

Nikos Themelis

04/03/2004 14:09

To: "Krisztina Kos" <Kosk@ceu.hu>

cc:

Subject: Re: Writing Europe 

Dear Ms. Kos,

Thank you very much for your effort and concern. The result of your work is approved by my side, so please go on.

Best regards,

Nikos Themelis



"Krisztina Kos"
<Kosk@ceu.hu>

03/03/04 05:06 μμ

To: <n.themelis@primeminister.gr>
cc:
Subject: Writing Europe

Dear Mr Themelis,

Attached I am sending you for your approval the copyedited version of your essay. Are there any books by you in English? If so, please send us the bibliographic details (title, translator, publisher, date of publication) of them by Monday, March 8. If we don't hear from you by then we will assume that the text is approved by you as it is.

Sincerely,
Krisztina Kos

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- Themelis.doc

Nikos Themelis

Greece

Born in Athens in 1947, Nikos Themelis studied law in Thessaloniki and in Cologne, where he received his PhD. He worked as a lawyer for the Greek Ministry of Economy and then as an advisor to the European Union in Brussels. Subsequently, he joined a team of advisors to the Greek prime minister, whom he continues to advise today. The novel *The Subversion*, which tells the story of the author's grandfather, has been a Greek bestseller for the past three years. In 2001 Themelis was awarded the Greek State Prize for his second novel *The Search*, published in 2000. With *Glimmer of Light*, published in 2003, the author has completed his historical trilogy.

Books in English:

???

Looking for a Widened Self-Awareness

Αν διατηρηθεί σε προτεραιότητα η εμμονή στην πολυπολιτισμική ταυτότητα της Ευρώπης και κατ' επέκταση η ανάγκη της κατοχύρωσης της εθνικής πολιτισμικής ταυτότητας κάθε κοινωνίας, τότε θα εξακολουθήσει να 'ναι δύσκολη η ανίχνευση του ευρωπαϊκού στοιχείου στην εθνική λογοτεχνία. Ακόμη πιο δύσκολη η παραδοχή της σε οποιοσδήποτε προσπάθειες αυτογνωσίας.

The Symposium *Europa schreibt. Was ist das Europäische an den Literaturen Europas?* (Writing Europe: What is European about the Literatures of Europe?) comes at a critical moment for the future of Europe. Our times are seen by some as a challenge, by others as a matter of deep disquiet.

I propose to approach our theme from a distinctive viewpoint, from that of the political and constitutional expression of "Europe." The European Union is now at the crossroads of enlargement, with ten to thirteen prospective new members, most of which belonged to the Eastern bloc until some ten years ago. At the same time a great debate has opened, not only among economists and politicians, but also within society at large. Over the next two years important issues will be settled on the evolution and transformation of the European Union. Key questions include "more or less European unification?" and "more or less of a 'social' Europe?" Opinions on all issues diverge.

Bewilderment pervades our societies with regard to the phenomenon of "globalization" and its ramifications. This bewilderment breeds both avid support and entrenched antagonism. Social problems, such as unemployment, social integration, and exclusion—both aspects of our multicultural societies—the relationship between growth and the environment, the cultural models engendered by the electronic media industry, the content and aims of education, issues of freedom and equality, solidarity and social justice, even issues of democracy, all require urgent, and often novel, solutions.

For some people—and this is, *itself*, the worst problem—*no* solutions are called for. Market ideology constantly aims, and often manages, to escape the sphere of economic activity where it belongs, permeating into the realms of society, politics, and culture. Whenever this takes place, those realms are diminished, their nature distorted.

I have the feeling that those values and principles that formed the ideological backbone and the cultural foundations of postwar Europe, and which were distilled in European thought over the course of centuries, are becoming marginalized. I am convinced that citizens are

increasingly being presented with oversimplified dilemmas while their problems are becoming increasingly complex. I feel that our society is progressively being subjected to processes leading to the depreciation of issues and ideas that used to occupy an important place in our collective conscience. And even if nobody dares to challenge these values and principles formally, in practice they cease to be priorities in the value system of a large part of society.

Alongside these great issues I would also place those of individual and collective self-knowledge that emerge frequently and forcefully. To be more precise, the need to bring to the fore common cultural values and principles as determining elements of our behavior and way of life. If we sincerely felt this need and succeeded in placing it again at the center of public discussion, if we succeeded in opening up the discussion to society at large, above and beyond the familiar boundaries of the so-called world of intellectuals, then it would be easier for us to find answers to the major issues that trouble European societies. We may also be able to achieve wider mobilization, a wider consensus on decisions, which could lead to a better and more tolerable *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi* in our societies. Confronted with this reality, literature certainly does not have the first say. Nevertheless, as part of the intellectual production of culture, what position does literature take?

I would like to make my position clear from the outset in order to avoid misunderstanding. I do not believe that cultural creativity, in our case literature, should follow rules in order to serve goals pertaining to extraneous spheres, such as the political, the social, or the economic. Nevertheless, by drawing stimuli and material from within its own context, by weaving this material into an original creation, e.g., into the fictional core shaped by the author, literature very often, or even inevitably, provides answers, transmits messages, adopts or dismisses opinions, and thus exerts an influence on the reader. This is how I believe that the value load of an ideology, in this case that of European thought, may find its way into literature, as an integral part of the writing process, assisting or influencing the process of self-knowledge and self-consciousness and not as a goal in itself.

With your permission, I would like to cite my own work as an example. Let me start by giving some necessary historical context: during the period of rule of the Ottoman Empire, Hellenism, as a broad notion, underwent an important process of development, not only within that Empire, but also in major Russian centers and in all the territories later controlled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Greeks, citizens of the one or the other empire, engaged in increasingly intense economic activities, mainly in commerce, shipping, and banking. In the Balkans, Greek emerged as the dominant language of commerce and financial affairs. Small communities were thus born, notably characterized by prosperity, a cosmopolitan spirit, and high

levels of education. These groups constituted the first web of the Greek bourgeoisie, composed thus of small communities a long distance from the present-day frontiers of Greece. To mention only the most important communities: Trieste, Vienna, Belgrade, Braşov, Bucharest, all the major cities of the Danubian principalities, Odessa, the cities of the Black Sea coast, Constantinople, Smyrna, and Alexandria.

This microcosm, all the time a part of Hellenism, was the first to adopt the ideas of the Enlightenment, of freedom and equality, to embrace modernity, and to become adaptable, self-confident, creative; it also was the conscious promoter of the goals of the 1821 Greek revolution against Ottoman rule. Since then an enduring conflict has unfolded in the territories that were later to compose the Greek nation-state. This was a conflict between, on the one hand, a western European ideology that had at its heart the principles of the Enlightenment and, on the other, an ideology emanating from the Greek Orthodox Church, which, along the way, had incorporated other national, popular, and folk elements. Put simply, this conflict could be described as a conflict of East versus West. Apart from a narrow circle of historians, little light has been shed on this aspect of the history of Hellenism. In the same way, Greek literature, as far as I know, has not felt the need to draw on the material it provides.

My two novels unfold as two parallel stories taking place in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Two different views have been advanced regarding the genre of these novels. According to the first view, they are primarily historical novels, and only secondarily *Bildungsromane*. The other view sees them the other way around. Europe is present in both novels. I will refer only to the first, which has been translated into German as *Jenseits von Epirus* (Beyond Epirus), as well as into Turkish and Italian.

European ideology and reality enter this novel via two routes. The first concerns my effort to bring to life the historical context of the period as accurately as I could and to shed light on particular aspects of it. Such aspects are the fragmentary and belated formation and rise of the bourgeoisie and the mobility of ideas in society and in economic life that characterized this era in southeastern Europe. At the same time I aimed to present the difficulties faced by the ideas of the Enlightenment and of Humanism in their confrontation on two fronts, on the one with the old world, and on the other with the nation state and nationalism in general, an ideology increasingly prevalent in the territories under Ottoman rule during that period.

The second route is the choice to create a character who would be a “carrier” of these ideas; a positive *persona* who pursues, and in the end realizes, his lifelong aspirations. Moreover, someone who, through the narratives of those describing his life, matures into a character not only appreciated as successful, but who is also elevated to the status of a mythical prototype in

the society in which he lives. This is the story of an adolescent, the son of a successful bourgeois merchant, who after his father's disappearance and his family's subsequent financial ruin attempts to rebuild his life by pursuing his fortune in the East, in Smyrna, the major commercial center of Anatolia.

The social context of *Jenseits von Epirus* is a world that has experienced neither the Renaissance nor the Enlightenment, a world cut off from the developments it now seeks to catch up with after decades, if not centuries, of delay. A world dominated by false beliefs, superstition, by the absolute hegemony over the Christian population of the Eastern Orthodox Church, which approached the issues of the day in a simplistic way on the behalf of people of low or non-existent education. Under the Eastern despotic regime the sense of equality, of the rule of law, and of freedom are all absent, with all the negative consequences and distortions this absence produces. At the same time, however, and up to the early years of the twentieth century, there is concurrently a wider social consensus for peaceful coexistence within the framework of a multicultural society.

This complex reality comes gradually into contact with the ideas of the Enlightenment and with ideas coming from the West in general, such as the free development of the personality, individual initiative, entrepreneurship, and a positive attitude towards the modern era and the challenges it brings, as for example the "invasion" of the steam engine in Anatolia. Nikoles, the central character, tries to stand on his own two feet, to provide answers to life's dilemmas great and small, to acquire more knowledge, to adopt innovations, to become self-sufficient, and to succeed as an independent entrepreneur, attaining, as his father had before him, the status of an *efendi*, best translated as a benevolent boss with an important position in society.

Throughout the course of his life, up to the moment of his sudden death, Nikoles reasons, makes decisions, and acts according to the ideas instilled in him by his father, ideas that, in general, we would characterize as those of the Enlightenment.

To give a few examples: Nikoles always remembers his father's most important piece of advice—to adopt a critical stance in any situation. The quest for truth and of its interpretations is achieved through adoption of a critical point of view in which rationality, *Vernunft*, is the main tool.

During the course of his life he tries incessantly to define and adopt an ethical stance that is distinct from the theocratic ethics of both Muslim and Christian dogma. He aspires to express a lay morality, permeated by ideas that have come to him from the West, albeit in a vague and uncertain form, without reference to any Christian dogma.

Knowledge, scientific proof, and the pursuit of a wider education provide him with a driving force. His perspective is most clearly defined in his animated dialogue with the teacher, in which they discuss the issue that is most central to the Hellenism of the period: the *Megali Idea*, the Great Idea. At the time, the *Megali Idea* was the dominant irredentist dogma, aimed at the realization of Greek nationhood. It was supported to different degrees by the overwhelming majority of those inhabiting the territories of the free Greek state. In simple terms, *Megali Idea* aimed at the expansion of that state to embrace the entire Byzantine Empire! When his friend, the teacher, passionately defends this idea, Nikoles responds by putting forward his own *Megali Idea*: Education.

“Not only reading, writing, and learning, but also education that opens minds and enlightens them. The kind of education we find if we look at what Koraes, and those who thought like him, talked about. The education which can unite people, whether they live here or at the other end of the Aegean, and even further away, in the Balkans, or the West. The kind of education that can, little by little, provide everyone with the freedom he seeks, that can teach him tolerance towards those who believe in another god and respect for that which is different. The kind of education that is able to create a great new society that will embrace us and empower us, a society where our progress will not depend on the arbitrary whims or the decisions of the few.”

I could refer to other examples in which European elements, not only ideology, are woven into the fabric of the novel. For instance, the cosmopolitan and multicultural character of late nineteenth-century Smyrna, where the European West met the East in a magical way. In Smyrna all faiths and nationalities coexist in an environment of a previously unthinkable respect and tolerance of diversity. However, we should be clear that fiction remains fiction. It is the adventure of a life, a web of human relationships, of dependence and subordination, but also of freedom, love and friendship, of the dilemmas, decisions, and confrontations of the central character with people and situations.

As we now know, that attempt to infuse European thought into the societies that constituted the Ottoman Empire had only limited success. It fared slightly better in the Greek territories. Various expressions of nationalism, religious dogmatism, deeply-rooted traditions and world-views, coupled with a general distrust of the intentions of Western European diplomacy stretching over long decades, prevented these ideas from prevailing and becoming an integral part of the local identity. Even in the Greece of today, where public opinion polls indicate that an even greater majority of the population favors the country's European orientation than do the populations of other member states of the EU, remnants of the opposing world view are still

evident in broad sections of society. The most important objective for contemporary Greek society is the fulfillment of its ongoing project to modernize and rationalize itself.

Over the past decade the younger generation of writers has increasingly provided examples of work extending the boundaries of creative freedom. Their work is in dialogue with the contemporary social milieu, where frontiers with the rest of Europe fell long ago. This dialogue takes many forms. As a rule it is silent, latent, and undeclared; for example, we find common themes, dealing with current social conditions, such as the solitude and isolation of life in big cities. Also on the increase is the shared recourse to common literary genres, such as the crime novel, or the very personal use of everyday modes of expression. This dialogue is highlighted when, for instance, literary texts deal with the communication problems experienced by people from different traditions.

Nevertheless, the multiple elements of European identity are fused in Greek literature, becoming integrated to the extent that they are adopted and perceived by the wider public consciousness as authentically national. In the prevailing climate of globalization and its inherent dangers, culture is perceived as the final bastion. If insistence upon the multicultural identity of Europe, and hence the need to safeguard national cultural identity in every society, remain priorities, then it will also remain difficult to identify European elements in a national literature. It will be even more difficult to acknowledge its contribution to any attempt at self-awareness.

—*Translated by Dr. Victoria Solomonidis*