



Looking Forward, Looking Backward: The Greek Continuum

Review of *After Antiquity: Greek Language, Myth, and Metaphor*
by Margaret Alexiou (Myth and Poetics Series). Cornell University
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The title reflects the scope of this intriguing book. Margaret Alexiou examines the whole of Greek literary and cultural experience, or as much as one volume can encompass. She invites her readers to look at all of Greek literature, both diachronically and synchronically, in order to understand any single part in any particular time. This is a rich book that could only be produced after a lifetime of scholarly and life experience. Our author elucidates the great variety and uniqueness of Greek culture, always emphasizing connections in time and space. After presenting important texts from late antiquity to the twentieth century, she discusses their main images “to demonstrate the flexibility and coherence of Greek metaphors” (349), especially concerning the life cycle. Here are rituals, proverbs, dances, songs, satires, riddles, laments, novels, short stories, letters, family anecdotes, language disputes and literary theory – all explained to show how metaphor reflects life. In fact, she explains that metaphor is life: “Metaphor is not a literary figure of speech but live and therefore literal” (412). And this life extends from antiquity to the present. Since any Greek text in a given period can help to explain texts from others, we are obliged to learn about everything. This is a tall order, but Alexiou lures us with a siren song; she makes her points

convincingly and welcomes us into the multifaceted world of Greek culture with a stunning array of fascinating documents. Honest readers are forced to agree that in order to understand the rich uniqueness of Greek literary works we should expand our knowledge and appreciation beyond our current specialties.

Alexiou's descriptions of Greek language reflect one of her main theses: there is not just one Greek language, even at a single time and place. She stresses textual "interconnectedness" (317), "diversity" (1, 6, 314, 413), "richness and complexity" (41), "heterogeneity" (3), and "multiplicity" (314). The language is "polyphonic and multitextured" (314) and has always been marked by a diversity of forms. In addition to Homeric Greek and the various conversational dialects of the classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods, Alexiou notes the rise of new genres like the Byzantine *kontakion*, and subsequent influences from Latin, Aramaic, Coptic, and Caucasian tongues. Add to this the influx of Slavic, Albanian, and Turkic peoples, and loanwords from Latin, Slavic, Albanian, Arabic, Persian, Celtic, Germanic, Turkic and Italian, we conclude that "Poyglossia" is a good description of the history of this language, giving credence to N. Bachtin's comment that "it is neither convenient nor accurate to speak of a modern Greek 'language'. There is no such thing. There is only the present state of Greek" *Introduction to the Study of Modern Greek* (Alexiou 17).

Her discussion of the 'language wars' of the past century and a half accompanies an appeal to preserve both the puristic and demotic forms of the language, and an implied wish that the modern Greek educational system would also be more sympathetic to the study of ancient Greek. Alexiou points out that the "reaction against ancient Greek" of some modern writers and the Greek educational system "is the demoticist converse of purism" (21). Interestingly enough, the supporters of both demotic and katharevousa appeal to tradition to support their sides. Alexiou cites Kavafy's dictum in favor of preserving a "heterogeneous tradition" of both: "the demoticists wanted to throw half of the Greek language into the river, while the purists wished to push the other half into the sea" (34). She concludes that diversity is desirable; it creates fertile soil for the growth of rich literary works.

We find here numerous examples of linguistic variety in several authors. The novels of Georgios Vizyenos (1849-1896), for example, "reach back through the Ottoman present to the Byzantine past," and "his multitonned use of the Greek language" uses "the multiple registers of the Greek language, shifting from dialect... to moderate katharevousa... and

high katharevousa” (301). Alexiou discusses three of his short novels and shows how Vizyenos’ range “includes words resurrected from Homeric and Byzantine Greek as well as from the Thracian dialect and Turkish. Literary allusions bring under scrutiny not just the medieval, Renaissance, and romantic West but the Balkan and Ottoman East as well, while problematizing notions of the literary canon and the appropriation of Hellenism by nationalism and aestheticism. It is the inner code rather than the external packaging that is both oral and literary, modern and Byzantine” (310).

In order to explain how Greek metaphor works, Alexiou stresses the need to understand performative aspects of literature, folktale, song, and poetry. Words are not always the basic mode of communication, as she demonstrates particularly well in her discussion of ritual (chapter 9). We associate metaphor with language particularly, but she urges us to go beyond words into ritual, comparing what we would normally call ritual (customs of eating, dressing, gift-giving, visiting, marriage, burial, and other religious customs) with the “obsessive ritualism” (325) of autistics, for whom there is “the need to organize the self where language and social structures are deficient or absent” (319). This makes sense if we think of ritual as “an attempt to control the outside world in relation to the self by symbolic means” (318).

Our author includes many examples of what we might call the ‘character’ of contemporary Greeks, which resonate with those foreign visitors to Greece who have done more than merely haunt the country’s shops and hotels. “In Greece, people love to dispute what they hear, read, or watch, from novels and newspapers to televised serializations: they are not passive consumers” (154). This observation does much to strengthen Alexiou’s argument that audience participation is a great part of story telling and other performance-based texts.

She also reminds us that ‘myth’ is a living force in the modern world, and helps to shape history – for better or worse. For example, stories of Constantine XI Palaiologos, the ‘marble emperor’ who will return from the dead to lead his people to victory in Constantinople, actually “helped shape Greek national consciousness and foreign policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Asia Minor campaign to regain the lost territories of Byzantium (1919-1922) was led in the name of the king of the realm, also named Constantine; he would fulfill the popular prophecy” (156-157). Myth is powerful; it guides our lives.

After Antiquity is an ideal text for students of comparative literature and cultural studies. Alexiou demonstrates how Greek song and literary tradition compare with those of Balkan peoples, and of other western Europeans, and presents comparanda from numerous traditions, including Scotland, Hungary, Serbia, Croatia, Yugoslavia, Ireland, England, and Germany. We learn that the paramythia “wonder tales” are not purely Greek: “They share more common features with Gypsy, Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and Indian wondertales than with those of northern and western Europe” (217). She shows how the first Greek novelists of the 19th century were indebted to and yet independent from their European contemporaries (Chapter 8), and how they owed much to earlier “Greek mythical genres,” and “oral modes of narration encountered in the wondertale, encoding one story within another” (280). In addition, they use “two quintessentially Byzantine features of narrative craft: antithesis and ekphrasis” (286), which Alexiou shows have roots in Orthodox Church Greek and Byzantine antecedents, but also parallel works from western Ireland, England, and the work of Goethe (300).

The relationship between Greece and ‘the West’ occupies a good part of the book’s analysis. How much of later Greek writing is an imitation of Western literary canons, and how much is indebted to local traditions? Alexiou asks: Is Greece Western or Eastern? She answers: It is a combination of both. Greeks are Europeans... technically. But because of their proximity to Asia and their unique relationship with eastern cultures, their literary productions differ from their European counterparts. Their music, for example, “with its regional diversity, complex modalities, irregular rhythmic patterns, and close affinities with Byzantine chant and near Eastern music, constitutes a ‘language’ different from that of northern and western European music. Perhaps the most striking difference concerns the apparent asymmetry of words and music in many songs, especially those in fifteen-syllable verse...” (183-184). Their tragic ballads, too, differ from their European contemporaries: “In contrast to the European novel, Greek fiction has eschewed the ideal of romantic love leading to marriage as the (implied) ending of the domesticated and usually middle-class female. Love is erotic rather than romantic, tinged with violence and death; death may be a renewal, not an end. Often illicit, love comes into conflict with traditional values, according to which marriage is a matter of duty and convenience, not of bourgeois individualism...” (314). The diversity of their language marked them as different from others in the West: “It is

as if the lack of a standard language, spoken and literary, established elsewhere in Western Europe since the late eighteenth century or before, goaded Greek writers to find their own voice amid the plethora of oral and literary texts" (314). Finally, the participation of women in Greek oral composition sets it apart. In Greece, "women can be shown to have contributed more significantly to the common culture than in the West, where the male written canon has been firmly entrenched at least since the Renaissance" (14).

Are the voices in later Greek literature individual or collective? Alexiou answers that they are both. Greek poetry, song, and story reflect "a social as well as individual voice" (407). This is one of the many strengths of this text, and one that makes it so valuable: we get a sense of who these people are, and how they differ from others. Alexiou presents a great array of texts, anthropological data, and her own observations of Greek life, through which we gain a picture of a whole society through time and space, through the language registers of village and city; of the rural Greeks and the European-educated intelligentsia.

One group of voices is female. Women "promoted moral and religious values, and have preserved the 'mother tongue' at times of foreign domination, by telling stories and singing songs in the family context" (14). They were at home with the children while their husbands worked, and thereby helped to "contribute to the transmission of the heroic ethos to the younger generation" (406). Women traditionally have fostered the cyclical notions of Greek history and life, emphasizing the continuity of birth, life, death and rebirth, in contrast to the masculine notion of linear history. Alexiou presents scores of songs, illuminating the whole spectrum of their experience – as told by the women themselves. An interesting example of the long-standing educative power of Greek women is preserved in the complaint of a Venetian on Crete: "Mocenigo attributes this loss of Italian to the pernicious influence of Greek wives, who brought up their children to be Greek speaking and Orthodox" (29). The importance of women through a male Orthodox voice is seen in the works of Romanos the Melodist, who in the second *kontakion* on the Resurrection celebrated "woman's power to mediate between the human the divine," and gave prominent position to women, especially Mary Magdalene (62-63).

Males have now appropriated the oral heritage which Greek women have traditionally transmitted, and there is a disconnect between contemporary Greek female writers and the traditional female voices. Alexiou says that today's women writers are "Western-oriented"

(perhaps an intentional oxymoron) “and hence are unable to address Greek women (rural, provincial, and urban) who are literate enough to follow the media but whose experience of life places them outside the enclosed time-space of salon, bedroom, and kitchen in which much of the new women’s poetry seems to be situated” (14-15).

It is gratifying to note the sheer abundance of texts which Alexiou includes -- in Greek, in summary, and in translation. We must thank her editors for printing so much in the original language. The reader gets a good sense of the sound and register which translation alone cannot achieve. I found myself reading aloud and hearing the songs and poems come alive.

Texts are carefully chosen: the pieces we read in the early part of the book are foundations for comparison with later documents. There is a satisfying cross-reference system. For example, Alexiou spends much time summarizing, quoting and analyzing 12th century Byzantine works (especially the almost-blasphemous katabasis *Timarion*, the surprising erotic novel *Hysmine* and the food/sex-obsessed Ptochoprodromic poems: Chapter 4), and uses them as comparanda for subsequent texts, constantly reminding her readers how these function as part of the continuum of Greek language and inherited cultural tradition. She presents a wonderfully full group of *paramythia* “wonder tales” (including an analysis of their meaning and significance in chapters 5 and 7, and songs (including the Bridge of Arta, the Song of the Dead Brother, Digenis Akritis in chapter 6), simultaneously showing how these genres reflect earlier traditions from classical and late antique works. These texts are still living documents which inform a great deal of the modern canon. For example, in Chapter 8 (“From Myth to Fiction”) Alexiou summarizes and discusses Emmanuel Roidis’ *I Papissa Ioanna* (*Popess Joan*, 1866), “a deviant and subversive text, banned by the Orthodox Church,” written in “elegant katharevousa,” showing both the author’s dependence on the past, and how he and his contemporaries use this heritage to critique the present (273). Roidis’ use of language was controversial in his time, and is so even today. The Regional Municipal Theater of Patras is bringing it to the stage (2008), maintaining its now-alien katharevousa text, in contrast to previous productions (by Giorgos Roussos and Gerasimos Stavros). Director Sotiris Hatzakis realizes the risk in doing so: asked if modern Greek audiences would reject a non-Demotic version of the work, he responded “With this venture, I’m taking a stand against the recent trend to translate

works into the vernacular.”¹ He expects his audience to stretch beyond their knowledge limits to appreciate their literary heritage—just as Alexiou encourages us to do.

One of the more bizarre (but delightful) documents here is a “‘swallow song’ (*chelidónisma*) recorded in Latin script from Greek schoolboys in Rome by Canon Benedict for inclusion in the twelfth-century *Liber Politicus*” (87). Two manuscripts of 12th and 15th century preserve this fascinating and difficult piece, which Alexiou includes along with Greek transcription and analysis. She makes good sense out of this document, and tackles some of its vexing problems.² Reverting to her original theme, and reminding us that we must always look backwards and forwards when contemplating a piece of Greek, Alexiou concludes, “The text is problematic but not nonsensical if compared with its ancient and modern Greek counterparts and with the Latin ‘hymns to spring’ interspersed with the Greek in our manuscripts” (93). Again, we see that understanding comes from looking both backwards and forwards in time.

Texts and anecdotes from her own life enrich Alexiou’s narration, and thus this book is uniquely personal – not only because the author tells us much about her family (in relevant and fascinating anecdotes), but also because the traditions she presents concern the universal human condition. From the New Testament and late antique family correspondence to Kazantzakis’ *Zorba*, we read (and hear) of family relations and erotic frustrations; of journeys, clothes, food, gems, hair, gardens, hunting, fruits, trees, and birds. We contemplate the traditional songs and rituals of birth, marriage, and death. We see the full range of humanity: love affairs, cheating wives, lazy husbands, and fairytale adventures—with an emphasis on metaphor, language, and ritual that reflect and illuminate their presentation. Alexiou presents life and literature as a united whole.

Alexiou has always been sensitive to the Greek continuum. She reminds us that over thirty years ago, her *Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* showed “consistent analogies between the human and natural

¹ Quoted in *Kathimerini* (English Language Edition; Athens, March 17, 2008, page 6): “Patras theater takes on the challenge of Roidis’ controversial ‘Popess Joan.’ Director Sotiris Hatzakis and art director Lydia Koniordou have opted to use the puristic version” by Vassilis Aggelikopoulos.

² I wonder why beta is transcribed here sometimes as V and sometimes as B. Also, it is confusing that the original line numberings do not match Alexiou’s transcription line numbers, so it is difficult to cross-reference when reading.

life cycle in the themes and images of Greek laments from antiquity to the present day” (349). In the present volume, Alexiou is at pains to show that we must study the whole spectrum of Greek culture in order to understand more fully any one part of it. Everything is informed by everything else. In her fascinating analysis of Greek letters from Egypt’s Fayum (2nd-6th centuries; Chapter 3), Alexiou shows how a knowledge of the ancient language is not enough to understand their grammar. In order to make sense of these documents, one must also use Modern Greek.

This book is a call to action: we who participate in Greek literature should enlarge our vision of it. To focus only on a single period or genre restricts our understanding of the whole. “In textual criticism, Walter Headlam established the principle that in order to edit any classical text, the critic must first become familiar with the changing forms of language known to the Byzantine scribes and scholars who transmitted them. *Any form of Greek from any period may be relevant to our understanding of a given text*” (10, emphasis added). This is obvious and important, and a most compelling part of Alexiou’s argument for us to broaden our perspective. The vitality of Greek tradition is “rooted in the unusual diversity of its means and resources. If we have missed this in the past, it may be because our overly narrow views of literature can, in the long term, only impoverish literature” (413). Alexiou puts the burden on her readers: it is up to us to expand our knowledge of Greek literature in order to enrich it – and ourselves.