

Continuities and discontinuities: Kostis Palamas' cultural politics at the end of the nineteenth century

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I will start with an attempt to define the broad term of cultural politics. Cultural politics is a vision and a strategy that may be performed by anyone whose voice has some power to reach others, especially large audiences. It is expressed through a discourse (whether expository, argumentative, literary or other) which comprises certain signs, techniques, claims, in order to diffuse specific ideas; in its accomplished function, it aims to propose patterns for the understanding of social, cultural and political life or even ways of organizing it. The arrangement of the cultural and political agenda may involve equally matters of great importance as well as more trivial ones, depending on the scope of the initiator.

In Greece, the cultural and political agenda since the late nineteenth century had been informed by a populist discourse.¹ I will not go into detail about how populism may penetrate different fields, and how it addresses all the crucial issues that are related to the notion of national identity.² I will just underline at this point that at the end of the nineteenth century, it was mainly expressed through the ideological movement of demoticism of which Kostis Palamas was a key figure.³ Palamas was a recognized poet, critic and a fervent supporter of the use of the demotic language in literature. He acted as a leader for a group of other poets – some were his followers, others viewed him more competitively– and his work appeared in literary journals as well as in editions which were able to reach many more than the immediate circle of friends and colleagues. However, it should be pointed out that he has not remained attached to a single movement, trend or ideology –as many studies of his work have demonstrated. His thought rather picked incessantly new ideas; he attended to the demands of his era, presenting through his work personal and collective visions and ideals. For this reason, I believe that Palamas' work projects an ingenious individuality; as a creator and as an intellectual figure he managed to overcome the traps of populist discourse. He expressed through his poetic work a comprehensive vision for Modern Greece.

Another important point that needs to be stressed is that Palamas' poetic work cannot be read in isolation from his critical work, for it is in his critical essays that the reader may find important 'keys' for understanding his poetry. Would it be fair to talk about the idea of a specific agenda? The lyrical self of the poetic persona expresses desire for the artistic freedom through the creation of poetry while the thinker/intellectual comments about all things pertaining to culture and society.⁴ But even this concept seems too schematic to describe the diversity and depth of his thought and the different aspects of his work.

We are accustomed to consider Cavafy as the poet of history, but Palamas is also a poet who visits history and different historical periods. Dimitris Tziouvas suggested that

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¹ (Leontis 1991, 192)

² (ibid)

³ See Liakos 2008

⁴ Palamas had assumed the role of the 'official' critic of literature with numerous articles which reviewed the work of predecessors as well as his contemporary writers in Greek and European literature. See Apostolidou 1992.

Palamas can be described as a mediator between the past and the future, securing the past achievements and using creatively all those elements from the past that must survive, transformed if necessary, in order to respond to the needs of the present.⁵ The poet himself declared in the prologue of his major work *Ο Δωδεκάλογος του Γύφτου* (The Twelve Lays of the Gypsy) that he was a ‘poet of his time and his race’, suggesting a preoccupation with the present time circumstances; this pronouncement also implied that he viewed himself as the spokesman of his era.⁶ In my opinion, the poem with title «Ύμνος των Αιώνων» (Hymn of the Centuries) manages to activate a dialogue between the present, past and future that clearly betrays the poet’s preoccupation with the existential necessity concerning the Greek identity. It acts as a metonymy of his cultural vision and plan. For these reasons, I have chosen to focus my analysis on this poem.

Blaise Pascal aptly wrote in his *Pensées* that

[most of us] wander in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; [...] Let each of us [he explained], examine his thoughts; he will find them wholly concerned with the past or the future. We almost never think of the present, and if we do think of it, it is only to see what light it throws on our plans for the future. The present is never our end. The past and the present are our means, the future alone our end”.⁷

It was almost mandatory for a country like Greece to keep the preoccupation with the past among its dominant concerns; after all, in the collective imagination, it was exactly the classical past that made the Greek cause of liberation sympathetic and worthy of support to the philhellenic parts of the Great Europe. Palamas’ use of the past, in this poem, however, escapes the established representation patterns of the period, i.e. veneration of the classical past followed by skepticism for the more recent past. Furthermore, it transgresses the dualism of purism and demoticism and their respective ideologies. It depicts a reality which carries a progressive message of acceptance and closure. I will attempt to be more specific.

First of all, let me address the methodological concern of examining a single poem out of a vast collection of works. How can we read it and how can we validate the interpretation that a single poem proposes to us as opposed to a more comprehensive study? It is evident, of course, that the close examination of a single poem (or a single work of fiction) does not exclude the knowledge of the rest of the work of an author; on the contrary, it considers it indispensable. Secondly, the timing of the writing and publication of this poem gives it a particular significance; at the time of the first modern Olympics in Greece and on the eve of the wars of 1897, it appears during a period of turmoil, reorientation and possibly new beginnings whether auspicious or not. Thus it emerges as a token expression of a certain period and of very valid considerations: is Greece the nation that defends its inheritance in the best possible way through the organizing and hosting of the modern Olympics or the nation which carelessly squanders valuable financial resources chasing a revival of the past? The poet himself was not immune to this atmosphere of ambivalence. The event of the Olympics preoccupied him. Having composed the Olympic Hymn in 1895, he went on to suggest, in the aftermath of the Olympics, that the expenditure was too heavy to bear and that the nation faced bankruptcy and a possible military catastrophe (in his 1897 article «Αι σκιάι των

⁵ (Tziovas 2005, 149-150)

⁶ (Palamas 1962-1969/Γ’, 292)

⁷ Borrowed from the “Introduction: No Time like the Present” of Calotychos 2003, 1.

προγόνων», The Shadows of the Ancestors).⁸ Thus, he seemed to lean more towards a skeptical and realistic attitude with regards the grand narrative of the revival of past glories. Palamas, as we know, always kept the ideal of strengthening the national identity at the core of his work, literary and critical, but did not believe that the irredentist dream was the only valid way forward for achieving this aim.⁹

The historical context and the issues that were at stake at that time, suggest that the poem, even as an isolated piece of work, acquires a particular significance. However, the poem is not only a response to the circumstances of the period; what one would name ‘poetry of the circumstances’ (περιστασιακή ποίηση). It seems to incorporate more lasting and crucial questions. Faced with the choice of different legacies it questions which one should be supported the most by modern Greeks and why? In the words of Peter Mackridge, “the cultural heritages of the nation are partly a matter of choice on the part of intellectual and political elites. The decision to adopt or to emphasize a particular heritage is a gamble with high stakes”.¹⁰ What does this poem propose? First, let us be reminded of the poem which I include below. I am also including an English translation:

Ὕμνος τῶν αἰῶνων¹¹

Μητέρα μας πολύπαθη, ὦ ἀθάνατη,
δεν εἶναι μόνο σου στολίδι οἱ Παρθενῶνες·
του συντριμμῶ σου τὰ σπαθιά στα κάμανε
φυλαχτά και στεφάνια σου οἱ αἰῶνες.

Και οἱ πέτρες που τις ἔστησε στο χῶμα σου
το νικηφόρο χέρι του Ρωμαίου,
κ’ ἡ σταυροθόλωτη ἐκκλησιά ἀπὸ το Βυζάντιο,
στον τόπο του πολύστυλου ναοῦ του ἀρχαίου,

Κι αὐτὸ το κάστρο που μουγγρίζει μέσα του
τῆς Βενετίας ἀκόμη το λιοντάρι,
κι ὁ μιναρές που στέκει, τῆς ολόμαυρης
και τῆς πικρότατης σκλαβιάς ἀπομεινάρη,

Και του Σλάβου το διάβα ἀντιλαλούμενο
στ’ ὄνομα που μας ἔρχεται στο στόμα
-με το γάλα τῆς μάννας που βυζιάξαμε-
σαν ξένη ἀνθοβολία στο ντόπιο χῶμα,

Ὅλα ἓνα νύφης φόρεμα σου υφαίνουνε,
σου πρέπουνε, ὦ βασίλισσα, σα στέμμα,
στην ὁμορφάδα σου ὁμορφιά ἀπιθῶσανε
κ’ εἶναι σα σπλάχνα ἀπ’ το δικό σου το αἷμα.

Ὡ τίμια φυλαχτά, στολίδια ἀταίριαστα,
ὦ διαβατάρικα, ἀπὸ σας πλάθεται αἰῶνια,
κόσμος ἀπὸ παλιά κοσμοσυντρίμματα,
ἡ νέα τρανή Πατρίδα ἡ παναρμόνια!

⁸ (Palamas 1962-1969/ IΕ’, 446)

⁹ Let us remember, for example, among other key works, his important essay entitled «Πατριδολατρεία» (Adoration of the Homeland) which appeared in 1926. In this essay, he attempted to analyze what defines the Greek identity, what are the components that combined create the specific character of the Greek nation and explain in what way the Greek nation differed from the rest of Europe (Palamas 1962-1969/ II’, 58).

¹⁰ (Mackridge 2011-2012, 15).

¹¹ (Palamas 1962-1969/E’, 309).

Hymn of the Centuries

Dear Mother, long-suffering, oh immortal,
it is not Parthenons your only ornament-
the very swords of your defeat have become
charms and wreaths by the centuries

And those stones placed in your soil
by the victorious hand of the Roman
and the cross-shaped church from Byzantium
in the place of the multi-coloured ancient temple,

And the castle in which moans still inside it
the lion from Venice,
and the minaret which stands as a relic
of the bitter black slavery,

And the crossing of the Slav echoing
in the name that comes to mouth
-with the milk that we sucked from mother-
Like a foreign blossom in a local soil,

All these they weave a bridal dress,
they suit you, oh queen, like a crown,
they have posited beauty in your beauty
and they are like offsprings/innards from your own blood

Oh honest charms, unmatched ornaments,
oh fleeting, from you is created eternally,
a world from old relics,
the new grand all-harmonious Motherland!¹²

The poem “Hymn of the Centuries” appeared in the newspaper *Asty* on the 25th of December 1896, and it was later included in the 1912 collection *Η Πολιτεία κι η Μοναξιά* (The City and Loneliness). A poetic voice which appears to be timeless crosses different epochs and weaves a poetic synthesis with the history of mother Greece being presented as an artifact, a bridal dress. The bridal dress itself, perhaps the most significant garment one would wear in the span of a lifetime, alludes to the future times ahead (a type of union and the possibility of new offspring). The rich and varied history of Greece thus becomes through the poetic skill a synthesis in which all the historical periods are mentioned without allowing a privileged position to a single one. The glorious Classical past is relativized from the beginning of the poem through the declaration “it is not Parthenons your only ornament”. In the poem there is also mention of the Roman and Byzantine period, the Venetian rule, the Ottoman Occupation, as well as the Slavic conquests. The poetic subject accepts and embraces in an equal footing all the symbolic and material manifestations of the Occupation his land had endured. The most striking confirmation is the acceptance of the Slavic presence in Greece (in the fourth stanza).

Fallmerayer had suggested first in 1830 that due to Slavic presence in Greece there was no racial or cultural link between ancient Greeks and the modern inhabitants of Greece. Both Konstantine Paparrigopoulos and Nikolaos Politis had responded to those claims with the affirmation that “the connections between ancient and modern Greece were not the result

¹² The translation is mine. I must thank Prof. Edmund Keeley for reading it and offering some suggestions.

of an artificial revival, but of a natural survival”,¹³ something which the poem seems to confirm with its reference to the ‘suitable placement’ (‘σου πρέπουνε’) of all past incidents in a comprehensive synthesis. Nothing is foreign in this synthesis as it becomes naturalized in the Greek soil: ‘σπλάγχνα απ’ το δικό σου αίμα’ (innards from your own blood). The poetic framework seems to make acceptable all the wounds in the nation’s history, allowing even the discontinuities to be part of the whole. Thus the poetic voice does not refute the Slavic presence but reaffirms the official historical line of the period according to which the spirit of Hellenism absorbed weaker and inferior cultures such as the Slavic one.¹⁴

Another striking feature of this poem is the plural “Parthenons”. What could it mean? Does the poetic voice see a miracle comparable to Parthenon in all the achievements of the long history of Greece? This thought would imply that not only the positive landmarks, the conquests, the traditions, and the institutions that survived are worthy to be remembered and celebrated, but also the dark periods which inflicted wounds to the national ‘body’ but helped, nonetheless, the process of development and expansion. Does it suggest simply the different lives of the classical monument which like the motherland has taken many incarnations throughout the years emphasizing the nation’s long history? Does it refer to all the surrounding buildings of the monument during the different historical periods before the purification process?



“An eighteenth century representation of the Parthenon and the surrounding buildings on the Athenian Acropolis”¹⁵

Despite its symbolist obscurity, the plural implies a more conciliatory tone between different epochs, different ideologies and expectations. Moreover, in accordance with the rest of the poem, it makes acceptable the material manifestations of the Occupation of Greece by

¹³ (Mackridge 2011-2012, 15)

¹⁴ (Hamilakis 2007, 116)

¹⁵ Illustration by W. Pars, from Stuart, J. and Revett, N. 1787, *The Antiquities of Athens*, Vol. 2, plate 1. Reproduced from Hamilakis, as cited above, p. 89.

foreign invaders.

In any case, it becomes apparent that this rather striking poem attempts to construct in a poetic framework a collective and meaningful sense of time and space. It manifests attachment to the Hellenic landscape and the belief in the possibility of a timeless community living in harmony with it, having incorporated in a positive way all the dark periods of the past.¹⁶ The poet creates in a concrete form a ‘gift poem’ for the motherland, applying his poetic skill to serve a noble cause; it is rather like a ceremonial process in which the creator not only observes, but also actively participates, describes and crowns the motherland. It is important to be reminded that a large part of Palamas’ work, like this poem, can be assigned to the ethnosymbolist theory for which “the connection of the past to the present and future can never constitute a single one-way causal relationship”; for ethnosymbolism, it is through different kinds of links –such as the landscape, a specific language, common myths of ancestry and historical memories– depending on external circumstance and the resources of a community that takes place the formation of a national culture.¹⁷

Thus, the poem aims to transform the materiality of the suffering into an agency for progress. Furthermore, metaphorically, we may recognize in this formalistic poetry something of the echo of the Great Idea. According to this project “the process of Greekness was declared ‘unfinished’ in 1844 (and this seemed valid also in the eve of 1897); in the logic of the Great Idea the missing segments of Greek earth had to be discovered and integrated into the centralized nation-state to complete an organic self-regulated Greece as ‘incarnated artwork, art made life’”.¹⁸ The ideal of the creation of a harmonious whole remains, however, almost utopian but the hope is strong as a lasting feeling, giving credibility to the poetic voice. This is inscribed in the poem itself which aims to invoke and compel the fragmentation of time and space, «κόσμος από παλιά κοσμοσυντρίμματα» (world of old relics), in order to make it compatible with a new formation. The poem projects in equal measures hope and hidden concern. It attempts to exorcise the anticipated troubled times. Despite the grandiose tone, the ambivalence about the ‘success’ of the vision may be perceived in the less than harmonious rhyming. The poem does not become the ideal of the song that the poet always aspired but it manages to emphasize, despite this absence, its symbolist construction (violence and peace alternate through very obvious symbolisms). The poetic voice carries a double weight. It expresses a dynamic way of reading the past; it recalls periods of rupture, crisis and dislocation and reevaluates the past with the aim to propose the way forward, both in political and cultural terms.

Palamas’ dialogue with the past and the future betrays his desire to act as a national figure. The connection between politics and poetry has remained salient for Greek society. It is not without significance the fact that Palamas’ poetry appears often in the internet as an example of patriotic stance –even by bloggers of different orientations, right wing or religious orientation, for example. However, it is mainly Cavafy, Palamas’ counterpart, with whom Greek politicians of our time choose to address each other, in order to validate their arguments with the symbolic power of the past, reminding us how closely linked poetry remains to the political discourse.¹⁹ This example also shows that “Greeks tend to focus on

¹⁶ For the connection between landscape and communities, see also Leontis 1991, 192.

¹⁷ (Smith 2001, 83)

¹⁸ (Calotychos 2001, 87), (Lambropoulos 1993, 82)

¹⁹ (Stallings 2012)

their distant past rather than their present or their recent past”,²⁰ something which Palamas tried to remedy with his work. He was a skillful poet, who could visit and transform the past with his poetry, without forgetting the present. He aimed to create the much needed national narrative of the nation-state in its modernity.

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²⁰ (Mackridge 2011-2012, 18).