

## Speaking Greek at the American Academy over the Last Two Centuries

### *Abstract*

*What do ancient and Modern Greek studies have to say to each other? What kind of conversation have Modern Greek studies—where Modern Greek is spoken—and Classics—where ancient Greek is read—been carrying on over the last couple centuries? What tensions, silences, and mutualities have defined this relationship? This talk traces several aspects of the history of this relationship, and focuses on ways in which academic multiculturalism has fostered intellectual exchange among scholars of ancient and Modern Greek. It discusses institutions, scholars, films, fiction, and poetry that bring Classics into conversation with Modern Greek studies, and develops its own word play on this relationship. It concludes by proposing a framework for future collaboration between the two academic fields: cultivation of a particular ethos of citizenship among students and the wider public.*

I will be speaking today about speaking Greek at the American University. I do not, for a moment, take this opportunity for granted. Speaking about Greek, particularly ancient Greek in relation to Modern Greek, is not always an available option in the academy. I must, therefore, place my speaking in relation to the wider context that enables it. The fact that I am able to speak Greek in the academy stems from the immense labor of scholars who have founded Modern Greek programs in this country. But I do not also forget the support for Greek by those outside the university, such as the Greek American community and philhellenes whose financial support promotes the academic presence of Modern Greek. This very lecture is possible because of Dimitri Pallas, Founder and President of the Foundation for Modern Greek studies, and Irmgard Pallas, a philhellene. I extend my deep appreciation to the donors and the Foundation.

I am neither a classicist, nor a linguist. How do I enter the terrain of speaking Greek over a span of two centuries? My training is in cultural studies. I am interested in the question of knowledge; who produces it and for what purpose. I have devoted my

professional life, for example, around a key question: how do we get to know Greek Americans? Who represents Greek identity in the United States, how, and for what purpose? This interest helps me focus. Ancient Greek and Modern Greek studies, two fields of knowledge: What defines their relationship in the American academy?

Several metaphors have been used by Greeks to capture this relationship. One is a relationship between mother and daughter; another between roots and branches (see Mackridge 2009). But I want to look elsewhere beyond metaphors of kinship and organic connectivity. There are two academic communities in the US—one that speaks ancient Greek and one that speaks Modern Greek. I want to look at their institutional relationship. How have the two been speaking—or not speaking—with each other? What questions of mutual interest have they been asking lately?

And so today I'll use as my compass the intersection point between Classics—the institutional site where ancient Greek is read—and Modern Greek studies—where Modern Greek is both read and spoken.

Let's begin with a well-known fact. Most Modern Greek programs were created in the 1970s, and some even as recently as the 1990s. Modern Greek is a relative newcomer in the American academy, while, as we know, Classics dates its academic presence back to the early Republic. Why this Modern Greek belatedness? And how did Modern Greek eventually assert academic viability and visibility?

To start untangling these questions, let me turn to a particular moment in the history of the American University, the founding of the University of Michigan in 1817. The initial name of the University was Catholepistemiad—a composite, seven-syllable, Greek-derived word—selected by the University's founder, Judge Augustus B.

Woodward. Catholepistemiad stood for a claim to universal knowledge. The aim was to cover the span of the entire spectrum of sciences; όλες τις επιστήμες.

The university broke tradition from the East Coast American universities, which heavily emphasized the classical curriculum. The founder of the University of Michigan believed that the modern University emphasized the sciences, and boldly introduced economics as a subject of learning. But the university did not abandon its commitment to classical subjects. As early as 1819 the university supported the Classical academy in Detroit, which was offering courses in Latin, Greek, French, and English. The thirteen professorships bore names that pointed to connections with classical learning. Professorship number one was *Catholepistemia*, or universal science. It was followed by *Anthropoglossia*, or literature and languages. Number eight was *Iatrika* or medical sciences; number twelve *Diegetica*, or history (Peckham 1994, 6). The names of the categories were in Greek, testifying in full display the cultural power of Hellenism in 19<sup>th</sup> century America.

In the University's mission to cultivate universal knowledge we recognize the modernist claim to capture the whole; the *katholikon*. But from our perspective today we know that a claim to the whole is a problematic claim. From our vantage point one would ask, what does a claim to universality mask? We are suspicious that any claim to universality is a way to include dominant values and interests and exclude others. Indeed, we notice that certain parts were missing from the University's claim to universal knowledge. The curriculum of modern languages in the early university, for instance, included French or Italian. But Modern Greek was offered only sporadically. Why this neglect?

A word play, a word play between Greek and English, presses itself:

**Catholepistemiad (Κατά-όλον-επί-ίσταμαι)**

Ίσταμαι ενώπιον  
της επιστήμης σου,  
Catholepistemiad  
modernity's ambition,  
to capture myriad  
subjects, including Iliad  
το όλον to grasp.

Επίσταμαι εγώ του επιμέρους·  
καθόλου το Νεοελληνικόν,  
πουθενά το δικό μου μερ(τ)ικόν  
(semicolon): I gasp<sup>1</sup>

Modern Greek then marks an early absence from the institution. But this was a partial absence. An eminent line of classicists brought Modern Greek into the university' orbit during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. Several names come to mind: Donald Swanson (1914–1976), of the University of Minnesota; Carl Darling Buck (1866–1955) University of Chicago); James Anastasios Notopoulos (1905–1967) of Princeton and Harvard University; Gordon Myron Messing (1917–2002) of Cornell University. These scholars built bridges between ancient and Modern Greek via their interest in linguistics and philology. They valued the study of how the Greek language has developed over time— and sought to illuminate their subject through the lens of continuity. Their contributions have been impressive. They compiled dictionaries of Modern Greek, put together bibliographies of Modern Greek scholarship, and reflected on the utility of Modern Greek for learning ancient Greek. Some taught Modern Greek as well (see Stavrou 1982).

This was a prolific production. But, notably, it took place in the absence of Modern Greek Programs. Modern Greek was not part of the modern language curriculum until at least the 1960s. To explore this absence one must take into account the relationship between ancient and modern languages in the university. This relationship has been antagonistic, even contentious, as modern and ancient languages were and have been competing for resources. As early as the early 1900s, advocates of modern languages and literatures made a case for wider representation in the curriculum at the expense of what they deemed “dead” languages. At the University of Michigan, when proficiency in Greek and Latin was dropped as a requirement for an A.B. degree in 1901, German gained students while Classics enrollments declined (Peckham 1994, 112).

This competition aside, there are larger historical forces at work in the relationship between Modern and ancient Greek. Classicists, in the spirit of critical reflexivity that defines their discipline today, raise this poignant question too. Johanna Hanink (2016), a classicist at Brown University, notes that Modern Greek is not required by graduate students in Classics even though there has been a rigorous tradition of Modern Greek scholarship about antiquity. She asks, why is it that Modern Greek is not one among the “discipline approved languages”? Her answer points to the connection between knowledge, language, and power. One way for early classicists to assert their own interpretation of antiquity was to disregard local knowledge. They empowered their own version of antiquity by discounting the Modern Greek perspective on antiquity. Hanink points to this colonial legacy as one of the reasons why “Modern Greek still [does] not have a seat at the classicist’s table.” Hanink’s reflections underline the

necessity for a future project: The history of the relationship between ancient and Modern Greek in the American academy awaits to be written.

It was multiculturalism that enabled the presence of Modern Greek in the academy. Multiculturalism transformed the university, and it did so radically. It took the University's claim to universality to task by pointing to its neglect to address a wide range of subjects. Advocates of multiculturalism made the case—and they made it with fierce political passion—for the inclusion of previously excluded subjects. It was necessary, they argued, for educational institutions to recognize the multiplicity of languages, histories, and cultures in the United States, “to address the educational needs of the entire citizenry” (Gutierrez 1994, 159). They called therefore for the inclusive expansion of the curriculum and a dramatic rethinking of what counts as a legitimate subject of learning. In this reconstitution, Modern Greek found a fertile space to assert a presence.

Modern Greek worked its way toward the multicultural University via identity politics. In multiculturalism, identity groups whose languages, cultures, and histories were marginalized demanded representation. This was played out at the deep fabric of the society at a grass-roots level. African American, Asian American, Native American, and Chicano communities mobilized, “crashing the universities' gates” to claim visibility (Gutierrez 1994, 157). (The legendary “culture wars” demand their militant metaphors.) European Americans followed suit. The ideology of inclusion resonated with Greek American communities too. They mobilized to place Modern Greek in the curriculum. The speaking of Modern Greek in the academy is integrally connected with community cultural activism tapping the language of multiculturalism.

Let us note that the Greek American community's mobilization to assert Modern Greek made copious references to classical knowledge. At least at my own institution, the project Paideia in the mid-1970s represented a classicizing moment. In name, narrative, and image, the project of "establish[ing] a Modern Greek curriculum" at OSU animated the classical. The fundraising brochure, for instance, draws from the writing of Plato to envision a civic mission for Modern Greek education:

Paideia is the education in virtue from youth onwards, which makes men [sic] passionately desire to become perfect citizens, knowing both how to rule and how to be ruled on a basis of justice. –Plato, *Laws*.

The paradox must be evident. Greek Americans sought a place for their cultural particularity via the language of universality. There is no mentioning here of the value for learning Modern Greek. The rationale builds on classical learning and the way it fosters citizenship as virtue.

Academic multiculturalism brought about a multifaceted dialogue between ancient and Modern Greek. In their exchange, I wish to argue, Modern Greek entered the conversation from a distinct position: the quest for *isotimia*. *Isotimia* holds immense value in Greek culture: It entails the "right to be treated as a person entitled to equal esteem" (Peristiany 1966, 188). It is about the claiming of self-worth in relation to Others. The way one asserts *isotimia* is inherently social. It is about cultural performance that aspires to excellence in what one does, even outdo others. It is performative and competitive. One has to prove his or her *isotimia*.

When Gonda Van Steen, a scholar whose work traverses Classics and Modern

Greek studies, advocated the conjoining of Classics and Modern Greek, it is no accident that she did so by using the language of “true multiculturalism” (2002, 175). The rhetoric of true multiculturalism implicitly points to the colonial relationship between Classics and Modern Greek. The latter has been often seen as the Other, deemed of lesser relevance, avoided as a matter of cultural pollution, or even plainly devalued. The language of true multiculturalism underlined the necessity for respect toward Modern Greek. Other Classicists advanced this call too. Sarah Morris wrote: “We advocate a different spirit and future for departments of classics to recognize modern partners” (2001, 10). In this context, Modern Greek sought recognition agonistically. It asserted equality through scholarly quality.

I cannot resist the sharing of this word play:

**Modern Greek *Isotimia***

I insist. I make it plain.  
I am not here to complain.

Neither am I here in ire  
a Modern Greek defense to try.

In my vocation instead I aspire  
to test my work in scholarship’s pyre.

Τουτέστιν, in this conference  
I yearn to earn  
distinction in diction,  
a reference, to impress!<sup>2</sup>

Let me pursue the Modern Greek Studies quest for *isotimia* in some detail. The teaching of Modern Greek in the multicultural university asserted a presence. But it did not warrant academic respectability. Major programs in the country never treated the teaching of Modern Greek as their sole mandate. Instead they sought to contribute to the



University's wider intellectual life, to its world of ideas. To put it differently: U.S. Modern Greek did not retreat into linguistic and cultural insularity. The stance was one of an active partner who sought to make a difference in academic conversations and debates. Early on in the history of Modern Greek, in the 1970s and 1980s, it was modernist Greek literature—that is literature that experimented with literary form and expression—that offered the venue for esteem. It was modernist poetry after all that earned two Nobel Prizes for Greek literature. One to Yorgos Seferis in 1963, and the other one to Odysseas Elytis in 1979.

Greek modernist poetry has had a powerful impact regarding the place of Modern Greek in American academic and cultural worlds, having brought distinction to Modern Greek letters. Exceptional scholarship has been produced around it. And it fostered an outstanding oeuvre of translations from Modern Greek into English. The power of literary modernism lies in its simultaneous claim to the national and the international. It speaks, that is, both the language of the nation and its continuity, and the language of the modernist universal. The poetry of Seferis, for instance, utilizes both modernist poetic form—ellipsis, literary quotation, fragmentary association—and evokes the nation's diachronic integration. His literary modernism joins international modernist poetics and national particularity. This claim to continuity between antiquity and modernity found a receptive English-speaking public. Literary modernism, Artemis Leontis notes, turned “the ‘living’ Hellas” into “a subject of interest” for a powerful literature-loving public. “For English-speaking enthusiasts, Greek literature seemed to reconnect the modern to the ancient world” (1997, 217). A literary community and a cultural industry brought the ancient, the modern, and English under the same book cover.

Notably, this literary corpus intertwined ancient and Modern Greek. Poetry in particular made references to Greek antiquity in conversation to contemporary Greece. It cited ancient authors and circulated ancient Greek themes. Exceptional scholarship and eminent translations brought Modern Greek into English while many applauded this output as a venue promoting “Greece and Greek civilization, which is a continuous process from prehistoric times until today” (Bowra, cited in Leontis, 1997, 217). Let us look closely at a specific example of modernist Greek poetics, namely section Γ from the poem *Mythistorema*, by Nobel Laureate George Seferis.

Γ’

*Μέμνησο λουτρῶν οἷς ἐνοσφίσθης*  
Ξύπνησα μὲ τὸ μαρμάρينو τοῦτο κεφάλι στὰ χέρια  
ποῦ μοῦ ἐξάντλει τοὺς ἀγκῶνες καὶ δὲν ξέρω ποῦ νὰ  
τ’ ἀκουμπήσω.  
Ἐπεφτε τὸ ὄνειρο καθὼς ἔβγαινα ἀπὸ τὸ ὄνειρο  
ἔτσι ἐνώθηκε ἡ ζωὴ μας καὶ θὰ εἶναι πολὺ δύσκολο νὰ ξαναχωρίσει.

...

*Remember the baths where you were murdered*  
I woke with this marble head in my hands;  
it exhausts my elbow and I don’t know where to put it down.  
It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the dream  
so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it to separate again.

(translation by Edmund Keeley, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/51457>).

The poem displays a range of Seferis’s poetic techniques: The ubiquitous use of quotations from ancient literary texts is one. The motto is taken from Aeschylus’s tragedy *The Libation Bearers*. Upon his homecoming, Orestes cries at his slain father’s tomb. The use of the quotation is elliptical: the poet omits the «πάτερ» from the original line. Elusiveness is also at work: In what way does the motto connect with the predicament of the poetic persona? Who is the poetic persona in the first place? In the poem, fragments

from ancient Greek and Modern Greek coexist obliquely. Their elusive juxtaposition presses for an interpretation. What does the poem mean? A vast volume of scholarship pursues this interpretive task.

Here I wish to bring attention to what the poem was made to mean during a particular performance, namely the opening ceremony of the 2004 Athens Olympic games. Let us recall the visual representation of the poem (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vzw8OQIVQAs>): A woman wanders holding the broken head of an ancient statue in her hands; she recites the lines of the poem as she seemingly wonders about her place in the world; she, a modern, is in tangible connection with the Greek past. In the background symbols of Greek antiquity—mythological creatures, fragments and figures of the Greek artistic and cultural heritage—are on display; they float and fuse; they combine and recombine; they parade and partake in the spectacle. Significantly, the past is staged through computer-generated images; antiquity is an integral component of modernity.

The ingenuousness of this technological spectacle aspires to match the greatness of the past. The performative context of the poem associates the greatness of the past with the nation's modern sophistication. It performs an answer to the perennial question associated with the Greek past as the burden of Modern Greeks: "What have the Greeks done lately"? They perform their connection with the past, the opening ceremony provided the answer, in the most virtuosic manner.

The advent of academic multiculturalism introduced a rupture to literary modernism. In fact, it brought about a paradigm shift by proposing new practices of reading. The multicultural academy read texts—novels, poems, films, biography and

autobiography—as vehicles of ideology and tools of authority; it discussed texts as the means by which a culture molds a person’s identity. What literary modernism primarily valued—the appreciation of dexterity in form and aptitude in literary techniques—took a secondary role. In other words, culture as a politicized arena became the center; culture as aesthetic achievement was de-centered. The aesthetic approach to literature was out. The politics of culture was in.

A community of scholars took up the challenge in situating Modern Greek studies within this conversation. They criticized literary modernism for containing Hellenism within the Greek national context, and for its preoccupation with Hellenism as direct link to the classical past. They interrogated literary modernism as “introverted, ethnocentric and anticolonial” (Tziouvas 1997, 2). Instead, the new interpretive community explored Hellenism both within Greece and outside Greece, but not as a national property. Instead of seeing Hellenism in terms of national purity, they pointed to its histories of mingling; instead of seeing it as a single entity, they pointed to the plurality of its expressions (Jusdanis 1995). Along this vein, scholars brought to surface artists and authors who explored the interfacing and mixing of Hellenism with other cultural systems. Hellenism was not national but a dynamic, cosmopolitan cultural resource.

Speaking Modern Greek at the multicultural University means to also speak the language of cultural studies. This is to say that instead of reproducing dominant paradigms critical Modern Greek studies questions their truths: it points to misplaced assumptions, questions entrenched methodologies, challenges major truths. Scholars spoke of Modern Greek studies as a relational position of intervention against the truths and assumptions of dominant disciplines (Lambropoulos 1990).

Modern Greek, then, speaks at least two languages: Modern Greek in the classroom, and academic English outside of it. And it does the latter, one could add, given the discussion above, with a critical accent. Thus, it asserts *isotimia*—again, “the right to be treated as a person entitled to equal esteem”—as a multilingual field.

Several Modern Greek studies scholars spoke additional languages, namely the languages of philosophy and Classics. Multiculturalism animated intense interest in the ways in which classical antiquity has been represented, translated, or reimagined in the postclassical era. In this context Modern Greek studies scholars write about the ways in which Modern Greek authors interact with ancient texts. Like literary modernism, this interest includes reflection on the literary uses of ancient quotes; but unlike modernism, this turn has no interest in establishing the continuity of the nation, nor the endurance of a native ethos, or intertextual influences. Instead, the interest is in how Modern Greek authors undertake their reading of the past as an exceptional performance; how they engage with prestigious texts in memorable interventions, competing to establish their own outstanding cultural mark themselves.

Let us take the poem “Young Men of Sidon (A.D. 400)” by Constantine Cavafy as an illustration. In the poem, an actor has been hired to entertain a group of privileged youth. The actor recites a series of Hellenistic epigraphs to proceed with the recitation of fragments from the epigram on Aeschylus’s tomb. We recall that the epigram in the tomb, perhaps written by Aeschylus’s himself, commemorates Aeschylus’s heroic deeds in the battle of Marathon. There is no mention of his literary achievements:

This tomb hideth the dust of Aeschylus, an Athenian, Euphorion’s son, who died in wheat-bearing Gela; his glorious valour the precinct of Marathon may proclaim, and the long-haired Medes, who knew it well.

The actor in the poem cites the quote only to be confronted by a youth in the small circle of listeners. The youth contests Aeschylus's decision. He claims that what matters the most is to unfailingly devote oneself to literary matters, not to defend the city with valor. The youth uses eloquence to assert his own reading of the past.

But there is more in this performative competition to establish a relationship with antiquity. As Vassilis Lambropoulos (2002) points out, the poet himself, by the virtue of his chosen title, enters the contestation. What is the valence of the youth's assessment given that the arena of his eloquent performance is merely a circle of privileged youth? Does this limited setting warrant the glow of his eloquent engagement with the past?

If Greek poets cultivate "the ethics of an agonistic relation with their ancient predecessors" (191), scholars too, Lambropoulos proposes, should practice an agonistic philology; they should undertake "performative readings" of the antiquity and how it is utilized in the arts and letters—"approaches that dramatize and bring to public view and scrutiny our complex relation with ... diverse traditions" (211). Adept scholarship asserts the contemporary relevance of certain texts and not others; our performance, he writes, "judges and determines what is memorable" (211).

Both authors and scholars in the formulation operate within the principle of *isotimia*. Authors establish their self-worth competitively with their ancient predecessors. Scholars vie for shaping culture through virtuosic readings.

Ancient and Modern Greek: Two ways of speaking Greek, two academic fields. They have perhaps never come closer together anywhere else as they have been in the context of academic multiculturalism. The discipline of Classics and the field of Modern

Greek studies intersected at the time when the modernist notion of Catholopistemiad was in question, in fact subjected to critical assault.

Let me briefly take up the topic of Classics in multiculturalism and the way it intersected with Modern Greek studies. Multiculturalism critiqued universality and favored particularity. It questioned any statement claiming universal validity, stressing instead situated knowledge. It challenged therefore, the authority of the Classics to define a particular corpus of texts as exemplars of truth and as a source of authority. It interrogated the social and aesthetic relevance of classical texts for contemporary life.

In the mid-1990s, a film offered an example of this critique. *City Hall* (1996), starring Al Pacino, John Cusack, Bridget Fonda, and Danny Aiello, questions the moral authority of Classics as a model of civic governance. *City Hall* is a political film and investigative thriller that takes up the problem of municipal governance. The setting is New York City in the mid 1990s. The plot is driven by a lethal encounter between a police officer and a mafia boss in which both are killed. A stray bullet in the shootout kills a six-year old African American boy as well. The government's inability to curb corruption threatens that violence spirals out of control and blankets the city into chaos. An investigation is set in place. Against advice to the contrary, Mayor John Pappas delivers the eulogy in the funeral of the boy. The eulogy, passionate and eloquent, successfully turns a moment of intense mourning into an urgent plea for civic activism to reclaim the lost greatness of the city.

The mayor speaks in English but the speech emulates a distinct Greek genre. The eulogy centers to the golden age of Pericles, in fact it builds on a theme in Pericles's Funeral Oratory, namely the requirement of the citizenry to participate in the (re)making

of a great city. The mayor, an Astoria-born Greek American, cites the deeds of classical Athenians who are claimed as the American nation's ancestors. Classical antiquity offers the template for a civic vision of New York City. The citizens are called to turn the classical ideal into reality.

To speak Greek, in this film, is to speak about the universal applicability of the classical ideal. Through the main character, who is the Greek American mayor of NYC, and his Greek eulogy, the film brings together Greek America and Classics. This relation points to the vital role of the classical past in Greek American identity. At the same time, the fact that the mayor proposes this classical ideal as a civic vision for NYC highlights the legacy of ancient Greece as a template that shapes civic American identity. *City Hall* acknowledges Pericles' funeral oratory as a component of America's political heritage, and thus the contemporary relevance of the classical ideal. Indeed, from Abraham Lincoln and his Gettysburg address, to John Kennedy's Jr. inaugural presidential address, and to former President Obama's remarks during his November 2016 Athens visit, Pericles stands as model of patriotism and active citizenship for the self-making of the Republic. Mayor Pappas aligns himself with this tradition to address a predominantly African American audience, and call this community into civic action:

The first and perhaps only great mayor was Greek. He was Pericles of Athens, and he lived some 2500 years ago, and he said, "All things good of this earth flow into the City because of the City's greatness." Well, we were great once. Can we not be great again? (See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eoyxeaBguTk>)

But the mayor's actions fail to measure up his lofty ideals. His thirst for power compromises his commitment to clean up the government. He falls prey to corrupt



politics, and governance ends up being denigrated to business as usual. He falls from grace.

*City Hall* then brings the culture conflicts of the 1990s into the domain of popular culture. It dethrones the cherished classical past as a civic exemplar for the nation. The classical is compelling in rhetoric but falls short in its political promise. The mayor's compromise brings down the ideal of the classical as civic mission. Instead, it is the deputy mayor who acts as the "ethics hero" in the film. It is he who embodies the moral integrity of the public servant: defy personal and political risk, and refuse the "sweet deal" offered to him by the mayor for "greater power and prestige" (Wielde and Schultz 2007, 73). "Ethics wins over spoils of crime" (75). The universal ideal crumbles, and the situated ethics of a dedicated public servant wins. Instead of offering a solution, the classical past is part of the problem. The classical ideal is unattainable as those who espouse it are prone to corruption.

The multicultural critique of Classics revitalized the field. It expanded the geographic scope of the discipline beyond Europe, and probed the imagining of the ancient world in terms of cross-cultural interactions and mixing, not purity. Multiculturalism brought Classics out of antiquity, as I mentioned earlier, drawing attention to the ways in which classical texts could be read and interpreted as relevant to a contemporary audience. Classics reinvented itself around a vocabulary that included the place of the discipline in contemporary conversations about gender, cross-cultural dialogue, and citizenship.

It was this paradigm shift that fueled the dialogue between Classicists and Modern Greek studies scholars. Scholars speaking ancient and Modern Greek often found

themselves in the same workshop, the same journal issue, even the same article, speaking the language of academic multiculturalism. And both ancient or Modern Greek scholars found themselves pressed about questions of their discipline's relevance.<sup>3</sup> Classicists and Modern Greek studies scholars joined to reflect on the question, "Why Greek"? Perhaps for the first time in history, the sign "Greek" did not require the modern modifier.

In this framework, Classicists saw Modern Greece anew. While in the past, Modern Greece was seen as an anomaly to the Classical ideal of purity, it was now offering an exhilarating social space of hybridity, cultural production of antiquity, and rich oral and performative popular culture. Modern Greece was seen as a cultural field that could illuminate new methodologies to learn about antiquity (Van Steen 2002). Modern Greek was seen "as the single field with the greatest potential to move classics out of antiquity" (Morris 2001, 11).

I cannot resist my own multilingual word play:

### **Neohellenic plus Classical**

**(Νεοελληνικό + Κλασσικό)**

Νεοελλη-νικό  
Συν (+)  
Κλασσ-οικό

In the academy's nation  
First class συνοικέσιον

Long gestation

Agonistic cohabitation  
Aids grades,  
A plus (+).<sup>3</sup>

Multiculturalism generates yet another site of cohabitation between Modern and ancient Greek, namely in literature. I have in mind the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex*

by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002), a novel that brings under the same cover at least three threads of Greek: (1) modern, (2) diasporic, and (3) ancient.

*Middlesex* engages multiple Greek worlds. It traces the history of three generations of Greek Americans and in the course of its oneiric, skillful storytelling interweaves Modern Greek history, Greek American history and society, and Greek mythology. The story utilizes the myth of Salamis, the classical figure of the “hermaphrodite,” to construct the identity of the novel’s main intersex character. This classicism plays a vital role in the narrative. Like Hermaphroditus, who “characterize[s] the fragmented human being in search of unity” (Trendel 2011, 2), Cal/ie, the third generation Greek American intersex character in the novel reconciles his/her fragmented gender and biological self. As Aristi Trendel notes, the question of gender multiplicity in *Middlesex* “becomes a metaphor for the composite self” (2011, 6). The novel attests to “the viability of the hyphenated being,” and it is classicism that informs its endorsement of the multicultural self.

It is useful to reflect on the ways in which *Middlesex* juxtaposes the speaking of Greek at the level of the characters and the speaking of Greek at the level of the author. The Greek American characters in the novel progressively distance themselves from Greek across generations. They lose their fluency in the language. At the same time, the narration displays vast knowledge about Greek worlds, both past and present, and within both Greece and the diaspora. In other words, the novel performs a particular mode of speaking Greek, Greek as learning—as *paideia*. *Middlesex* makes a place for itself in the distinguished republic of American letters, and from this position it maximizes the dissemination of knowledge about Greek in English.

*Middlesex* is emblematic of multiculturalism's preoccupation with the Self. Multiculturalism recognizes the Self as an open-ended process; as fluid and becoming; it explores a subject's transgressions, multiplicities and ambiguities; its crossing of all kinds of boundaries. But while the probing of the self is of immense value, there is yet another topic that requires our attention: how literature engages with the question of civic identity. In what way does Greek and Greek American literature inform discussions about citizenship?

Let me turn to a short story as an example. The title is *Pericles on the 31<sup>st</sup> Street* by Harry Mark Petrakis (1978). I teach this story in my Greek American class to illustrate the notion of classical heritage as a past that can be utilized to address contemporary concerns.

The main character of the story, Simonakis, is a Greek immigrant. The setting is working class bar in urban America; ethnic and class conflict drive the plot of the story, a social drama unfolding in a bar where the clientele is all ethnically marked. The story juxtaposes two distinct uses of heritage. When Simonakis extols the greatness of the classical Greece as a badge of cultural superiority he alienates a group of shopkeepers from various ethnic backgrounds. But this Greek immigrant also identifies with Pericles as a vested orator who speaks the truth to defend public interest. Pericles is seen as a public figure who stands for a noble statesman committed to defeat the demagogues who manipulate the public in order to enhance their own personal interests at the expense of the interests of the polis.

It is this principle, defending the public good, that informs Simonakis' stance as the plot unfolds. When the shopkeepers' landlord unfairly raises the rent under false

pretenses, Simonakis harnesses all his oratorical power to expose the landlord as a demagogue the way, he imagines, Pericles would have acted. Simonakis' unsolicited intervention serves as a catalyst to successfully mobilize the shop owners against this injustice, earning the admiration of his former adversaries. The story concludes with all the characters toasting their victory in the spirit of a newly found solidarity.

Petrakis' story takes up the relevance of the classical heritage today to provide a contingent answer. Heritage is not an inherently valuable resource, the story seems to be telling us. Instead, the crucial question is how we utilize this heritage, what kinds of uses we imagine for it. Deployed in an ethnocentric way, the connection with the past fuels ethnic conflict; in this case, classical heritage works as a liability. But mobilized as knowledge to effect justice, it serves the interests of vulnerable groups; here heritage works as an asset. The story points to the classical past as a usable past to mold citizens invested in the public good. Greek American identity and the classical heritage speak about civic concerns, not narrow ethnic interests.

Petrakis's story offers an example of how literature utilizes ancient Greek heritage for the purpose of public good. It invites us to reflect on ways to address wrongdoing/exploitation through interethnic solidarity. The interest is in public minded citizens; the focus is on the use of culture in civic engagement. This is not of course a new idea. But its urgency is. There is a powerful thread in contemporary culture that relentlessly promotes "competitive, self-interested individualism" (Giroux and Giroux 2004:120). The ideal of the middle-class American citizen is one who espouses self-reliance, freedom, calculation, individualism, innovation, and flexibility at the expense of those citizen-subjects who pursue alternative modes of civic engagement such as civic

duties and obligations. The idea therefore of civic education—*paideia pros ta koina* (Castoriadis 1991:140–41)—is as relevant as ever.<sup>4</sup> What does it mean to be a public-minded citizen in an era whose measure of success is entrepreneurial innovation? This is question that could animate yet another con-joining of Classics and Modern Greek. In what ways does Greek and Greek American literature animate the classical past? Classicists and neohellenists could fruitfully open yet another thread of conversation around this question.

I'll conclude with a poem of my own:

**Classics–Modern Greek  
(Ohio/Michigan)**

Crossing the border  
for a talk of tall order

Regional rivalries  
Buckeyes–Wolverines  
Packs of ice, explosive benzines!

Crossing the border  
a diaspora proper

Scholars' links  
Modern Greek–Classics  
Curiosity picks, conversational peaks!

Speaking Greek,  
English with Greek,  
ancient/modern Greek  
accents, translations, transliterations

You say koine, I say κοινή  
You say paideia, I say παιδεία

Things have advanced (and fast!)  
Our dialogue no longer flat

Our interests intersect  
in multicultural hues

we flirt, love to inter-text  
cultural studies cues  
–receipts of reception  
literary traces, agonistic races  
identity formation, cross-fertilization  
no signs of deception.  
Hard-earned mutual respect.

Crossing the border  
προχωρώ. Και περπατώ.

Νέο χώρο δημιουργώ  
μ'ένα ταγκό κλασσικό  
κοσμοπολίτικο  
αγωνιστικό.  
Με την λογοτεχνία οδηγό  
σε πόλη πολυπολιτισμική  
πολύτιμους πολίτες  
να συναντώ· σας προσκαλώ.  
Classics–Modern Greek  
είστε εδώ;

Crossing the border  
Ohio State homeland, I dare

say, set aside the split in regional affect.  
In a project's affinities  
intellectual possibilities,

borders do connect.

I go on. And I keep walking.

A new space create  
through a tango, classical  
cosmopolitan  
agonistic.  
With literature as my compass  
in a multicultural city  
worthy citizens  
to encounter; I invite you.  
Classics–Modern Greek  
are you in?

Yiorgos Anagnostou

The Ohio State University

### *Notes*

<sup>1</sup> επιμέρους = particular  
μερικόν = partial  
μερτικόν = share, portion

<sup>2</sup> Τουτέστιν = that is [to say]

<sup>3</sup> See for example Jusdanis (1997), Ruprecht (1997), Morris (2001), and Van Steen (2002) among others.

<sup>4</sup> I draw closely here from Martha Klironomos' (2006) discussion on developing a Modern Greek studies pedagogy.

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