The Other Self
Selfhood and Society in Modern Greek Fiction

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Preface

Having taught modern Greek fiction for a number of years, I have come to the realization that a book on the subject is urgently needed as students constantly complain about the lack of studies on individual novels or on Greek fiction as a whole. As there is an increasing interest in Greek fiction and a growing number of English translations, the need for a scholarly study of the Greek novel becomes more apparent. This study attempts to address such a need and to offer a fresh look at some key texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

This book has two related starting points. The first is the gradual transition of Greek culture from the notion of community to an increased emphasis on the individual, and the other is the postmodern challenge to rigid totalities and grand narratives by emphasizing relativity and subjectivity. This book seeks to map out the transformation of Greek society and its impact on recent Greek fiction and at the same time to embark on a rereading of the Greek narrative canon. The readings in this volume are not intended to cancel out earlier ones, but to show how the interpretation of literary texts might be adjusted to the cultural and ideological developments of each period.

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Introduction

Fiction has been described as the 'Cinderella' of modern Greek literature and in the past it attracted little interest from scholars and translators. Apart from Nikos Kazantzakis, who enjoys international status, few modern Greek writers are well known outside the country. Greece has traditionally been considered as a culture of poetry, including poets who achieved global reputation and influence (e.g., C. P. Cavafy) even—in two cases—becoming Nobel laureates (George Seferis, Odysseas Elytis). Prose writers have remained for years the underdogs of Greek literature and with the exception of Kostas Tachtis, whose Third Wedding is the only modern Greek novel to have been published by Penguin, or Vassilis Vassilikos, who owes his reputation partly to the success of the film Z and has been widely translated, other writers are little known on the international stage.

Over recent years there has been an explosion of fiction in Greece as publishers and the public turn their attention away from poetry to fiction. This transition is indeed telling in respect of recent cultural developments and may throw light on deeper changes in Greek society at the turn of the twentieth century. The reassessment of fiction has even extended to the past and rehabilitated undeservedly forgotten novels of the nineteenth century such as O Polypathis, which is discussed in this volume.

This growing emphasis on and reevaluation of Greek fiction has been accompanied by an increasing scholarly interest. However, this has been focused on studies of a historical or bibliographical nature rather than on an analysis of the novels themselves. In other words, though the resurgence of

1. In this respect the anthology and author-by-author overview of Greek fiction from 1830 to 1967 published by Sokolis Publications in twenty-seven volumes from 1988 to 1999 is indeed a very useful reference tool, but it does not offer close readings or rigorous analyses of the novels.
interest in Greek fiction has rightly diverted attention to unduly neglected writers, it has not produced, as one would expect, sufficient new readings of novels to highlight the complexity and subtlety of Greek fiction and thus shake off its image as the poor relative of poetry. Hence, there are few books, even in Greek, which focus on analyzing and interpreting the novels, as most studies still concentrate on the study of literary context and do not engage in close readings of the novels themselves. As a result there is a dearth of scholarly readings of Greek novels and readers still have to rely on outdated analyses, while in English the only book available on Greek fiction is a volume of conference proceedings published in 1988. Although in recent decades some interesting narratological or comparative approaches on Greek authors or genres have appeared, new and challenging interpretations of key Greek narrative texts are few and far between in book form.

On the other hand, in recent years a trend has emerged among younger scholars toward a modernist or even postmodernist reassessment of early twentieth-century and more recent texts or authors (Dimosthenis Voutiras, Melpo Axioti, Yannis Skarimbas, N. G. Pentzikis, Nikos Kachtis). It tends to establish an alternative, nonrealist, western-oriented canon due to the rather formalist, self-referential, and noncontextual approach employed. The aim is to elicit the nonrepresentational character of certain texts and to show that they do not lag that far behind other European experimental narratives. Though it has contributed significantly to reviving interest in Greek fiction and to reshaping the contours of Greek modernism, this trend risks going too far in the westernization of Greek fiction and attempting to build a tradition of modernist or experimental fiction in Greece out of isolated texts and cases, ignoring historical complexities and cultural specificities. Though acknowledging these two trends (the historical/contextualist on the one hand and the nonrepresentational/self-referential on the other), the present study attempts to cut through and transcend them, arguing that they are either excessively historical with insufficient analysis of the texts themselves or too formalist with insufficient emphasis on thematic interpretation.

In this study various manifestations of identity are explored and successive stages in the development of the Greek fictional autobiography are traced: the picaresque (O Polypáthis), Bildungsroman (Leonis and The Sun of Death), and the women's novel of self-discovery and awakening (Fool's Gold and Achilles' Fiancée). Although the novels discussed here range from the picaresque to the confessional, most of them can be described as novels of formation that try to maintain a balance between society and selfhood. Following Marianne Hirsch's argument, this study treats the novel of formation as situated between these two genres:

While the picaresque novel is turned outward toward society and the confessional novel is turned inward toward consciousness, the novel of formation maintains a peculiar balance between the social and the personal and explores their interaction.

One of the main features of the novel of formation is that it focuses on one central character and his/her development within the context of a defined social order. By and large the novels discussed here share this feature, and, therefore, can be seen as belonging to this broad category and its related genres.

This volume does not aspire to offer a comprehensive study of the Greek novel, but a close reading of some key texts of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, addressing questions of self-identity, autobiography, and the role of society in determining the development of an individual character. In the past the emphasis has been placed on contextual analyses and some readings here attempt to show that a different approach is also possible. They are intended to offer alternative insights into important Greek novels and to challenge readings that are informed either by heroic, and at times even ethnocentric, approaches or that focus exclusively on the self of the protagonist and thus ignore the historical context. For example, O Polypáthis has been read simply as the Greek version of Gil Blas, namely as the adventures of a constantly displaced rogue and not as a national allegory. On the other hand, Vasilis Arvanitis' and Freedom and Death have been read from a male and patriotic perspective that treated the protagonists as national heroes and not as vulnerable individuals with an identity crisis. Alexandros Papadimitriou's The Murderess has also been read more as social drama than as the drama of an individual consciousness while Dimitris Hatzis's stories have been read as social portraits, ignoring the bitter and frustrating loneliness of the characters. It might be argued that some of the texts discussed in this book, however popular or canonical they might be, should now be considered old-fashioned by dint of being closer to the realist tradition and less innovative in terms of narrative technique. Yet such texts can more clearly demonstrate how alternative readings can be applied to Greek fiction and how they can acquire a new lease of life.


My aim in this study is not simply to reverse or deconstruct the existing readings of these texts, but to show that different interpretations can emerge depending on the perspective adopted. So far the context within which these texts have been read has dictated their readings and thus historical, patriotic, or social approaches have prevailed. What links the novels under discussion in this book is that almost all of them have protagonists who really stand out and engage with their context in different ways while negotiating their subjectivity. Most of these characters are defiant, eccentric, or nonconformist and tackle the challenges of their society in an absorbing way.

Greek fiction is thought of as lacking memorable characters. In spite of this it is still possible to trace the construction of selfhood and the development of individuality by studying the ways in which individuals conform to or more often resist social conventions. Individual freedom and social constraints are at odds in a number of the novels included in this study, and by exploring this conflict I hope to throw a different light on Greek fiction as a whole. Focusing on the characters, their autobiographies, identities, or their psychological makeup is one way of reconsidering these texts from a different and fresh point of view. This does not mean ignoring the context, but finding new ways of exploring forms of engagement between self and society. Hence, this study is as much about decontextualizing as it is about contextualizing the self. By exploring the construction of subjectivity from a psychoanalytical rather than an historical or ethnographic perspective, the texts discussed yield new and challenging readings.

In this respect recontextualization involves rereading texts by setting them in a new framework, by approaching them from a different perspective and with a fresh set of theoretical principles in mind. Though I am not espousing the 'new historicist' notion that literature needs to be studied in relation to the social context in which it was written, neither am I completely rejecting this idea. Contexts can be restrictive but they can also be liberating as long as we treat them as constantly replenishing and reconstituting themselves. By placing a text in a different historical, social, or intellectual context new interpretations can emerge that may highlight the subtlety of the texts.

The study of the Greek novel needs this kind of recontextualization in order to show its polyphony and diversity. The aim of this book, therefore, is to demonstrate that Greek fiction has a richness and complexity that deserves serious study for the insights it offers that other kinds of writing cannot. The readings here do not aspire to be canonistic or definitive, but aim to show that Greek fiction is informed by the dialogics of self and context, individuality and society. This study does not aim to privilege the self over the context or vice versa. Therefore it may be useful to outline its theoretical premises by looking into how selfhood has been perceived over the centuries. Here the focus will be on western perceptions of selfhood whereas in the next chapter it will be on Greek attitudes to individuality.

Western medieval philosophy defined personhood in terms of the relationship to God, and the concept of the soul evolved into a forerunner of the concept of the inner self. The main reason for the relative indifference to individuality during this period was the firm Christian view of "life on earth as imitative or derivative of the ultimate, otherworldly realities." As John Lyons points out "before the fulcrum of the mid-eighteenth century the point of personal narrative was to make one's peace with God; afterward it was to make one's peace with himself." With Enlightenment secularization and rationalism, the focus of the ideals about personhood shifted from the will of God to the rational mind. Premised on Cartesian dualities of mind/body and self/other, individualistic ideologies embarked on the pursuit of personal freedom and autonomy as a substitute for theological doctrine. Bentham, Mill, and Rousseau "saw society as the aggregate of individuals striving to maximize self-interest, and perceived the social as a threat to authentic, independent self-realization." The Enlightenment's oppositional dichotomy that prioritizes the individual over society, formed the basis of liberal individualism. Secularization, rationalism, and individualism have contributed to the western idea that the self is an innate property and personal responsibility. This essentialist ideal in respect of the inherent qualities of selfhood has been challenged over the years and the self is no longer treated as a permanent essence but as protean and constantly reinvented.1

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4. With the exception of O Polypthias, Katodikos, and To Diplo Vivito all the texts considered here are available in English translation.


6. John O. Lyons, The Invention of the Self: The Hinge of Consciousness in the Eighteenth Century (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 55. Lyons argues that the self was invented shortly after the middle of the eighteenth century and perhaps the new focus on the self during this period "is a compensation for the realization that the individual is such a mine before the carelessnes of natural and historical laws" (p. 39). See also Aaron Gurevich, The Origins of European Individualism, trans. by Katharine Judekohn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).


8. Richard Bennett in The Fall of Public Man (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974) argues that "before the 19th century, the real close to the self was not thought to be a realm for the expression of unique or distinctive personality" (p. 89).

9. Jean-François Lyotard in his influential book The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) argues that "a self does not amount to much, but no self is an island: each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at nodal points of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be" (p. 15).
According to Michael R. Wood and Louis A. Zurcher “the fundamental assumption of modernity, which ran through Western civilization since the sixteenth century, was that the social unit of society was the person, rather than the city, the tribe, the guild, or the group.” Over the last two centuries there has been a radical change in the meaning of the individual from being to a self, and from eternalism (being) to temporalism (becoming). The relationship of the single self to society underwent a crisis during the nineteenth century. The individual could no longer be equated with his or her position in society. According to Roy F. Baumeister “the growing belief that inner selves were different from overt behavior also detached the individual from the position in society. People came to believe in an inner self separate from the social self. Social mobility and belief in internality thus undermined the belief that the person was equated with social position.” Gradually, and more particularly during the nineteenth century, individuality came to mean something inner and hidden which is in long-term conflict with society:

The point is that Western culture increasingly placed a value on private, inner experience, and this value was connected to individuality. . . . Indeed, during the Victorian era (the late nineteenth century), the private family home became a bulwark against the chaotic and threatening world of public society. Rugged individualism, disillusionment with society, the secularized work ethic of competitive capitalism, and the emphasis on family life—all of these expressed the belief that it was now up to the individual to define the meaning of his own life; society had let him down by failing to do it for him. Fulfillment was associated with private, even inner, life—with individuality.

Thus, identity has been equated since the nineteenth century with the hidden, inner and, in turn, true self, though the former represents the latter’s definition and interpretation. The contemporary sense of the self based on the notions of impulse and process is similar to the “untrammelled self” of nineteenth-century Romanticism that was a self of spirit, feeling, and transcendence. Indeed, Romanticism promoted the idea of the essential or authentic self that has to be recovered and expressed. Later, however, as a reaction to Romanticism “the idea develops that a self is something that one creates, makes up, so that every life should be an art work whose creator is, in some sense, his or her own greatest creation.” The two major dominants in the western world, cultural humanism and economic capitalism, share a similar conception of the relation of the individual to the social whole. For humanism the individual is unique and autonomous, also partaking of general human nature, and for capitalism the celebration of individualism conceals methods of mass manipulation and conformity. Both humanist and capitalist notions of selfhood and subjectivity have been called into question by the ‘decentering’ trend of postmodernism.

This study does not seek to retrieve an authentic selfhood, but treats subjectivity as an undetermined, productive instance that is simultaneously dependent on a social and cultural structure. It puts forward a relational concept of identity where sameness and otherness are not mutually exclusive, but are recognized as equally important aspects of an effective sense of self. Replacing ontology with discourse as the foundation of individuality, the self is presented here as continuously shifting and dialogic. It is essentially constituted within a social context.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic conception of the self balances and brings closer the constituent parts of older dualities such as self/other, individual/society, identity/difference. Instead of focusing on one pole of the opposition or trying to highlight their conflict, the dialogic conception of this duality emphasizes their interaction and their antagonistic or symbiotic encounter. Therefore, this study is not trying to privilege any of the constituent agents of the polarities mentioned above, but to explore how all these agents operate in the texts under discussion. Dialogism seeks the liminal self that is enacted on the boundaries of self and other, identity and diversity, with each dialogic partner defining the other through varying degrees of contextual power. As Bakhtin himself has put it: “A person has no internal sovereign territory, he is wholly and always on the boundary; looking inside himself, he looks into the eyes of another or with the eyes of another. . . . I cannot become myself without another. I must find myself in another by finding another in myself (in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance).”

12. Baumeister, op. cit., p. 145. According to Georg Simmel, On Individuality and Social Forms, Selected Writings, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) the notion of individuality in the eighteenth century differs from that of nineteenth-century Romanticism. In the first, the emphasis is on what people have in common; “the idea of a uniform human nature that is present in everyone and that only requires freedom for its emergence” (p. 272). In the second, the emphasis lies on what separates people and the denial of equality. “By and large, one can say that the individualism of simply free personalities that are thought of as equal in principle has determined the rationalistic liberalism of France and England, whereas the individualism that is based on qualitative uniqueness and immutability is more a concern of the Germanic mind” (p. 225).
For Bakhtin the other “is formative of the self in the sense that one is not able to know oneself without the interacting presence of the other.” Similarly we come to know and understand texts and characters through the (re)reading capacity afforded by the otherness of the context(s). The other is the prism through which the world is refracted for the self and vice versa. The confluence of the self and other makes their boundaries fluid and cross-fertilization between them possible. Meaning is realized at the interstices of the self and other as each specifies and is grounded in the other.

As the title of this study suggests, it relies on the dialogical conception of the self and tries to go beyond the modernist centripetal tendencies on the one hand and the postmodern centrifugal tendencies on the other. Dialogism rejects the bias toward a dialectical synthesis and the privileging of the co-articulation of centripetal and centrifugal forces. By challenging the supremacy of the interiority of selfhood or its treatment as simply an outcome of the context, the dialogics of self perceives the self as ‘becoming’ on the boundaries of self and other, identity and difference. The ‘postmodern self’ may represent the shift from unity, cohesion and authenticity to dispersion, multiplicity, and contradiction, but this trend still presupposes the Enlightenment’s hegemony of the rational mind which, when faced with irreconcilable contradiction, collapses into fragmentation and multiplicity.

Modernity was involved in the project of mastery and determination of the other while postmodernity marks a shift in the priority of the self over the other. Underlying these shifts, according to Gerard Delanty, is a certain scepticism as to the durability of any narrative of the identity of the self: “The reinvention of the Self under the conditions of difference is one of the central tasks in the new ‘social’ postmodernism, a project which in fact can be seen as a return to the modern discourse of the Self, but under the conditions of a more radicalized reflexivity whereby a relational conception of the Self emerges.”

The dialogic alternative treats the forces of synthesis and dispersion, order and disorder as equal partners in a dynamic tension that enables the dialogical self to be unfinalizable, emergent, and ongoing. Bakhtin demolishes the notion of the atomic self and treats the self as essentially social and poly-

16. Terry Eagleton points out that “the sterilely familiar opposition between ‘humanist’ and ‘decentered’ subjects is quite misleading, since to be decentred in one sense of the term, constituted through and through by others, belongs to our human natures. It is by restoring this social dimension of subjectivity that we can avoid both the humanist mistake of simply modelling political solidarity along the lines of a singular self-determining subject, now suitably collectivized, but otherwise largely unaltered, and the nosology of a subject which suspends solidarity itself as some oppressively normalized consensus.” The Illusions of Postmodernism (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 91–92.
19. Ibid., 72.
20. Ibid., 2.
What I seek in the Word is the response of the other. What constitutes me as subject is my question.\(^{23}\)

In Lacan’s view, the ego cannot be centered on itself (as in ego psychology) because it is formed in an identification with an ‘other’ that produces the illusion of wholeness. William R. Handley argued that in Bakhtin as in Lacan the point “is not that the other gives the subject the truth about himself, but that the self’s self-understanding depends upon a certain untranslatability, a certain internalised foreignness.”\(^{24}\) For dialogism and psychoanalysis, the self emerges as the result of one’s identification and negotiation with or opposition to other(s). Though psychoanalysis is considered the apogee of the development of individualism in western culture, it shares with dialogism the notion of the self as relational and intersubjective.\(^{25}\)

The notion of the self is based on a decentered identity where it is thought of as located in a dynamic relational network. “By individuality,” as Ian Burkitt argues, “Bakhtin is not referring to something internal and given to self, but to the biography of an individual who has a social and historical location. A person will always bring something of his or her own biography and socially formed self into a dialogue with others.”\(^{26}\) Bakhtin’s dialogism suggests that the subject is constituted by both the self and the other, in and through its dialogical relations with others and the world at large. This study insists on the sociohistorical immersion of the subject retaining simultaneously a degree of freedom. In a Bakhtinian sense the self is caught, but not trapped by the context. The text is seen as the site in which the interaction and dialogic engagement between the self and the other, individuality and society is effected.

Like Bakhtin’s double-voiced discourse, this book is doubly directed towards subjectivity and context, self and other, and tries to show how the one is grafted onto the other. Having as its premise that dialogism is not a dualism, it acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the text in the same way the ‘other self’ seeks to highlight the unfinalizability of the characters. This study explores the other side(s) of the fictional characters, who, like writing, are not finalized objects of understanding, but unfolding events and processes of becoming or, in Lacanian terms, the very writing of desire that is never completed. It calls for more probing into latent aspects of their subjectivity or identity as they are conditioned by or resist the formative forces of society. In this respect, the ‘other’ in the title could also stand for female subjectivity and the deconstruction of the myth of woman as Other, thus inviting an alternative approach to the texts themselves.

The analysis of the Greek novels in this study should be set against a wider paradigm shift that has been taking place in Greece. Thus the first chapter seeks to explore and outline this shift from collectivism to individuality that informs to some extent the readings offered here. The emergence of a ‘new individualism’ is becoming a global phenomenon and sociologists such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck associate it with the retreat from tradition and custom in our lives and pressures toward greater democratization. Having abandoned collectivism, according to Anthony Giddens, the politics of the ‘third way’ “looks for a new relationship between the individual and the community, a redefinition of rights and obligations.”\(^{27}\) In Greece the retreat from collectivism also has wider cultural implications that require careful investigation, since a cultural shift normally entails a reconsideration of critical approaches and a change in the ways we read the texts. In this respect, the readings offered here should be seen within the broader shift occurring in Greek culture and fiction in general.

Although societies might display features akin either to collectivism or individualism, literary texts or other cultural products could be used either to enhance a sense of collectivity or to demonstrate the exact opposite: the manifestation of individuality. A case in point is the Greek klephic songs which have customarily been treated as the celebration of national resistance against the Turks, whereas a number of scholars tend to see them now as songs of individual bravery and the klephs as solitary rebels who refused all allegiance and social obligations.\(^{28}\) Consequently, the collective or individualist character of a society is not inherent or fixed, but to a certain extent a matter of interpretation. This suggests that a particular perception of a society could be promoted or played down depending on the use or reading of certain cultural forms or activities that in the past have been approached differently. By this I am not trying either to undermine the distinction between collectivist and individualist


24. Handley, op. cit., p. 150.

25. As Nancy Julia Chodorow points out “when we investigate psychoanalytic theory and practice, we see a historical progression from a view favoring a pure, differentiated individuality based on rigid notions of autonomous separateness toward a relational individualism.” Nancy Julia Chodorow, “Toward a Relational Individualism: The Mediation of Self through Psychoanalysis,” in Reconstructing Individualism, ed. by Thomas C. Heller, Morton Sonin, and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), 207.


societies or to deny that they can change by gradually moving from one type of society to another, but to implant the idea that the relationship between society, literature, and selfhood is intricate indeed.

What is important to be stressed at this point is that the waning of collectivism in Greek society and fiction occurred rather recently, this change coincides and is often conflated with the introduction into Greek fiction of postmodern notions of subjectivity and relativity. This might be accounted for by the swift transformation of Greek culture that involves a rapid, and not always contradictions-free, transition from a premodern collectivity to a postmodern celebration of diversity and atomization. It is not necessary to treat this trend in terms of belated modernization or westernization, but as a more complex case in which the fast pace of change often leads to unfamiliar phenomena. Therefore, the process of individuation in Greek society cannot be seen as identical to western individualism. I think this constitutes the hallmark of recent social and cultural developments in Greece and singles Greek society out from other western ones. Hence, the first chapter of this book provides the wider framework necessary to an assessment of cultural and intellectual changes and to reconsidering the relationship between the individual and society over the last two centuries within the context of Greek fiction.

Chapter One
National Imaginary, Collective Identity, and Individualism in Greek Fiction

INDIVIDUALISM AND IDENTITY

Individualism is an elusive concept and there are at least three distinct, but potentially interconnected, aspects as pointed out by Michel Foucault in his account of the Hellenistic and Roman world: (1) an exaltation of individual singularity; (2) the positive valuation of private life; and (3) the intensity of the relation to self. As a term it was invented in the 1820s, though in all ages and societies some people have been ‘individualists’, flaunting their egocentrism, difference or independence of mind. However, as Ian Watt points out, the concept of individualism involves much more than this:

It posts a whole society mainly governed by the idea of every individual’s intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past modes of thought and action denoted by the word ‘tradition’—a force that is always social, not individual. The existence of such a society, in turn, obviously depends on a special type of economic and political organization and on an appropriate ideology; and more specifically, on an economic and political

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29. It will be useful here to clarify the difference between individuality and subjectivity by referring to how poststructuralist theorists define the subject with the emphasis on its constructedness. According to The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism, eds. Joseph Childs and Gary Gentz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) “in contrast to the term individual, which connotes a certain amount of autonomy and unity, subject indicates a being who is constituted in and by language or ideology, who is not determined merely by consciousness” (p. 292).

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