economy, Europe, Greek identity and South Europe. As the literature texts written in the era of austerity are shaped almost entirely by the contemporary historical and political context, the term *crisis literature* was thought as – at least – ambiguous. Literary criticism pointed out that the important period of economic, socio-political and even cultural differentiation of Greece, did not really lead to great novelistic results. Indeed, it is not rare that this body of literature texts resemble a dramatization of the reality, rather than a deep aesthetic reaction to it; despite that fact, though, I argue that the Greek literary texts during the years of recession are characterised by interesting aspects which have not been discussed thoroughly. A structural parameter of the Greek crisis literature concerns the in-depth examination both of Modern Greek identity and of the contemporary Greek society in transition. In addition, Greek authors often perceive crisis as a global issue, raising questions regarding the actual level of democracy in the E.U., and in parallel, seeking to discuss methods of true European integration.

45 See for example Schorlau (2019).

46 See Hensel (2012).

47 Streeruwitz (2015).

48 Eder (2013).

Economy, on the other hand, is perceived as a new mode of imposition and suzerainty, forming narratives with a clear critique regarding the European economic policy in general. Finally, an extremely interesting feature of this literary production is the negotiation of the historical past; Greek authors not only proceed to a renegotiation of the past, but also view the political past of the country as the shaping factor of the multifaceted crisis experienced by Greek society. In addition, literary narrations often depict the past as an idealised space and time, through a romantic gaze. These narrations aim at the reconsideration of the Greek collective memory, whereas the contradictory negotiation of the past – which encompasses a simultaneous idealization and demonization of it – is inevitably linked to the aforementioned tendency to constantly examine Modern Greek identity.

As for the foreign texts that depict contemporary Greece in the decade 2010–2020, similar concerns arise there. Apart from interesting representations of the Greek Other, foreign writers describe the birth of a new world, in which many aspects of previous societies will disappear. The literary images both of the Greek Other and the Greek society are mainly characterised by solidarity, but some exceptions remind to reading audience of the depictions of Greece as an anti-European country, as well as a threat for the European vision. As in the Greek case, these texts examine aspects of the European South, but also discuss the balance between European North and South, in political, social and economic terms. In addition, a significant part of these literary texts reflects on the notions of privacy, individuality and autonomy in contemporary European societies. Thus, a word of uncertainty emerges; in such narrations, the existential anxiety regarding the new work norms and individuality in the contemporary capitalist systems meets collective concerns about politics and economy. In this way contemporary perceptions regarding the terms *economy* and *crisis* are detected in the literary texts of the austerity era. In addition, in numerous texts written in the period of recession, obvious doubts are expressed about the content of European policy, with clear references to authoritarianism against the European South. Finally, as the literature of crisis is characterised by a clear political rhetoric, political demands are commonly embedded in the literary text, such as concerns about the increasing control in European societies, as well as exploration of paths that will lead to a deeper and broader European integration.

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