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***The Hymn of Athens* by Kostis Palamas: A Poem about Athens or Athens as a Poem?**

Abstract

This article is divided into three parts. The first part gives a brief overview of the Greek literary history in the time of Palamas in order to erect a general literary framework within which Palamas's poetry can be interpreted. The second part gives an overview of the nationalist theory as has been studied in both current and national/international scholarship in an attempt to investigate even further the literary personality of Palamas. Finally, the article focuses on the analysis of the poem *The Hymn of Athena*, discussing Palamas's poetical technique in relation to national aesthetics.

Introduction

In the last two hundred years, the Greek tradition of letters has exhibited a plethora of writers, especially in the field of poetry, and this marks disproportionately the time and space of their creations. Only a few of them however have played a very significant role in the self-realisation, formation and transformation of the collective Greek national conscience. Solomos was the first national poet of Greece who signified the reformation of the national conscience, its renaissance and its enlightenment. In the twentieth century, George Seferis and Odysseus Elytes, both Nobel laureates in 1963 and 1979 respectively, were leading poets of the so-called generation of the 30's, and the creators of a reviving national representation based on cosmopolitanism, modernism and a consciousness that depicts another transformation of the

Greek world. Kavafy on the other hand is an outsider and one that represents the *hybridism* of the Greek diaspora. Living outside of mainland Greece, Kavafy created an 'imaginary construction' of a Hellenism that reflected itself not only as a diachronically multi-dimensional entity of an inimitable Hellenic signification but mainly as a diversified process of literary implication able to accept every negligible and not necessarily 'national' Hellenic element.

Nationalism and 'National Literature'!

It seems that nationalism as a process still has a long way to go. The studies about nationalism are many and each writer analyses a particular place and time, which usually is not applicable to any other place or time. The different perceptions of time (for example, that of the static and timeless pro-modernist period in comparison with the present more homogenous, 'emptied' and calculable time), and the perception of what happens in it, together with the invention of print media have made it possible for a universal education of sorts and therefore, the homogenisation and individualisation of particular ethnic communities. These are the main elements where any student (and/or researcher) of nationalism has to concentrate their efforts in order to better comprehend the origins and modes of signification and process of change embodied within the works (Anderson 1993).

To provide a general definition of what nationalism is and means today might be easy but it will be disingenuous or even inadequate. Nationalism sustains different interpretations and definitions in various places and times because its notion has been developed, perceived and interpreted differently over many centuries. The dominant perception maintains that different ethnic communities define themselves in the course of their imagination. According to Anderson communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity or their genuineness, but by the 'style' in which they are seen, 'imagined' and constructed (Anderson 1993). The term 'imagined communities' though is not an abstract state of being; but rather underlies the way in which people perceive their reality. Therefore the 'imagining' element in it is more real than the *reality* of itself. According to the precepts of surrealism reality only exists within the faculty of imagination, therefore it could easily be stated that the *surreal* (or imagined) is the only true reality.

On the other hand, Gourgouris in his book *Dream Nation* utilizing Freud's insights into dreams stated that: 'Dreams are nothing but a particular

form of thinking, made possible by the conditions of the state of sleep' (Gourgouris 1996: 28). In this book Gourgouris referred to Greece as a living paradigm of a *dream nation*. He went on to state rather philosophically that as the dreams came into existence at the time of their interpretation, similarly 'nations come into historical consciousness by articulating their own self-interpretation' (1996: 1). It means therefore that the historical existence of the nation depends upon the capability of their 'imagined' communities to interpret and re-interpret their *dreams and their forms of thinking* for and about themselves. Forms, icons, symbols and other 'cultural artefacts' achieve their realisation through language. These elements secure the nation's 'imaginary' institutions and hence 'its historical being'. Literature, or the collective corpus of any written kind that signifies particular traditions composes a significant part of a much larger body of a nation's 'cultural artefacts' (Anderson 1993: 4) that will fill up the 'emptiness' of the calculable time mentioned above.

Literature according to Apostolidou (1994), and more specifically 'national literature' constitutes the backbone of any particular community in order to pursue its 'dreams'. In order to construct the concept of Greek continuity from antiquity till contemporary times, scholars eventually opened the route, not only for research into the origins of neo-Hellenic literature, but also for the investigation and connection – linguistically – with the prestigious past; an element that differentiates it from the rest of European literature (Apostolidou 1994: 24). Kitromilides (1990) emphasised the antinomies that characterize Greek nationalism, and he stated how successfully the nation has reconciled itself with the Ecumenism of the Orthodox Church and the 'dreaming' past. 'Cultural artefacts' however, like Palamas's *Dodecalogou of Gypsy*, *The Flute of the King*, Sikelianos's *Pascha of the Hellenes*, or more recently Elytes's *Axion Esti*, filled up the 'emptiness' of the time and made possible the creation of the *dream-nation* of the Greeks.

Palamas as a national poet

Palamas is one that has been considered by scholars, as the successor of Dionysios Solomos, and for many is the innovator of new forms of literary expression that consolidate the traditional and cultural trends of his time. These trends enhanced national aspirations and helped greatly in the establishment of Greek identity as has been formed in the last two hundred years. Palamas is the poet that dominated the literary scene in Greece for fifty

years and his work extended in multifarious disciplines; poetry, prose, theatre and criticism. His literary advancement coincided with the progression, transformation and expansion of the Greek nation. As some historians, such as Gallant (2001) have stated,

Greece's problem is not that it has too much history but that there are two related but still distinct histories involved - one being the history of the Greek people which, depending upon how one defines the term 'Greek' extends back thousands of years and the other being the history of the Greek nation-state, which has a relatively short history. Greece then is a young state with an old culture.

As the author himself freely admitted however, this seemingly simple assertion is far more complicated than it appears and it is outside the confines of this article to explore a possible solution at present. Apparently this is a problem that faces any thinker that is part of a society that claims three millennia of uninterrupted literary tradition and two hundred years of politically institutionalised statehood. For Palamas this problem is magnified not only because he lived in a time when Greek history was in a crucial transitional period (at the turn of the century) but because Palamas himself was a part of the institutionalising canon of 'national literature'¹ and one of the main 'imaginary' constructors of modern Greek identity.

Palamas had been influenced by Neo-Romantic European thought. He was also an admirer of Nietzsche and Bergson as well as Yiannis Psycharis. According to Demaras (1985), '... while Psycharis, initiated the new movement of Demoticism, Palamas was its creator'. The adoption of demotic language in literature for example was strongly supported and materialized by Palamas, at a time when the archaic form of expression had been long-established in every aspect of public Greek life. This was a situation that according to sociologists and many progressive educationalists stood as a serious impediment to national education, so much so that it became a 'question' (Ζήτηση) both politically as well as nationally and dominated the political-social-cultural life of the Greek people for more than a century.

Palamas apparently supported the national aspirations of the so-called 'Great Idea' but he never expressed them literally. In his long epic poem entitled *Dodecalogue of the Gypsy* written in 1907 the poet composed an epic-lyric work of art that according to Demaras expressed, 'Positive science, folklore, traditions, ancient history, Byzantine and modern history, childhood recollections, readings' (Demaras 1985). There are some verses however, which

scholars have interpreted as a prophesy of a revived glorious present and inevitably a similar future (Demaras 1985: 412). The verses towards the end of the poem, having the indicative sub-title of 'Prophetic' confirm the impression we perceive from the content itself. The initial personification of the main poetic character of the gypsy is transformed progressively into a suffering Hellenic psyche who arrives at the extreme point of humiliation before his eventual advancement towards a promising future. By simultaneously looking backwards in order to revive and gather strength from the past glories, the gypsy (and hence poet) enlightens the present national course (Apostolidou 1994: 24):

*... and not having another step further down to go
to tumble down even deeper
onto Evil's stair,___
for the ascension which calls you again
you will feel to spring up again, oh joy!
the wings,
your wings of long ago, the great!*

Palamas probably envisioned the ascension of Greece here because he was able to perceive the outcome of the national struggle of this period – the first decade of the twentieth century- and realized that eventually the Greek nation-state would embrace the other two thirds of the Greek population that was living outside its newly formed national borders. With his poems he supported and acquiesced to the visions of the Greek nation. In the epic poem *The Flute of the King*, which was published in 1910, the poet, while sustaining the same epic-lyric tone, permitted the national preoccupations to predominate as inspiration. Athens is the strongest element here and its symbolism is very transparent: Palamas very cleverly encapsulates the trip of Basil Voulgaroktonos to Athens and his subsequent pilgrimage to the church of the Virgin Mary (located within the Parthenon), thus identifying the Christian deity with the virgin pro-Christian deity (Athena). This gesture has been interpreted by many as a recognition of the Greek cultural/linguistic continuity which extends from classical times to Byzantium and onwards, towards the contemporary Hellenic world². In this way Palamas shows that Athens is symbolically the centre of the new Hellenism giving it however a more broader dimension in order to remind us perhaps that Athens still

exists as a creative 'artefact' and in that way to enforce the national cultural consciousness of the Greek people: '*Athena, diamond-jewelled, ring of the Earth*' stated the poet in the climactic verses of the poem.

In the meantime, many other thinkers together with a substantial part of the Greek population identified themselves as Greek Orthodox, or *Romioi*. They looked mainly towards the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the centre of Orthodoxy, and considered the city of Constantinople as the centre of new Hellenism.³ These imaginary expectations nourished both the population and the intellectuals of the Greek state in the whole nineteenth century until the fatal Asia Minor catastrophe, in 1922. On the other hand the Greeks that lived in the Eastern Mediterranean and North African littoral did not entirely comprehend the aspirations of the national element developed in mainland Greece. Poets like Kavafy who had a mainly European – specifically English – education perceived and recreated a hybrid cluster of imaginative forms of Hellenism able to embrace all people who speak, live and feel Greek in the diaspora, as well as many other, semi-Hellenes and Philhellenes. Kavafy's symbolic centre of Hellenism, as most people are aware, was the cosmopolitan and multicultural city of Alexandria.

Hymn of Athena: a poem about Athens or Athens as poem?

Palamas wrote the *Hymn of Athena* in 1889, seven years before the first international Olympic games and eight years before the disastrous Greco-Turkish War in 1897. The fact that the poem was awarded a prize in the Philadelphian poetry competition is indicative of the unanimous acceptance of the poet in the canon. Demaras commented that the poem was characterized by a constant elevation of the tone '... (and) the fifteen-syllable blank verses revealed a remarkable technical perfection with its solid structure, as with its easy flow' (Demaras 1985: 400). Demitrios Vikelas, the first President of International Olympic Committee was so much impressed by the lyricism of the poem that he stated enthusiastically, 'for us it is as though an ancient poet had composed this hymn, and not Kostis Palamas'. Later on he asked Palamas to write the Olympic Hymn, which in recent years has become quite famous.

In the following I will attempt to examine Palamas' poeticism as opposed to his perceived nationalism. I will argue that although Palamas was considered a national poet who enhanced the national sentiment, at the same

time he kept the rules of personal creativity according to his theories and beliefs about poetry, theories that coincide to a large extent with Aristotelian poetics. According to Aristotle, poetry 'exists in a direct connection with reality, a reality that is mainly aesthetic and based on the poet's soul, who is always ready to approach the truth' (Aristotle year?).

Palamas received the messages of his time and created his own personal poetic style, which derived both from modern contemporary thought and Greek tradition, classical and modern; that is, he recreated a new *mythopoeism* of the world in a way he perceived it. Since space in poetry coincides with time, Athens became for Palamas a milestone and a source of inspiration. The history of Athens, so apparent and at the same time so hidden, constituted a challenge in which Palamas felt he had to oppose, conquer and overcome with his poetic language. At the end of the nineteenth century Athens was a small city with a few neo-classical buildings, classical ruins and numerous Byzantine churches surrounded by picturesque nature that presented a unique illustration, real or imaginative. These obvious contradictory elements that constituted the poet's contemporary *real* picture of Athens presented an intellectual challenge that had to be overcome. He found himself obliged to merge the elements that revealed the reality of Athens, but his ultimate purpose seems to have been his desire to resurrect the ancient past of the city and to have it prevail over all else. He had to comply with the literary canon which corresponded with the national literature and reconstructed creative images from the classical Hellenic past. Palamas's imaginary predilection then was rather selective. The image of Athens from the glorious past, which is more or less 'imaginary', signified Palamas's pro-poetical material; the vaulting horse for his advancement in order to overcome reality. Significantly, for his poetic construction is the way in which he interplayed with the name/word 'Athena'. The name 'Athena' both divine and secular, both real and imaginative, both history and 'artefact' is the single potent space onto which the poet focused his spiritual dynamics in order to bring into being his hymn (Augustinos 1977: 4):⁴

I will sing the Great Goddess of the world

And your name alongside with Hers,

I will knit into my song, pairing both of you, sacred land

which was created by her hands and is her mind's brilliance.

The poetic language reveals that there exists a comprehensive interconnection between space and myth which finds its perfect application in the name/word 'Athena'; the name becomes the space where the process of poetical praxis is conducted. Thus, the time becomes timeless; the poetical language dissolves the barriers of time, the past becomes present, the place that is called Athens advances from reality into another dimension, it joins the divine spirit of the Goddess Athena and becomes a poem. Its individualisation as poetical genre occurred simultaneously with its dissemination in the poet's consciousness. It is the poet himself however, who stated that, 'poetry is the art of logos that obtains the dynamics to dematerialise the material and materialize the immaterial, in such a way as to give the near the dreaming distance of the past and to bring the past nearby' (Palamas 2002: 565).

The language of the poem is demotic, people's living vehicle of expression and not that of the state (Apostolidou 1994: 25).⁵ The poet knitted his text by using an affluence of compound nouns and adjectives that revealed attributes towards an inward energy, which uncovers very forceful signifiers in a continuous undulation. Every phrase of the poem recreates a multileveled portrait of living nature and advanced lyricism. The words that refer to music and the inner rhythm of the verses reproduce a melodic sound that reinforces the poem's lyricism:

*Plains, from the undying, white-green olive,
humble rocks who remind us of famous other ages,
accept this desirable song and listen to it in throes,
and echo the rhythm of the song, keep with me the tempo,
you good-wished nymphs from the banks and caves.*

Again, nature within this poem is interconnected with myth, history and reality including the strong presence of the poet. The poet plays the role of conductor, who very masterly orchestrates the various elements of the poem into a further dimensional level. According to the *Poetics of Aristotle* (Aristotle, 1995) nature like poetry has its own individual laws. Although, it seems that poetry and nature contrast each other, in reality they are homologous because both of them constitute the two possibilities of things, those which are made and those which are natural -ποιητά and φυσικά, according to Aristotle's terminology. Thus nature and poetry are two forms of 'Being'. Nature characterised by movement and poetry by *mimesis*. *Mimesis* connected

with nature and movement, while the 'Being' is perceived as movement and mimesis. The Being as *mimesis* is *mimesis*, advancement to itself, that is to say, evolution. Thus when the poet imitates Nature, in reality he creates and recreates himself as a projection of his own *mythopoetic* and individualized world. The poet knows that the images produced by the poem will make people rediscover and redefine the city's past significations so that he will eventually inter-communicate with the Hellenic psyche.

The poet also brings into existence a poem that he named a song (*tragoudi*). *Tragoudi* might be connected with the concept of Greek Tragedy, ancient αἰδός and certainly, with demotic songs and Homer. Palamas imitated creatively Homer in the way that he starts the poem by invoking the Goddess Athena who becomes his inspirational motivation which eventually he transfers to his Muse.

Also, Palamas's poeticism as opposed to his nationalism could be examined in the way he referred to the past. The poet does not connect contemporary Athens with the glorious classical past which according to Isocrates, was proclaimed as school of knowledge for the whole of Hellas, but he poetically links it with the humble passage from Sophocles calling it an 'honourable city': 'O Greatest Pallas calling all Athenai, most honourable city'. The glorious past of Athens, that is symbolized by the masterpiece of the Parthenon which is situated in the 'sacred rock' of the Acropolis, two and half thousand years ago, Palamas referred to it only as 'humble rocks who remind us of famous other ages'. He created a new image of the Parthenon to fit in with its humble times. The Parthenon is a unique creation of all the ages, which represents the human excellence in art and architecture. The poet however evoked people to rediscover these qualities through the process of learning them. So, the element of humility to this representation denotes, in essence, an aesthetic pleasure that in reality emphasizes its greatness. It is obvious that the poet attempted to give a harmonious balance to his poem and achieve excellence in an attempt to create a piece of art that signified the human meter, in order to remind his future readers of the superb ancient ideal of metro, '*Pan metron ariston*', rather inaccurately translated as 'all things in moderation'. The readers are able to discover within the poem a solid structural perfection, where the elements of nature, mythological features, art and history are transubstantiated into a point where they encounter Palamas' 'imaginary' view of the world.

Finally, is this a poem about Athens, that is to say, is it only a colourful description, emphasizing the glorious, heroic classical past in order to enhance the nationalistic sentiment of the Greek people, or does Palamas recreate the city of Athens as a poem? In this discussion I have attempted to show that Palamas, as a poet did not remain in an ephemeral description of the city of Athens, but he used his poetic technique, however according to dominant literary canon, in order to create a poem where Athens as a name, as word, that is as a language, came into existence in an apocalyptic way. The readers should be subjected to the process of searching, interpreting and analysing the poem in order to rediscover each time a revived image of Athens. Palamas made it possible for Athens to exist as a poem in a different way. Thus, *Hymn of Athena*, will remain a classic poem reminding the world of Athens' diachronic and multifaceted historic existence, because as Palamas penetratingly said:

Harmony, here! the daughter of the golden Paphia!

Harmony, blonde, blonde, was born here!

Ο ΥΜΝΟΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΘΗΝΑΣ

*Ω μεγίστης Παλλάδος καλούμεναι,
Πασών Αθήναι τιμιωτάτη πόλις.
Σοφοκλής*

*O greatest Pallas calling
all Athens', most honourable city.
Sophocles*

*I will sing the Great Goddess of the world,
the purity, the progress, the knowledge, the wisdom;
in your sacred earth, divinely-created Athena,
only such a song is eternally suitable to be heard.
I will sing the Great Goddess of the world,
And Your name alongside with Hers
I will knit into my song, pairing both of you, sacred land
which was created by Her hands and is Her mind's brilliance
Blue-winged wind, full of fragrance
O! you who embraces this land so fatherly and makes*

*the days brilliant and the nights misty-blond,
 take my song and make it as brilliant as the sun
 And scatter it in mountains, forests seashores.
 Plains, from the undying, white-green olive,
 humble rocks who remind us of famous other ages,
 accept this desirable song and listen to it in throes,
 and echo the rhythm of the song, keep with me the tempo,
 you good-wished nymphs from the banks and caves.
 And give me power Goddess and good luck
 For many other songs I have for thee, always songs for thee.*

ST'

*Athena! gold-crowned and highly honoured land!
 The blessed Gods stand over you in vigil
 and they leave from Olympus to rest
 in your rock-strewn earth. Because they found that here
 humankind is more in accord with the Gods,
 because here prayer ascends more heartily,
 the poets' lyre is heard sweeter,
 the water's clarity, the very fair honey,
 and the precious wine that banishes our worries,
 are offered with a purer soul towards the immortals,
 and the images of the Gods which the artists work on
 more faithfully and truthfully reproduced on the marble,
 which keeps unspoiled its shining whiteness.
 It is here that Zeus thunders and flashes and torments the evil,
 here that the Goddess Hera bestows good luck on loving couples
 and the great-archer, Apollo, the Sun,
 seduces the beautiful women inside caves, and moulds
 from mortal Queens, divine Kings
 It is here that Eros, nestles and his wings folds
 and the Great Pan never dies, and richly
 does Demetra scatter her wheatear and Aphrodite her
 pomegranates.
 And sweet-talking Hermes vigilantly stands by
 and worthy makes the body for wrestling and running,*

*and the Hours arrive quicker, and the Graces younger,
 and in the dew-lad and clean air
 and the maidens of Parnassos raise incomparable dances.
 Like a fierce bull the river Kephissos runs and moans.
 Thousands of little springs like daughters of his, freshly
 pouring into the ravine, dispersing into plains,
 bringing out of the earth's bowels thousands of flowers.
 And here, nothing remains nakedly uncrowned,
 Neither the altars, nor the pure heads of the maidens.
 The rose bushes bloom, the anemones laugh,
 and the violets are countless, the lilies full of pride,
 and the dewy hyacinth and the narcissus, keep
 the first human life within their dewy green leaves,
 stirred as if they were secretly crying.
 The night's frightful goddesses, the tormentors of the guilt-ridden
 with the snake-like hair, and copper-like legs,
 here, they have forests untrodden and a myriad of produced
 fruits,
 which the wild-north wind does not beat nor the sun burn,
 which no human foot has ever laid its imprint,
 and no human voice has ever being heard,
 and only the innocent, solitude-loving, nightingales bitterly sing
 Here everything is noble, divine-created, everywhere!
 Up there beyond the horizon, the sea shine like a mirror,
 Unfolding like a plain,
 And here the earth is proud spread like the waving sea.
 Here, no heavy shadow hushing on the eyes,
 Here hills unattainable, superfluous greens,
 they not hide any piece of earth, do not spoil it,
 everything simple, decent, cautious, written with a slate.
 The sky is very deep and bleu, embroidered at nights,
 the eyes are always in front of it and they search out for it,
 always. Noble beauty and secretly dispersed,
 Which is not blurred the stare, and the soul flutter!
 Harmony, here! the daughter of the golden Paphia!
 Harmony, blonde-blonde was born here!*

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Notes

¹ I borrow the term from the text of Venetia Apostolidou. See: *Η Συγκρότηση και οι Σημασίες της 'Εθνικής Διογοτεχνίας'*, στο *Έθνος-Κράτος-Εθνικισμός. Επιστημονικό Συμπόσιο. Εταιρεία Σπουδών Νεοελληνικού Πολιτισμού και Γενικής Παιδείας*. Αθήνα, 1994.

² Παλαμάς, Κ. *Η Φλογέρα του Βασιλιά με την ηρωική τριλογία*. Εκδόσεις Βιβλιοπωλείον της 'Εστίας'. Σελ. 48. Βλ. Τους σχετικούς στίχους:

*Τη Δέσποινα των ουρανών θα πάει να προσκυνήση
Που το κάστρο της έχτισε στο βράχο της Αθήνας
Κι από τα τετραπέρατα κι από τη Θούλα ολοάκρη
Του πιστού δέχεται τ' αγνό πρόσφορο και το τάμα
Κι ύστερα από την Αθηνά την πολεμόχαρη ήρθε*

*Και με το ίδιο ανάστημα και με τον ίδιο αέρα,
Μια γαληνόχαρη, χωρίς σκουτάρη και κοντάρι.*

*To the heavens' Lady he will put his respects
Where her castle has been builded upon the Athena's rock
And as too far as from the Thoula's edge
She accepts the believer's pure offerings
He then came from the war-lover Goddess Athena
Which she has both the similar stature and grace
But one calm-charming Goddess, without shield and spear.*

³ I refer mainly in the early studies of Eftaliotes A. and Psicharis G. See: Εφταλιώτης, Α. Άπαντα, Ιστορία της Ρωμοσύνης, τόμ. 2ος. Επιμ. Γ. Βαλέτα. Αθήνα. Εκδόσεις Πηγή, 1952. Ψυχάρης Γ., Μεγάλη Ρωμαϊκή Επιστημονική Γραμματική. Αθήνα. Εκδοτικός, Θ. Δ. Κολλάρος και Σία, 1937, τόμ. 1ος. Ion Dragoumes however was more specific about the position of Constantinople in the Greek world. He believed that Constantinople was not only a symbol of Hellenism but it should belong to the Greeks: 'I should feel in the same way about the Poli (abbreviation of Constantinople) and Hellas'. See: Δραγούμης Ι., Δέκα άρθρα στο Νουμά. Πρόλ. Σχ. Α. Δενδρινού. Αθήνα. Εκδόσεις Ελεύθερη Σκέψις, χ.χ. Το κείμενο δημοσιεύθηκε πρώτη φορά στο περιοδικό Νουμάς 129/130. το 1905.

⁴ Augustinos (1977: 4) for example, stated that, 'Palamas' writings were not as narrowly nationalistic, as those of others of the time. Palamas' intimate and immense knowledge of the Greek past enabled him to create a powerful and original vision of what the nations' culture ought to be in modern times'.

⁵ Apostolidou states that, 'Demoticism corresponds with the development of the Nation-State {...} though the linguistic or other extremities, Demoticism with the leading role of Palamas, achieved linguistic unification and eliminated the various local cultures like the Phanariot and Heptanisiot.