Tussen verleden en toekomst, Nieuwgriekse traditie en ideologie in het werk van de Griekse prozaschrijver Dimitris Chatzis (1913-1981)
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SUMMARY

BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE

Modern Greek tradition and ideology

in the work of the Greek writer Dimitris Hatzis (1913-1981)

Dimitris Hatzis (1913–1981) is one of the most important post-war Greek prose writers and, especially in left-wing circles, one of the most popular. However, even in those circles his literary work has not always been fully understood; it has often been taken merely as an expression of nostalgia for the pre-war Greek society which no longer exists (especially in the book of short stories, The End of our Little Town) or as an indictment of German society and its treatment of foreign workers and of Western (capitalistic) society in general (especially in The Double Book).

Hatzis’ work should be seen in the context of the age-old conflict in the Greek world as to Greek identity and its relationship to the Classical, the Byzantine and the Ottoman past, the position of Greek society between East and West and the structure and mental orientation of Greek society in the future.

For this reason the introductory Chapter I includes — in addition to an outline of Hatzis’ life and work — an outline of this controversy from the middle of the eighteenth century onwards, with a certain emphasis on the 30’s of the twentieth century, especially on what was said on the subject in left-wing circles, as those years and those circles were formative for Hatzis himself.

In Chapter II Hatzis’ scientific work as a Middle and Modern Greek philologist and his journalistic work (including interviews) are discussed. Hatzis’ views on Modern Greek tradition and ideology are clearly revealed in this work, which constitutes an explicit background for what he wished to express — in general more implicitly but often also quite explicitly — in his literary work.

In Chapters III to VII Hatzis’ complete literary oeuvre is discussed, with emphasis on the (central) issue, i.e. how he has worked out his views on Modern Greek tradition and ideology in his literary work. Chapter III deals with the literary work he wrote in the forties, Chapter IV with the two versions of The End of our Little Town (1953 and 1963), Chapter V with work written between 1963 and 1976, Chapter VI with The Double Book (1976) and Chapter VII with work written since that book. The final chapter, ‘Summary and Commentary’, consists of a general discussion of conclusions and an attempt to place them in the context of the Modern Greek discussion of Greece’s past and future.
In his non-literary work Hatzís always speaks emphatically of Modern Greek tradition, literature etc. as a separate national, social and spiritual entity, to be distinguished from, and in no way leaning upon, the preceding Greek traditions of Antiquity and, in particular, the Byzantine and Ottoman periods.

In Greek history Byzantium, with its predominant scholarly language and culture and its feudal, theocratic and multinational society and ideology, represents Greece’s mediaeval phase. As early as the twelfth century there were signs of an emerging Modern Greek tradition (the Greek Renaissance), but the Greek Middle Ages retained their supremacy for centuries, even after 1453, in the framework of the Ottoman empire, in which the (rural, and also mediaeval) folk culture was to become the dominant tradition.

As for the role of Antiquity: in Western Europe, it gained its true significance after the Middle Ages in the tradition of Renaissance, Humanism, Reformation and Enlightenment, a tradition which would eventually result in bourgeois-democratic society, the ‘Graeco-Roman citizens’ civilisation’. The Renaissance was a progressive, secular, bourgeois, democratic movement; it was typified by the emergence of the triad national consciousness, national culture and the national state. At a personal level the Renaissance meant liberation of the individual and emphasis on the individuality of the human being, on the development of the human individual as a free, moral personality with his own personal creativity.

Attempting to understand just how the transition of Greek society from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance has progressed or has not progressed from the twelfth century into the twentieth century — i.e. the emergence of a truly Modern Greek tradition, in contrast to Byzantium and the Ottoman period and to later continuations of the mediaeval tradition — is a matter of national self-knowledge for Modern Greeks. Since ‘Europe’ (the West) was earlier with its Renaissance than Greece, the Greek Renaissance development may, in practice, mean ‘joining’ the West, not, however, in the sense of importing something from a completely different cultural area, but as a delayed realization of the same cultural heritage which all European countries, including Greece, have in common. On the other hand the — Byzantine and Ottoman — East, according to Hatzís, represent historically the Greek Middle Ages, which Greece now, in the twentieth century, must finally put behind her.

In the other European countries (the West) the Renaissance tradition reached its peak in the nineteenth century, in the form of bourgeois-liberal, democratic society. In Hatzís’ view, this is no longer adequate in the twentieth century; the Renaissance tradition must now be taken further and completed, throughout the world, by moving on to a socialistic society. In the case of Greece, where, in the twentieth century, even the bourgeois-democratic society itself does not yet exist, this completion of the Renaissance can hardly be expected to come from the Greek bourgeoisie; it has become the historical task (in a socialistic sense) of the Left.

In the forties, Hatzís’ view was that this socialistic completion of the Modern
Greeks, the national self-knowledge for Modern Greek Renaissance — 'in one step' — was the ultimate goal of the communist struggle, besides resistance to the foreign invaders. However, this struggle for a Renaissance in the forties ended in failure for the Left. It was not until after 1974, after the dictatorship of the Colonels, that there was any hope of a 'democratic change', by which Hatzís meant not so much that the undemocratic steps taken by the colonels would be reversed as that Mediaeval ('Byzantine') society in Greece would finally be set aside in favour of a bourgeois-democratic society. He still saw this as, in the long run, a Vorstufe for a socialistic society, but as far as that was concerned he no longer expected anything from old-fashioned communism; although he continued to speak of a socialistic society and was unwilling to relinquish the concept of 'anti-capitalism', his views actually inclined towards social democracy.

So there was a certain evolution in Hatzís' thinking on this point; whereas in the forties he saw the transition to socialism in terms of revolutionary struggle, in the seventies he believed this transition could result only from a historical process of inner transformation of society; in the case of Greece this process would first have to bring about a realization of bourgeois-democratic society itself. So this phase gains value in its own right, because it will mean that Greece has definitively abolished her Middle Ages and 'caught up' with the other Western countries.

So Hatzís welcomes this transformation into a modern society, at least as far as it means that Greece is able to share in the positive elements of a Renaissance development. Hatzís is, of course, also aware of the negative sides of modern society: not because he is concerned about Greek roots or something similar, but because he sees how human beings become alienated in modern society with its production mechanisms, consumptivity and bureaucracy. According to Hatzís, what is needed to get rid of these unpleasant aspects is not a return to tradition, but a further perfection of modern society from a socialistic point of view.

The Enlightenment in Europe (as a continuation of the Renaissance) and the Modern Greek Enlightenment from about 1750 were always shining examples for Hatzís; he considers that what Greece needs is a new Modern Greek Enlightenment, to complete the half-finished work begun in the eighteenth century. He has always been strongly opposed to any form of populism, folklorism, nostalgic romanticism, exoticism, orientalism, mediaeval mysticism, Byzantinism and obscurantism, all of which flourished in Greece in the thirties and also in the seventies; he was horrified to see that these tendencies were also in vogue with (a considerable proportion of) the Leftist movement. He regarded such tendencies, like the 'scholarly' mediaeval ideology (Greece of Christian Hellenes) of the conservatives, as a regression to the Middle Ages and a deviation from the historical significance of Europe and the correct path of Renaissance and Enlightenment.

Hatzís has expressed some thoughts on what the socialistic society would eventually be like, but only in vague terms, reminiscent of a utopia. One thing is clear: in this society the human being — who has been individualized and thus 'made lonely'
during the transition from Renaissance to modern society — would have to rejoin
the other 'lonely' individuals, in a new community, with common goals, interests,
and (possibly even) myths; but at the same time the human individual must retain
priority and individual creativity will have to provide most of the answers.

What Hatzís says in his non-literary work about his views on literature in general
and his own work in particular makes it clear that in his literary work he wished
to express his conviction that Greece should now at long last relinquish her Middle
Ages and evolve from a traditional rural society into a modern, Western society, a
socialistic one. The connection between his non-literary work and his literary work
is also revealed by the fact that in his later literary work he expresses his convictions
more and more explicitly and in detail.

In his earlier work, written in the forties, the 'short-term vision' was predomi-
nant, i.e. the view that a socialistic society might be achieved through direct human
intervention (a revolution; Hatzís himself played an active part in the leftist strug-
gle at that time); but at the same time the 'long-term vision' is also present, i.e.
the view that in the long run a socialistic society would be the result of an inner
transformation of Greek society. The most important work of this period, the novel
Fire (1946), balances between the two views; this novel has usually been read only
as a story of the communist struggle ('fighting text'), but it also contains elements
which are more indicative of the long-term vision. Most of the stories in Service and
Service II, and also the first version of The End of our Little Town, are 'fighting
texts' and direct expressions of the short-term vision. The novel fragment Broken
Wings and the short story 'Song in Athens' (in Service) contain only elements of
the long-term vision.

In the work Hatzís wrote after 1953 (the year of the first version of The End of Our
Little Town) only the long-term vision is expressed. The eventual transformation
of Greek society, which was not only necessary but also inevitable, was something
which Hatzís wanted to express at the level of the individual — ordinary, non-heroic
— human being. The consequences of this transformation were detachment, often
unconscious, from traditional, collective structures; a process of individualization
and often of isolation, which Hatzís, however, saw as an unforgoable intermediate
step on the way to finding a new, universal form of community in a new society.

Hatzís' progression from the short-term to the long-term vision is clearly illus-
trated in his revision of the book of short stories The End of our Little Town; for
this reason the first version (1953) and the definitive version (1963) are compared
to each other in detail and a great deal of space is devoted to a discussion of the
differences (Chapter IV). Change in the protagonists in the first version led to a
conscious conversion to the communist struggle in the context of the Second World
War: a progressive class consciousness which would lead irrevocably to the revolu-
tion, which was to put an end to centuries of repression and exploitation. (As the
protagonists were not real heroes, heroic fighters in the strict sense, the book did not meet up to the strict social-realistic demands of the communist party). In the definitive version of the book it is the social processes of industrialization, expansion and tourism which put an end to traditional rural society; World War II is at most a catalyst for this development. The process of change in the protagonists is more important than its concrete results; the change takes place almost unconsciously and means that after a process of ‘isolation’ (individualization) they find a new source of creativity within themselves. This inner transformation of individuals is an indispensable prerequisite to the inner transformation of society as a whole.

The book of short stories _Defenceless_ (1966) is an outstanding example of the portrayal of the lonely, ‘small’ human being, cast back on his own resources. The references to the Left’s defeat in the forties are not always direct, but the book as a whole can be regarded as a document of that defeat. In the story ‘Defenceless’ itself Hatzís does explicitly come to terms with the Greek civil war.

As the various themes of Hatzís’ work converge in the _Double Book_ (1976) and receive their most exhaustive treatment in it, a separate chapter is also devoted to the discussion of this novel. In it the transition from rural society to modern, urban society which began in _The End of our Little Town_ is taken a step further. The main character, liberated from all his bonds, both with the traditional Greek past and with the civil war, is forced to fend for himself in modern society, along with all the other ‘lonely ones’; the message of hope in this book is that they will eventually succeed. There is a secondary theme in the book, interwoven with the main theme: that for a writer there can only be a future if he deals with this sort of character’s future in modern society, and not with some sort of return to the past.

In Hatzís’ literary work after the _Double Book_ he develops certain themes which had appeared in his earlier work, e.g. (in the book of short stories _Studies_, 1976) ‘loneliness’ and negation as a necessary intermediate phase in order to achieve the final _Bejahung_. Through his renewed contact with Greek reality after 1974 (when he was able to return to Greece after 25 years of exile), he could see how slowly the inner transformation of Greek society was progressing; he also realized that his work was not always appreciated in the right way. He started to write even more explicitly in his literary work and his tone became more bitter and sarcastic, e.g. in the published novel fragments of _Uncle Polykrátis in Uganda_.

As a Marxist, Hatzís distanced himself from various forms of nostalgia for some form of Greek past, especially from the populist tendencies towards a return to folk culture which were so much in vogue in leftist Greece and from other tendencies which entailed renunciation of Western, Renaissance society. Hatzís always clung to socialism as an ultimate, though later more and more utopian, ideal, but for the present his work actually became more and more a defence of modern, western, bourgeois-democratic society as something valuable in its own right.