

LITERATURE AND NATIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS
OF THE GREEK MINORITY IN NORTHERN EPIRUS*

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*Deep in the people's soul
wailed the demotic verse*

Panos Tsoukas

ABSTRACT: The first period of Albanian rule in Northern Epirus, from 1912 to 1945, witnessed a continuation of the oral tradition enriched by the experience of the unceasing struggle for liberation. It should be stressed that what we now call "literature of the ethnic Greek minority of Albania" is in fact nothing but an integral part of Greek literature. It is the literary output of the Greek inhabitants of the area who, despite the adverse political developments that left them outside the borders of the Greek state, maintained their creativity and their Greek identity. From 1945 onwards, with the establishment of the People's Republic of Albania, any attempt to assess the literature of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus stumbles upon the political and national dichotomy of the land and its people. Firstly, the writers who identified themselves with the Communist ideals were following the principles of Socialist Realism. Secondly, those who followed a path of silent resistance and struggled for the preservation of the Greek language reverted to allegory and cryptic writing.

The protracted subjugation of the Greeks in Northern Epirus under the slowly collapsing Ottoman Empire had a positive impact on their folk traditions. The first period of Albanian rule in Northern Epirus, from 1912 to 1945, witnessed a continuation of the oral tradition enriched by the experience of the unceasing struggle for liberation. Moreover, in the realm of social life, the observation of traditional forms of social organisation, the binding of the Greeks around their Greek identity and their Orthodox religion, as well as the persecution they suffered, created conditions for the defence and preservation of these same

* Work on this paper would not even have been started without the warm encouragement and the suggestions I received from the poet Andreas Zarbalas. It would never have been completed without the discussions I had with and material offered by the journalist Nikos Anagnostis, the teacher Christina Tsikolia, the writer Telemachos Kotsias and the late medical doctor Spyros Litos. To these Greek friends from Northern Epirus I dedicate the present paper. I have made available the books, the newspapers and the clippings that I was able to collect for my research for the use of researchers at the Archives of Modern Social History (ASKI) in Athens.

fundamental values, as preconditions not only for their national but also for their mere survival.

It should be stressed at the outset that what we now call, rather tentatively, “literature of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus”, which could be called simply “literature of the ethnic Greek minority of Albania”,¹ is in fact nothing but an integral part of Greek literature. It is the literary output of the Greek inhabitants of the area who, despite the adverse political developments that left them outside the borders of the Greek state, maintained their creativity. Under such circumstances, the folk song acts as the bond of a society in multiple isolation, and we can observe, primarily through the help of the *Ανθολογία δημοτικού τραγουδιού* [Anthology of folk songs] by Vassilis Nikas,² that the folk song remained remarkably alive.

Tasos Vidouris (1888-1967), from Droviani, translated many works from French and later published his first collection of short stories in Patras in 1938, as well as a collection of poetry under the title *Ιλίσσια* [Ilissia].³ His style follows Naturalism, as it tries to describe local customs and psychological states; this is why Kostas Natsios, in his critique, calls him “our Papadiamantis”.⁴

Michalis Papadopoulos, known as Botis (1860-1937), from Vouliarati, wrote two collections of poems, both entitled *Μερόπη* [Meropi];⁵ his poetry uses demotic verse and it is characterised by simplicity as well. His skilful use of the 15-syllable verse makes his work part of the Greek popular tradition. Botis is also known for his drama works; his plays describe everyday life with a strong sense of irony for human conditions.

Kyriakos Oikonomou, from Droviani, author of the novel *Η Τσίλω* [Tsilo],⁶ is an exceptional case. He is known for his ideologically driven

¹ Cf. Panaghioti N. Barka, *Literature in the Ethnic Greek Minority*, Tirana: Shtëria Botuese e Librit Universitar, 2005.

² Published in Argyrokastro by the publishing house “8 November”, 1989. Originally only one publishing house was established by the state under the name “State Publishing Company”. A division of this central publishing house followed, and as a result “8 November” became the publishing house responsible for both political books and Greek editions. Greek books and the newspaper *Αξιόλογο Βήμα* were printed in Argyrokastro, and the printing house was named “21 January”.

³ An excerpt from *Αξιόλογο Βήμα* (30-7-1961) of the poem *Το χωριό μου* [My village] shows the simplicity of his literary language: “Oh you beautiful Droviani, my beloved village, countless are the treasures your soft, fertile soil provides to our common household which the Party is leading, and all of us freely are working to build the new life.”

⁴ From the newspaper *Τα Νέα της Ομόνοιας* [The news of Omonia] (2-6-2000).

⁵ Published in 1911.

⁶ Kyriakos Oikonomou lived in Paris most of his life, studied literature and taught Greek language.

description of an imaginary village called Niviadro (the author's native village of Droviani with its name written backwards, syllable by syllable); there, not only the name, but the social reality described is the reverse of the author's village: a revolution takes place for the benefit of the people.

The continuation of this tradition is linked to, but lags behind, literary developments in Greece. In the period between the World Wars, writers from Northern Epirus started publishing in Greece works that carried their reminiscences from their birthplace. Katina Papa (1903-1959) from Yanitsates, with her book *Στη συκαμιά από κάτω* [Under the sycamore tree],⁷ relates her childhood memories of Yanitsates. Her short stories describe nature and human customs, ordinary people and heroic figures in a way that holds the dramatic interest of the reader.

It is also interesting to consider the case of the poet Takis Tsiakos (1909-?) from Argyrokastro, who made his literary appearance in Greece around 1930. He published poetry, including: *Σβησμένη ηχώ* [Extinguished echo] (1936), *Αμμουδιές και βραχάκια* [Sandy beaches and reefs] (1945) and *Πεταλίδες* [Petalides] (1949). The critic Aimilios Chourmouzos wrote about him: "Tsiakos belongs to the generation that will not forget the appeal of the songs of Palamas, despite the winds blowing at our contemporary poetry. I recognise certain echoes of Palamas in his verses and in his well-crafted metrical structures, and also in his cultivation of the rhyme. Even in the sensuality of his verses, this new poet reminds us of the old teacher."⁸ The dominant influence of Palamas is not surprising, as the people of Northern Epirus, frustrated in their national consciousness and trapped in their lives, were very receptive to the national character of Palamas' poetry. It is also not surprising that the poets of Northern Epirus often resorted to allegories and other cryptic devices in order to express their separation and subjection:

In two I have been apportioned
but this apportionment cannot stay.
[...]
Do not hate me. Other hatreds stifle me
And I have been battered much. Battered...
Συγγνώμη [Pardon], Takis Tsiakos

⁷ Her book was published in Athens in 1935. She also published a collection of short stories titled *Αν όλα μπορούσαν ν' αλλάξουν* [If everything could be changed] (1959) and the novel *Στο παρθενγωγείο* [In a girls high school] (1959).

⁸ Aim[ilios] Ch[ourmouzos], *Νέα Εστία* 47 (15-3-1950), p. 545. See also the article by Yorgos Pratsikas, "Ένας ποιητής από τη Βόρεια Ήπειρο" [A poet from Northern Epirus], *Κυπριακά Γράμματα* 246 (December 1955), pp. 475-476.

The limited literary production of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus in the period before 1945, mainly poetry, was published in Greece. It is a poetry that preserves folk elements and carries in it the ideological and rhythmical tonalities of Palamas and his followers.

From 1945 onwards, with the establishment of the People's Republic of Albania, the Greeks of Northern Epirus found themselves doubly outlawed. On the one hand, the regime of Enver Hodja imposed the abolition of all religions, including, of course, the Greek Orthodox Church. On the other hand, the educational policies forced the Greeks, now living in designated minority areas, to accept the cultural uniformity of Socialism and the resulting literary outlook of Socialist Realism. From then on, literary production splits into a visible and a hidden part. On the visible side, there was acceptance of Socialist Realism by the Greeks of Northern Epirus. On the hidden side, the secret literature (manuscripts illegally circulated and publications that later appeared in Greece) continued the Greek tradition, though gradually enriched by influences from European literature, especially French.

Poetry, even though still quantitatively dominant, was no longer the only form of literary creation. Prose works started appearing with greater frequency. Regarding poetry, the continuing tradition of metrical verse should be stressed. Free verse made a hesitant appearance in the work of poets published after 1960 in connection with the revival of Albanian literature through Kadare. However, the use of free verse produced a strong reaction from the previous generation, especially from Panos Tsoukas (born 1925), from Sopiki of Pogoni, who was the best-known poet of the first post-World War I generation. He has published some 33 books, which include some prose works. He was for many years responsible for the half-hour cultural programmes broadcast every Sunday by the radio station of Argyrokastro, the only Greek radio programme broadcast in Albania under the Enver Hodja regime. Of course, this programme had to submit to the laws of the regime, and in fact it did. Nevertheless, it played an important role in binding together the Greeks of Northern Epirus in Albania. Panos Tsoukas was an active militant in the Albanian Communist Party.⁹ He publishes both in Greek and in Albanian. His poetry reflects the political events that occurred in his country, and his verses are mainly an ideological commentary expressing the political views of his party. However, he uses

⁹ The following excerpt from a poem entitled *Ο αθάνατος* [The immortal] written on the occasion of Enver Hodja's death appeared in *Αξιό Βήμα* (28-4-1985): "The musicians spread around sweet music, the poets are knitting warm verses describing the beauty that will come in the future. All of us are composing anthems for the Party, all of us celebrate you, Enver."

traditional demotic verse with genuine talent; his best poems are those dealing with human problems and with difficulties of everyday life, especially when he writes about life and death.

On 25 May 1945 appeared the first newspaper of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus, *Λαϊκό Βήμα* [The people's tribune], which was published in Argyrokastro. In 1956 it started featuring a "literary page", edited by Panos Tsoukas until 1960. From 1960 to 1968 the literary page was suspended, but it reappeared in 1968, edited by the poet Andreas Zarbalas (born 1942) until 1988. From 1988 to 1991 it was published as a separate newspaper: *Λογοτεχνικό Λαϊκό Βήμα* [The people's literary tribune], edited by the journalist Nikos Anagnostis. This literary page, which evolved into a newspaper, featured poems and prose pieces by both established and new writers, for whom it functioned as the antechamber for further publishing. The Albanian state created designated minority areas; but the extent of these areas was much smaller than the actual spread of the Greek population, leaving a large number of Greeks outside these so-called minority areas. This way the international community would get the impression of a minority policy of good intentions; in reality, within the borders of the Albanian state, one part of the population recognised as Greek was oppressed by education and culture under total state control, while another part, that outside the minority areas, was denied any expression of its identity. One of the distinctive accusations hurled against the Greeks by the Albanian police was that of being a "friend of the Greeks". When confronted with this accusation, Vangelis Vassiliou, a teacher and author of the well-known song *Τα παιδιά του Βούρκου* [The children from Vourkos], gave the court in 1945 a response that is remembered by many: "Friend of the Greeks is what you should be, you who are an Albanian; I am Greek." His reply caused a pandemonium and an interruption of the session. Vangelis Vassiliou was eventually sentenced and imprisoned for approximately two years. Many years later, in 1976, at the funeral of the poet Vangelis Dalianis, the teacher of the village school read verses from the poem "The Grave" by Palamas and was accused of stimulating nationalism.

Education offered at the so-called minority schools was of an eight-year duration. In the first four years only Greek was taught; in the last four, only Albanian was used, with the exception of a course in the Greek language which included selected texts of Modern Greek literature, especially Palamas, Krystallis, Varnalis and Ritsos, but also texts by those writers from Northern Epirus who were approved by the regime, especially Panos Tsoukas, Spyros Tzias and Pavlos Sioutis. The generation of teachers who taught up until the 1960s had been educated in Greece, and despite the restrictions imposed on them by the

Albanian government, could offer to their pupils a relatively good education. But old teachers gradually retired and were replaced by younger ones, graduates of the minority schools and of the College of Education in Argyrokastro.¹⁰ So the younger generation of teachers entered the educational system with deficiencies in their command of Greek, and the educational level of the people of Northern Epirus deteriorated. Moreover, the traditional linguistic nucleus of the family was little enriched by school education. In fact, the Greek taught to children at school was often inferior to that spoken by their parents at home. Books from Greece, the few of them that illegally crossed the border, were passed from person to person through informal illicit networks resembling a lending library. But linguistic expression became increasingly rigid and full of solecisms. In any case, the people of Northern Epirus had the opportunity to have access, through Albanian translations, to the wealth of classic European literature: French, English, German and Russian classic authors were translated and made available to the general public, and even taught in schools. Classical Greek authors were also available in Albanian translation, notably Homer and the Tragedians. Concerning Modern Greek literature, one could find translations of Kazantzakis, Loundemis, Ritsos, Livaditis and other writers of the Left.

The writers published during this period were mostly aligned with the regime. They followed the principles of Socialist Realism and worked on themes they shared with their contemporary Albanian writers: nation, party, work. A very well-known school poem by Pavlos Sioutis goes:

Who secured your mouth shut
Who tamed you, beast?
A giant, the Party,
Who beats all enemies.

Spyros Tzias (born 1918), from Sophratika of Dropoli, whose story *Τα πέντε γράμματα* [The five letters]¹¹ was translated into six languages, wrote a series of monographs in Greek on the heroes of the anti-Fascist struggle and two widely read novels: *Το παρτιζάνικο νοσοκομείο* [The guerrilla hospital] (1967) and *Το Δροπολίτικο χρονικό* [The Dropolitiko chronicle] (1989). He too followed Socialist Realism in his writings and promoted Communist ideology.

Another writer of this period is Yiannis Panos (1917-1989),¹² known for an elegy about Lefteris Talios, as well as for a poetry collection entitled *Το τρα-*

¹⁰ The College of Education in Argyrokastro started offering classes in the academic year 1955-56 and the first teachers graduated in 1959.

¹¹ Published in Tirana (1957) by the State Publishing Company.

¹² In his poem *Μετά τη μάχη* [After the battle], published in *Λαϊκό Βήμα* (31-12-59),

γούδι του Βούρκου [The song of Vourkos] (1962). Panos was a poet of the Socialist regime. Vassilis Kotsias (born 1940) is connected with the younger, post-1960 generation. His poem entitled "To the Statue of Liberty", published in *Λαϊκό Βήμα* (28-10-84), appears to be strongly connected with Karyotakis' poem *Στο Άγαλμα της Ελευθερίας που φωτίζει τον κόσμο* [To the Statue of Liberty lighting the world].

The books of the minority Greeks were published in Tirana by the same publisher as those of other Albanians, including Naim Fraseri,¹³ Albania's national bard, and they were printed in Argyrokastró. A special committee chose two or three books every year, mostly collections of poetry. But many authors had no possibility of publishing there, either because they were considered "friendly to the Greeks" or because such stigma burdened their families. For that reason, the literary page of *Λαϊκό Βήμα* gave expression, mainly in an allegorical way, to whatever was otherwise inexpressible: for example, *Το σεντούκι* [The chest], a story by Photos Kyriazatis; free verse poems by Andreas Zarbalas; and *Η νοσταλγία για τη λευτεριά* [Nostalgia for freedom] by Telemachos Kotsias. Of course, a great thrust to creative writing was given by the appearance of the separate *Λογοτεχνικό Λαϊκό Βήμα*.

Any attempt to assess the literature of Northern Epirus stumbles upon the political and national dichotomy of the land and its people. Firstly, the writers who identified themselves with the Communist ideals as they were formed in Albania by the Enver Hodja regime followed the principles of Socialist Realism, glorified reality and extolled the regime. Secondly, those who followed a path of silent resistance, and struggled for the preservation of the Greek language, reverted to allegory and cryptic writing, and came against a refusal to publishing their works. Specific reference should be made to Photos Kyriazatis (born 1942),¹⁴ from Lazati of Aghioi Saranda. In 1964 he published his first collection of poetry but he soon came into conflict with the regime and was imprisoned. Photos Kyriazatis, with his book *Κραυγή στη νύχτα* [A cry in the

the atmosphere shows the continuation of social life after the battle, the brotherhood and equality among men and women, Christians and Muslims, as well as the freedom that offers to all people new opportunities.

¹³ Learned poet of the nineteenth century, who studied at the Zosimaia School of Ioannina and wrote in Greek katharevousa the poem *Ο αληθής πόθος των Σκιπετάρων* [The true yearning of the Skipetari], in which he describes the necessary segregations and conditions of mutual respect that must prevail for Albanians, Greeks and Serbs to live peacefully together in the region.

¹⁴ His poem *Πρωινό στο Βούρκο* [Morning in Vourkos], published in *Λαϊκό Βήμα* (15-4-82), shows the new lyricism that appears with the younger generation of poets.

night] (1991), a forcible “account of doom and hope from Northern Epirus” as he himself describes his work, is noted for his “vigorous and intense style, sometimes excessive, but always capable of using a softer tone”,¹⁵ according to Christoforos Milionis’ critique of his poetry.

Andreas Zarbalas,¹⁶ from Lazati of Aghioi Saranda, published his first poetry collection, *Επιμένουμε* [We insist], in 1981. With his poetry collection *101 Ποιήματα για μια χούφτα τόπο* [101 poems for a handful of earth] (1992), which was written in 1972 and remained unpublished until liberation, Zarbalas became a key figure in the Greek minority. He used free verse as a symbol of his free spirit. He used a lot of traditional elements with a metaphoric and allegoric approach. He invented a place in his native land, calling it his “topos”, which represents a centre of collective identity, and he flashes back from the present time to the past.

Vassilis Gizelis (born 1938), with his poetry collections *Δύσκολη πορεία* [Hard march] (1991), *Ελευθεριάδα* [Eleftheriade] (1992) and *Βαλκανιάδα* [Balkaniade] (1993), is one of those who resorted to publication of their work in Greece. After he and his family suffered persecution, he spent his life in exile in the north of Albania, and he settled in Greece in 1990.

Telemachos Kotsias (born 1951) escaped to Greece in 1991 and published a collection of short stories entitled *Περιστατικό τα μεσάνυχτα* [Midnight incident] (1991). His prose writing resembles oral narratives and enables Greek readers to gain a better understanding of what life under the Communist regime was really like. Kotsias’ style is simple but not naïve. He gradually became a kind of spokesman for the Greek minority, although he lives in Greece, because his book recalls his previous life and experience.

Nikos Katsalidas (born 1949),¹⁷ from Pano Lessinitza of Aghioi Saranda, is considered one of the most interesting writers of the Greek minority, especially for his appeal to both Albanian and Greek readers. He first appeared as an Albanian poet of the young generation, and his work was mainly written in Albanian. He continued his work by using his mother tongue as well as Albanian and shows an interesting mixture of both cultures in his poetry.

¹⁵ Christoforos Milionis, *Η Καθημερινή* (6-3-1994), p. 31.

¹⁶ In the poem *Παππούς* [Grandfather], published in *Λαϊκό Βήμα* (23-5-85), the poet Andreas Zarbalas composed in free verse but otherwise used themes from the folk tradition (often as metaphors for present events) and a clear style.

¹⁷ The poem *Η ακοίμητη καντήλα* [Vigilant olive-oil lamp], published in *Λαϊκό Βήμα* (28-10-84), shows the continuation of hope for liberation through the metaphoric appearance of the Virgin Mary and the vigilant olive-oil lamp symbolising salvation.

Katsalidas is the most productive of all poets in the Greek minority; he is also known as an essayist in connection with writers of his native land.

It is interesting to see that the above authors' mature works register the dire experiences of Hellenism in Northern Epirus and demonstrate the cultural gathering around the values of the folk tradition, which was always the great school of the people in Northern Epirus, cut off as they were from Greece and from the developments taking place there. But if at first it strikes one as a retrospective, even naïve literature, upon closer examination this literature is transformed into a rich source of revived traditional values that have long been lost from the rest of Greek literature. Perhaps the most important literary contribution of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus is its response to the challenge of the most essential elements of Greek tradition – not in the spirit of a stagnant return to the picturesque, but in the spirit of a creative exchange that imparts to Greek literature its lost traditional values.

Ninety years have passed since the Great Powers divided Epirus in two, almost sixty years since the government of Albania first tried a policy of Albanisation of the Greek minority, and fourteen years since democracy opened up Pandora's box. What will happen to these Greeks? Is Greek culture in the region a matter of the past? In the land where Greek culture flourished, where, at Moschopolis, the first Greek printing press was established, Hellenism is now shrinking. Silence and escape are the dominant means of survival. In the not so distant past one could end up in prison for saying that one saw a dream in which he killed Stalin. This actually happened to the father of Telemachos Kotsias, who was sentenced in 1960 to five years in prison. Maybe this does not happen now. In the past they buried poems underground in tin cans, as Andreas Zarbalas did. This does not happen now either. What does actually happen is that people worry about living through the next day, that many have to flee in order to find means of survival, that those who stay have little to hope for. Escape through literature has been tragically transformed into a literal escape.

The preceding discussion urges us to consider our responsibility, as academics, toward the preservation of the relevant material. The first step is the creation of a database that will allow scholars from different disciplines to collect, reflect on and disseminate the cultural production of the Greek minority in Northern Epirus.

