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THE RECEPTION OF KALVOS BY MODERN GREEK CRITICISM:  
SOME INTRODUCTORY REMARKS\*

The reception of Kalvos's poetry is especially interesting because there have been many different perspectives on his work, varying from the most positive to the entirely negative. A close look at these reviews shows that they tend to correspond to the milieu and literary tendencies of each particular period of time. That is to say, the response of the readership to Kalvos's works through time permits us to see the development not only of Kalvian studies but also of modern Greek criticism.

One can say that the history of Kalvian studies has developed in parallel with the history of modern Greek letters and intellectual life in the last one hundred and fifty years. Thus, my discussion of the reception of Kalvos's poetry runs parallel with my task of elucidating the intellectual aspects and movements underlying the comments of critics on Kalvos.

The monographs on Kalvos are few, but there are countless studies and articles on various aspects of his life and work. It would therefore be interesting to examine, in detail, how this poet has been treated by modern Greek criticism, between the years 1818-1960.

As far as I know, this is the first study of this subject. Since there has hardly been a single literary or academic generation which has entirely ignored Kalvos or his work, such a task is fully justified. At the same time it is possible to distinguish between the official academic line and the reviews of critics, between the interpretations of scholars and the evaluations of critics, between the contributions of biographers, anthologists, historians of literature and authors of encyclopaedia entries and lecturers on formal occasions, and so on. Kalvos—together with Solomos, Palamas and Cavafy—provides one of the few examples which show such differences in perspective, approach and theoretical framework. The work is further justified by the absence of studies on the reception of modern Greek poets.

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Kalvos was a poet and a scholar at the same time. If one wants to present a global analysis of his reception by modern Greek criticism, one has to approach his work as a whole including his non-poetic output. Of course, the reception of his poetry will dominate my research, as critical commentary has concentrated on this part of his work.

Since Kalvos was an intellectual with extensive and varied interests and activities, I consider the year 1818 as the starting point for my research, when the poet delivered a series of public lectures in London. 1960 constitutes another boundary mark in Kalvian studies, for two major reasons: a) because it was nominated by the then Greek government as “έτος Κάλβου” and his remains were conveyed from Louth, Lincolnshire, to Zakynthos; and b) because studies on Kalvos subsequently became very large in number and mainly restated the accepted literary merit of his poetry. This is why I prefer to end my examination in that year.

The lack of substantial studies on the reception of Kalvos might be a bibliographical disadvantage; however, such an extensive study presents an interesting challenge. The same can be said about the almost complete lack of bibliographical references, pertinent to my subject, in English or any other European language.

One of the major problems in dealing with such a topic is placing the material into a theoretical framework. Most of the questions relating to my topic can be tackled in the context of Reader-Response Criticism and more particularly by making use of Reception Theory<sup>1</sup>. This theoretical movement appeared to a large extent as “a reaction to social, intellectual, and literary developments in West Germany during the late 1960s”<sup>2</sup>, and in general “it refers throughout to a general shift in concern from the author and the work to the text and the reader”<sup>3</sup>.

Among the six dispositions of Reader-response theory suggested by Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman<sup>4</sup>, I consider as the most appropriate for my study the historical one, which is chiefly represented by the German theoretician Hans Robert Jauss (especially in his important essay “Literatur-

1. Reception theory can be separated from Reader-Response Criticism “on the basis of lack of mutual influence”. See Robert C. Holub, *Reception Theory. A critical introduction*, London and New York: Methuen 1984, p. xiii.

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

4. Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1980, pp. 6-7.

geschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft")<sup>5</sup>.

Jauss's essay "Literary history as a challenge to literary theory" constitutes his manifesto on the aesthetics of reception (Rezeptionsästhetik) and is one of the central texts of reception theory. The crucial question to which Jauss tries to give an answer in this work is "what is and for what purpose does one study literary history?"<sup>6</sup>. In most of "Literary Histories" one merely finds a description of literature based on an already sanctioned canon, setting out the life and work of the authors one after another in chronological order. Literary histories have been based on two kinds of methodological principle: the first proposes the organisation of a literary canon around general tendencies, genres and other similar categories; the second deals only with major authors in blocks; neither solution is satisfactory. It is indisputable that literary history should be rewritten, from a new viewpoint.

Hans Robert Jauss tries to delineate the limits of his theory, by giving an answer to this question extending over seven precepts. To start with, one has to accept that a literary piece of work does not stand by itself as an object and it does not offer the same view to each reader in every period. The recapture of literary texts on the part of the receptive reader, the reflective critic and the author in his continuing output constitutes a new way of writing the history of literature as a process of aesthetic reception and production. The historical and literary context in which a literary piece of work appears, "is not a factual, independent series of events that exists apart from an observer"<sup>7</sup>.

One cannot say that Kalvos's work presents itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum; in many ways, it awakens memories of certain things which have already been read, brings the reader to an emotional attitude and is a challenge to be approached according to the rules of its particular genre. One can detect in this work memories from the ancient

5. Hans Robert Jauss, "Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft", in *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1974 [<sup>1</sup>1970], pp. 144-207. This essay has been translated into English under the title "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" in the volume, Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. (Translation from German by Timothy Bahti; Introduction by Paul de Man). The Harvester Press, pp. 3-45. See also, "Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory" (translated by Elizabeth Benzinger), in *New Literary History*, vol. 2, Autumn 1970, pp. 7-37.

6. This is the original title of a lecture which was given by Jauss at Constance in April 1967; the title was revised later. (Cf. Robert C. Holub, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54).

7. Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

Greek world, and various influences from Neo-Classicists, Pre-Romantics and Romantic poets, and from the ideals of the 1789 French Revolution. Kalvos uses various neoclassical and romantic motifs to conform to the horizon of expectations<sup>8</sup> of his contemporary European audience, a part of which imagined an impressive rebirth of its contemporary Greek world; the main purpose of this was to propagate the Greek Revolution of 1821 and its triumphs over the Ottomans all over Europe; he believed that this way he could help the Greek Struggle more effectively.

The first appearance of Kalvos's texts, their acceptance by European scholarship and the Philhellenic Committees (especially of Switzerland and France), and the initial failure of the Greek audience to appreciate them, obviously provide some criteria for the determination of their aesthetic value during this period, since these were the most important factors in the approval or disapproval of Kalvos at that time. One must bear in mind that the gulf between the horizon of expectations of the Greek audience in nineteenth century and Kalvos's work was quite large, because there was no similar previous aesthetic experience in modern Greek literature, although the ideals of the Greek Revolution found in his work were well known and accepted by a great part of the population of Greece. At the same time, the poems of Alexandros and Panayiotis Sutsos and, later on, of Achilleas Paraschos and Alexandros Rizos Rangavis were considered as literary works of high quality, because they constituted the horizon of expectations of the Athenian audience of the nineteenth century. But this first failure of Kalvos's texts to attract the Greek audience, was not to last forever. The continuous re-evaluations of his work and his place among the greatest modern Greek poets, especially after Palamas's lecture in 1889, the "rediscovery" of him by the "Generation of the '30s", the admiration of his revolutionary poetic forms by Surrealists and other recent Greek scholars as well as the consideration of him as a national poet by the majority of contemporary Greek critics, have a lot to do with the change of the "horizons of expectations" of modern Greek criticism and scholarship. Every work depends on the milieu, views and ideology of his audience. In this way, one can explain why Demoticists almost ignored or remained indifferent to Kalvos's work, why the critics of the Greek Left celebrated its patriotism and political aspects, and why "bourgeois" criticism insisted on Kalvos's biographical elements and interpreted his work from an idealistic point of view. In any case, Kalvos's work

8. On this term see Hans Robert Jauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-45. See also Robert C. Holub, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-69.

at the moment of its appearance was not directed at any specific audience in Greece. (Besides, he could know little of the details of the revolutionary situation because he had spent too many years away from his country.) Yet later on his work broke through the changing horizon of expectations and today it has its own audience. In contrast, only a few scholars are focusing today on the work of Paraschos, Rangavis and of the two Sutsos brothers.

A pertinent question on this point arises: should the philologist evaluate Kalvos's work according to the perspective of the past, the standpoint of the present, or the "verdict of the ages"?<sup>9</sup> By using the standards of the past, one cannot assess the work's rich semantic potential, nor follow through the history of its influence on other literary figures. And the history of the influence of his work is as an "authority open to the same objections as the authority of the author's contemporaries"<sup>10</sup>. Consequently, one is led to an alternative judgement, answering the above problem; a judgement as objective as possible, mainly by determining the stages of the historical reception of Kalvos's work. If one is to define the level and the kind of influence of this work on the literary texts of other modern Greek writers, then one is obliged to accept that in the literary tradition there is a dialectical relationship between the present and the past and that within a process of tradition, the present and the past "are constantly mediated", according to Hans Georg Gadamer<sup>11</sup>. Thus, Kalvos's odes and the rest of his work "say something" to all only when they are not studied in isolation.

Kalvos's work constitutes a new form indeed in the literary continuum. But one cannot explain its popularity as a mere opposition to or aesthetic variation on what prevailed. Literary evolution is not only a ceaseless struggle between the new and the old or the substitution of one canon or form for another. The most important thing is to determine where exactly the mediation which includes the step from the old to the new form lies. And, as hinted in a previous paragraph, the distance between the first perception of Kalvos's work and the expectations of its first Greek audience, required a long process of reception before it could take its present place, unthinkable within the

9. Cf. René Wellek, "The Theory of Literary History", in *Études dédiées au quatrième Congrès de linguistes - Travaux du Cercle Linguistique de Prague*, 1936, p. 184 and "The Concept of Evolution in Literary History", in *Concepts of Criticism*, New Haven 1963, pp. 17-20.

10. René Wellek, *Concepts of Criticism*, op. cit., p. 17.

11. Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode - Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen 1960, p. 275; *Truth and Method - Fundamentals of a Philosophical Hermeneutics*, New York 1975, p. 258.

earlier horizon. Characteristically, until Palamas's lecture in 1889, Kalvos's work was not appreciated by the Greeks, although it was not completely unknown to them. Surprisingly perhaps, the obscure lyrics of the Surrealists also allowed a re-evaluation of Kalvos's odes as well as the reopening of a pathway towards these forgotten literary forms. A number of things that had not been sought by the previous scholarship were now in vogue. In order to analyse all these things, it is necessary to follow the diachronic interaction between production and reception of Kalvos's work within the historical process of changing aesthetic attitudes.

One can argue that each historical period should be seen in its own terms<sup>12</sup>. And this applies to each period of Kalvos's poems which should be seen within this historical dimension; this would then explain why Alexandros and Panayiotis Sutsos's work was preferred in the first half of nineteenth century to that of Kalvos, why the texts of the poets of the First Athenian School were dominant in the second half of the same century and had greater impact in comparison to *Λύρα* and *Λυρικά* and so forth. The history of Kalvos's work comes to life exactly at the interface of its diachronic and synchronic presence, because "since each synchronic system must contain its past and future as inseparable structural elements, the synchronic cross-section of the literary production of a historical point in time necessarily implies further cross-sections that are diachronically before and after"<sup>13</sup>. I also think that in each period of time, one can examine with the same method several other modern Greek poets and their reception by criticism (the reception for instance of Cavafy's poems compared to the work of Sikelianos and Palamas<sup>14</sup>).

When one tries to interpret Kalvos's work and its presence through time, one has to see its history as a kind of special history in its own unique relationship to general history. Otherwise, the historical development of the reception of Kalvos will be difficult to study; the special history of Kalvos's work runs parallel, to a great extent, with the general history. When Kalvos's work first appeared, there was a great contradiction between his poetic diction and the everyday use of language by ordinary people. Kalvos wrote in his own unique language as well as in his own unique style. In addition, it is quite

12. "Each historical period should be seen as a mixture of events which emerge at different moments of their own time". See Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last*, New York 1969, p. 53.

13. Hans Robert Jauss, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

14. See Dimitris Tziouvas, *The nationism of the Demoticists and its impact on their literary theory (1888-1930)*, Amsterdam: Hakkert 1986, pp. 176-180.

difficult to support the view that this particular work had or has an effect on the social behaviour of Greek readers, because it has very little to do with their own experiences. There is no real reflection of Greek society during the Revolution of 1821 in Kalvos's odes; on the other hand, one sees an idealised image of the Struggle. But Kalvos's work constitutes a new form which can make possible a new perception of things, first brought to light in the form of literature. And as a new literary work is received and judged against the background of other works of art as well as against the background of the everyday experience of life, "the gap between literature and history, between aesthetic and historical knowledge, can be bridged if literary history does not simply describe the process of general history in the reflection of its works one more time, but rather when it discovers in the course of 'literary evolution' that properly *socially-formative* function that belongs to literature as it competes with other arts and social forces in the emancipation of mankind of its natural, religious, and social bonds"<sup>15</sup>.

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15. Hans Robert Jauss, *op. cit.*, p. 45. For an excellent critical presentation of Jauss's theory see R. C. Holub, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-82.