

BETWEEN TWO PATRIAE

Transnational Patriotism in the Adriatic, 1800-1830

I would like to thank the Modern Greek Program and the Mediterranean Topographies workshop for organizing this lecture. I am very excited to be here!

So, let's begin:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0ssrYLKyYtg&feature=related>

For those that do not know, what we have just heard was the national anthem of Greece. It comprises the first two stanzas of the *Hymn to Liberty*, a poem written by Dionysios Solomos in 1823. The hymn was set to music and officially proclaimed the national anthem of Greece in 1865, that is, 44 years after the outbreak of the Greek Revolution and 35 after Greece's secession from the Ottoman Empire and its recognition as an independent state. In 1865, Solomos had already been dead for eight years, but his corpse not as much so: in that same year, indeed, his bones were exhumed from the island of Corfu (where death had found him) and transported to the island of Zante (where the poet had been born). Corfu and Zante, two of the seven Ionian Islands, had just been, the year before, united to the Kingdom of Greece.



This is a picture from another exhumation. We are in a village near London, in 1871. What you see here is the Italian expedition to the grave of Ugo Foscolo, the Zakyntian poet who had died in England some 44 years before. Foscolo's relics were translated to Italy and posed in the Santa Croce Church of Florence, next to those of Dante, Michelangelo, Galileo and Alfieri. Just ten years had passed since Italy's unification as a nation-state, five since its incorporation into Venice (Foscolo's second patria), while only one from the seizure of papal Rome by the Italian army. Post-Risorgimento Italy was in desperate need of myths.



The second picture relates to another exhumation. We are now much later, in 1960, and here we see the public ceremony welcoming to Greece the relics of the Zakyntian poet Andreas Kalvos and of his wife. Kalvos had been dead for almost 90 years and had been buried at the cemetery of Louth in the British Lincolnshire. It was on the initiative of the Greek ambassador in Britain and famous poet, Giorgos Seferis, that Kalvos' relics were exhumed and translated to Greece. They were received with honors and buried in the "Mausoleum of National Poets" in Zante, next to the relics of Solomos.



So, the *one song and two funerals* with which we have started, I believe introduce very well the three actors of our story: Ugo Foscolo, Andreas Kalvos and Dionysios Solomos, all three important poets of the beginning of the nineteenth century, all three born in Zante (and within few years of each other) and all three declared “national poets”. Albeit, “national” of two different countries. This is the historical paradox that sets my talk today in motion. I start from a simple question: How and why did these men, in such a narrow span of time, take such different routes regarding cultural identity and national belonging? What does this tell us about them and about their intellectual production? And especially, what does it tell us about the world in which they lived in, about the wider issues of their historical time?

Let me make clear right from the beginning that I approach the subject not as a literary theorist, but as a historian. Of course, we no longer experience the same tension between the two fields as we once did, and interdisciplinarity is now much easier to achieve. But in order to anticipate false expectations, I would like to make it perfectly clear that what interests me more in this lecture (and in my research in general) is not the work of these poets – or better, not primarily their work –, but their biographies; and their biographies not as such alone, but as a means to reach the wider historical context of their time. In other words, I see these poets as totally historical subjects, as intellectuals belonging to a specific historical reality that needs to be reached and understood; and if their cases appear to you isolated today (for reasons of the paper’s economy), you should imagine them instead as part of a longer line that includes many other similar cases of intellectuals, ideologists and men of letters. You should imagine them, for instance, next to the names of Andrea Mustoxidi, Ioannis Kapodistrias, Emilio Tipaldo, Isabella Teotochi-Albrizzi, Mario Pieri, Giovanni Veludo, Maria Petrettini, and many others, less or more known, Ionian intellectuals of the same period.

That said, let’s begin by revisiting their biographies and see what they can tell us.

I started this lecture by posing a question: what does this paradox (the fact that these men, born in the same island and within years from each other, became the “national poets” of two different countries), what does it tell us about the world in which they lived, about the wider issues of their historical time? I believe that we can now safely say that these three biographies, taken together, can give a micrographic image of the processes that took place on a macrohistoric level in the Adriatic region during the end of the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century. These processes involved the total or partial dismemberment of four empires (the Venetian, the Napoleonic, the Austrian and the Ottoman) and the rise in their place – or even within them – of a series of distinct nationalisms that would eventually be crystallized in separate nation-states. This transition signified not only the slow and uneven passage from empire to nation-state. It also marked the radical transformation of the concept of “patria”, from a cultural and local community, into a political and national entity; it meant the gradual reconceptualization of language that was transformed from a sign of social mobility, into an attribute of national identity. On the other hand, this transition amounted also to the dissolution of the common Adriatic space and to the breaking of its Venetian cultural continuum. It meant a shift of political and cultural geographies – in the case of the Ionians, loyalties shifted from the center that Venice used to be to the center that Athens was now becoming. Overall, these processes led to the total restructuring of space and to the tracing of new boundaries between homelands and languages: in the world that was now emerging, the world of mutually exclusive nationalisms, the sea was slowly transforming from a bridge into a border.

I consider, then, these three biographies as the three stages of this transition.

My argument resembles a reverse pyramid: if I started by pointing to the divergent routes that these poets eventually took, my effort during this lecture was to trace these lines backward toward the one point where the three of them initially converged, the *ground zero* let’s say of their story. I tried to imagine a moment in which all choices were still possible, all roads open. That was a moment that multiple patriae could still coexist and transnational patriotism could constitute an option. In fact, if I started by showing these men as “national poets”, I shall now end by saying that they were just individuals located at the crossing point between two centuries and two cultures; they were intellectuals trying to reinvent themselves and adjust to a changing world. If the dead bodies of these poets were so clear, their lives indeed were so blurred.

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