

Raising the Profile of Today's Greek Children's Literature

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Abstract

The main scope of this article is to raise a concise profile of today's Greek Literature for Children, which has been shaped during last years. After a short report on the reasons that contributed to the configuration of such a profile, some representative books written for children are presented, divided into three categories according to their main theme. There is also a reference to the various genres of literature address children as well as to the translations into Greek, to the illustrations made and the criticism of this literature. By the end of this article becomes apparent that, while Greek Literature for Children presents an intention of qualitative rise referring to the themes presented in the books, and follows European and international standards, it needs to become "bolder" regarding the narrative ways authors employ to meet their readers.

Keywords: children's literature, Greek books for children, Greek novel, Greek poetry, Greek illustrated books, Greek short stories

1. Greek Literature for Children: The Long Preparation

The current picture of Greek Literature for Children mainly has been shaped, formally and ideologically, during the last thirty five years. Many factors have contributed to its development: the sociopolitical conditions of change of regime, the new ideas that were registered in the educational system and were related with the international reality, the appearance of associations, as "Woman's Literary Company" and "The Circle of the Greek Children's Book" (Greek National Section of I.B.B.Y.), that with a lot of competitions, which had established from the 1960s, promoted considerably the literary books for children in Greece. Additionally, the past of Literature for Children has also acted in a reinforcing way. Because, beyond the social and moral "didacticism" of 19th century and that of the beginning of 20th century, ideological parameters that acted to a large extent as examples to be avoided, Children's Literature has given considerable "work-patterns". We indicatively report: *Tragoudakia gia pedia* (*Little songs for children*) by Alexandros Pallis (1889) (Note 1), *Ta psila vouna* (*The high mountains*) by Zacharias Papantoniou (1918) (Anagnostopoulos, 2004, pp. 1068-1069), and from the means of 20th century the work of important writers, as Elli Alexiou, Vassilis Rotas, Michael Stassinopoulos. Apart from them, Alki Zei was the first one – with *To Kaplani tis Vitras* (*The Tiger under Glass*) (1966) and, little later, with the novel *O megalos peripatos tou Petrou* (*The big walk of Petros*) (1971) – who placed the base for a big ideological category: that of socio-political reflection, that would penetrate as a component, more or less, all the postwar thematic spectrum of Greek Literature for Children.

2. A Publishing "Burst" Is Coming: Fictions' Thematic Categories

In the 1970s, according to the records of "National Centre of Book" (E.KE.VI.) and "The Circle of the Greek Children's Book", Greek Literature for Children presents an editorial explosion which is continued until today, even if the rapid increase of production does not also involve the proportional guarantee of quality. Schematically, we can say that during the last thirty years, from the side of issues (the central subject of each book), the literary books for children – in which the child-hero, his/her action and his/her everyday routine but also the fundamental social and global matters that surround him/her dominate – can be classified, for the sake of

the exposition, in three big thematic categories (Papadatos, 2009, p. 56). These categories are not monolithic, since they do not necessarily exclude each other and each one may be detected in another one.

2.1 The First Thematic Category

In the first thematic category, where the interpersonal relations and the individual problems dominate, subjects that concern birth, death, worker-child, relations between parents and children, divorce, adoption, orphan hood, daily occupations and relations of children, childhood, the sexual factor, handicapped children (special needs) and the third age are prevalent. The child is presented more than never as the center of problems and acts, while he/she is activated to an awareness that modern times require. Research has shown that in certain books an amalgam of ideas, often not argumentatively refuted and also reversed, is depicted.

Indicatively we report: *Pos genniounte ta pedia?* (*How children are born?*) by Filippas Mandilaras (2009); *Spiti gia pente* (*Home for Five*) by Loti Petrovits-Androustopoulos (1992); *Dio spitia* (*Two houses*) by Amanda Michalopoulos (2000); *Onira apo metaxi* (*Silk Dreams*) by Litsa Psarafi (2002), [divorce]; *To koritsi me tis dio miteres* (*The girl with the two mothers*) by I. D. Ioannidis (1996); *Enas Xenos stin ekogenia mas* (*A stranger in our family*) by Eleni Choreanthi (2005), [adoption]; *Leoni* by Maria Pyliotou (2004); *O mikros Ntoup* (*The small Ntoup*) by Ereni Marra (1992); *Fili, Fos fanari* (*Friends, it's true*) by Frangeska Alexopoulos-Petraki (2005), [handicapped]; *Mia mikri kalokerini istoria* (*A small summer Story*) by Eugenia Fakinou (1986); *Petai, Petai o skylos* (*The dog is flying, flying*) by Christos Boulotis (2004); *Elitsa i paparouna* (*Elitsa or Poppy*) by Manos Kontoleon (2009); *An t'agapas xanarchonte* (*If you love them, They come back*) by Vasiliki Nevrokopli (2007), [death]; *Ena saki malia* (*A sack of hair*) by Pantelis Kaliotsos (1996); *O daskalos me to violi ke to asteri* (*The teacher with the violin and the star*) by Thetis Hortiati (1986); *O kerios mou* (*My teacher*) by Zorz Sari (2002); *E daskala pou to kefali tis egine kazani* (*The teacher whose head became a bowl*) by Sofia Mantouvalou (2006), [relations between teacher and students]; *O theos agapa ta poulia* (*God loves birds*) by Angeliki Varella (2001); *O pappous domata* (*The tomato-grandfather*) by Kali Doxiadi (2004); *O pseftis pappous* (*The liar grandfather*) by Alki Zei (2008); *Mi fevgis* (*Do not leave*) by Billy Rozen & Makis Tsitas (2009), [third age]; *To krymmeno ergostasio pechnidion* (*The hidden factory of toys*) by Vissaria Zorba-Rammopoulos (2009), [child labor]; *To tetradio me tous orismous: Ena kefalaeo apo tin aftoviografia tou Ilia Makri* (*The notebook with definitions: A chapter from the autobiography of Elias Makris*) by Maria Agelidou (2008); *E mikri Rouala* (*The little Rouala*) by Petros Hatzopoulos (2009); *O adelphos tis Aspasias 3. Kataskinosi: Kato apo ta ...zodia* (*Aspasias' Brother 3. Camping: Under ...the zodiac*) by Manos Kontoleon (2012), [childhood], etc. (Note 2)

2.2 The Second Thematic Category

In the second thematic category, that determines the wider social and historical environment, problems that are related with drugs, violence and terrorism, the (illegal) trade of antiquities and the more general historical facts are presented. In this category with the individual problems, par excellence, that have however social dimensions, realism in practice functions in a multiple level. The individual presents itself in his/her daily decay so much that he/she exploits the dreams of the others or, being innocent, he/she is undermined in order to overcome problems and to open up new prospects. This side of realism, in most books, especially in the novels of the last fifteen years, begins to present itself in a frame of a dynamic confrontation of reality, through the search of a new point of view, as a result of the synthesis of the environment and the personal agony, the subject.

Indicative books: *To taxidi pou skotoni* (*The journey that kills*) by Manos Kontoleon (1989); *E Konstantina ke e arachnes tis* (*Konstantina and her spiders*) by Alki Zei (2002), [drugs]; *O kosmos variete na diavazi thliveres istories* (*The people get bored of reading dreary stories*) by Maroula Kliafa (1986); *O Kipos me ta agalmata* (*The garden with the statues*) by Eleni Sarantiti (1995); *San ta helidonia* (*Like the swallows*) by Eleni Katsama (1997), [gipsies]; *Prin apo to terma* (*Before the finish*) by Galateia Grigoriadou-Sourelis (1988); *O assos ton gipedon* (*The ace of playing-field*) by Antonis Delonis (2008), [violence in the grounds]; *To avgo tis echidnas* (*The egg of viper*) by Litsa Psarafi (1990); *Gevsi pikramigdalou* (*Flavour of bitter almond*) by Manos Kontoleon (1995), [AIDS]; *Diskoli keri gia mikrous prigipes* (*Difficult times for little princes*) by Maroula Kliafa (1992); *Psithiri agorion* (*Whispers of boys*) by Voula Mastori (2009); *Sti diapasson* (*In intensity*) by Vassilis Papatheodorou (2009); *Mia stagona psema* (*A drop of lie*) by Nena Kokkinaki (2011); *Ienes* (*Hyenas*) by Filippas Mandilaras (2011), [modern problems of adolescents]; *O megalos apocheretismos* (*The big farewell*) and *Mnimes Smyrnis* (*Memories of Smyrna*) by Galateia Grigoriadou-Sourelis (1990 and 1998, respectively); *To sentouki me ta amithita sentefia* (*The settle with the immense nacles*) by Tzemi Tassakou (2004); *E spilia tis gorgonas* (*The mermaid's cave*) by Litsa Psarafi (2007); *E profitia tou kokkinou krassiou* (*The prophecy of red wine*) by Loti Petrovits-Androustopoulos (2008); *Mia mpalada gia ti Rebecca* (*A ballad for Rebecca*) by Maroula Kliafa (2011), [history], etc.

2.3 The Third Thematic Category

The third thematic category contains more general humanitarian and global subjects as those of peace, ecology, refugees, immigration, science, technological development and acceptance of diversity. In many books of this category the imaginary is entangled with the real. The critical confrontation of modern reality (ecology-racism), on the one hand, and its visionary outlet in a more human, more ecological and inter-cultural world, on the other, constitute different aspects of realism. The writers, apart from a few exceptions, propose a more ecological and inter-cultural world, using suspense elements of contemporary reality (e.g. the reasoning of the modern way of economic growth, the perseverance and the incarceration in the national element). However, their effort to create a world of utopia (with elements feasible) in the anti-utopian reality of the 1970s and 1980s, functions rather positively and prepares to a large extent the climate, so that books published during the last decade to contain a reality included in the frame of a visionary, but feasible ecological and inter-cultural, reasoning.

Indicative works: *Ste chora ton mamouth (In the country of mammoths)* by Kira Sinou (1977); *E angeli tou ouranou (The angels of the sky)* by Litsa Psarafi (1981); *E triti efchi (The third wish)* by Chara Giannopoulou (2009), [science fiction]; *Ta dentra pou trechoun (The trees that run)* by Maria Pylitou (1987); *Gasment, O fygas me ti flogera (Gasment, The fugitive with the flute)* by Katerina Mouriki (2004), [immigration]; *Ta koritsakia me ta naftika (The little girls with naval)* by Eleni Dikeou (1991); *Gia tin alli patrida (To the other homeland)* by Loti Petrovits-Androutsopoulou (1986); *O Navid den itrhe gia diakopes (Navid did not come for vacation)* by Panos Christodoulou (2007); *Kosmodromio (Cosmodrome)* by Eleni Katsama (2011), [refugees]; *O thimos tou Possidona (The anger of Neptune)* by Charis Sakellariou (1991); *Lampera agathia (Bright thorns)* by Giorgos Bontis (2004); *Filenada, Fountoukia mou (My friend, My hazel-tree)* by Angeliki Varela (1998); *To megalo taxidi tis kinezikis papias (The great journey of Chinese duck)* by Vassilis Papatheodorou (2008), [ecological problems]; *E taeleftaea mavri gata (The last black cat)* by Eugenios Trivizas (2001); *Cafe aediasitiko balaki (Brown, Disgusting little ball)* by Vangelis Iliopoulos (2003), [racism]; *O polemos, E Maria ke to adespoti (The War, Maria and the stray)* by Zorz Sari (2003); *Tote pou krypsame enan angelo (Then we hid an Angel)* by Angeliki Darlassi (2009), [peace]; *E miteroula mas e rossia (Our mummy Russia)* by Maro Loizou (1994); *O Trigonopsaroulis (The Triangular Little Fish)* by Vangelis Iliopoulos (1997); *To misso pithari (Half Jar)* by Foteni Frangouli (2001); *Mia istoria tou Fyodor (A story of Fyodor)* by Manos Kontoleon (2004), [acceptance of variation, differentiation, intercultural society], etc.

A big thematic axis of books, mainly novels and small stories, is the historical one. Their subjects are reported in all historical periods presenting an evolutionary tendency, which of course is in tune with the new perceptions of the historical fact and its extensions in social and individual life. Thus, from the pure historical books of Penelope Delta, and later of Alkis Tropeatis and Takis Lappas, we reach the last twenty years, where books of historical content with explicit socio-political extensions are written (e.g. Alki Zei, Zorz Sari, Voula Mastori). One of the most faithful in the type of the "old", but perhaps more authentic, model of historical novel is Galateia Grigoriadou-Sourelis.

3. The Other Genres

With regard to the genres of Greek Children's Literature certainly the novels attract the main interest. There, however, we believe the representative production is located, concerning the quantity as well as the quality. There are novels which, thematically, are comparable and "competitive" with those of the rest European literature. Already books of many Greek writers have been translated and edited out in the abroad. They are writers who "dare" as far as the issues as well as the content are concerned. (Alki Zei, Zorz Sari, Manos Kontoleon, I. D. Ioannidis, Maro Loizou, Zoe Valassi, Loti Petrovits-Androutsopoulou, Toula Tigka, Sofia Filntissi, et al.). However, research has lately shown few cases of "didacticism", censorship, differentiation of sexes and other negatives elements from a sociological point of view (Papantonakis & Kotopoulos, 2010).

The short story does not present a great production, as it is regarded to be a difficult and confused genre by editors and writers. With the short story they have dealt mainly: Spyros Tsiros, Sofia Filntissi, Charis Sakellariou, I. D. Ioannidis. The presence of poetry is relatively small and the exclusive responsibility for that have the editors, since they state that poetry "does not sell". Certain poets are: Giorgis Crocos, Rena Kartheou, Dimitris Manthopoulos, Nikos Kanakis, Kostas Kalapanidas, Giorgos-Menelaos Marinos, Thetis Hortiati, Ntina Hatzinikolaou (Akritopoulos, 1993; Papantonakis, 2009).

Something proportional happens also with the theatre. If we exclude enough books that are published for the needs of school performances and they assemble particular attention, the production that remains, except for few that monopolize the interest, is small. We mark certain writers: Eugenios Trivizas, Dimitris Potamitis, Xenia Kalogeropoulou, Yannis Xanthoulis (Grammatas, 2004). Where there is a big production is in the categories of

fairy-stories and small stories. Here, we can say to a larger extent than the other genres, quantity does not keep pace with quality. Apart from certain cases of writers, the same patterns and the same stereotypic situations are repeated (Tsilimeni, 2004, p. 1070).

4. Detecting Some Writing Tendencies

Intense "pedagogism" and "didacticism" as well as long narrations are detected in a lot of Greek books for children. It appears that the majority of Greek writers prefer such narrations, in the fulfillment of all voids of a story, which makes it long-winded but without surprises. The abstractions that make the texts useptible of many readings, but also reproachable from a lot of age-related levels of readers, are absent. Just to report certain writers: Zoe Valassi, Maro Loizou, Christos Boulotis, Ereni Marra, Sofia Mantouvalou, Eugenios Trivizas, and the young persons Fotini Frangouli, Vangelis Iliopoulos, Poly Vasilaki, Vassiliki Nevrokopli, Melina Karakosta, Alexandra Mitsiali, Maria Agelidou, Tzemi Tassakou, Petros Hatzopoulos (the two last ones in the novel), where a part of their work recommends a new renewing tendency, concerning the conception of subject and style.

The translations of foreign books, mainly from England, America, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, classic and modern, "make fracture". They constitute the thirty five per cent (35%) of roughly the total production of Literature for Children (according to the records given by E.KE.VI.). The subjects of many translated books, and we would say that for certain thematic categories, are "bolder" than domestic, not only in form but also in content. We report some authors who have been translated into Greek: Ph. Pullman, M. Ende, J. K. Rowling, M. Burgess, R. Cormier, T. Blacker, J. French, D. McKee, G. de Pennart, C. McNaughton, et al. (Note 3)

A fact that should be pointed out is also that the writing of books during the last twenty years address to pre-adolescents and adolescents (young adults). We indicatively report the writers: Manos Kontoleon, Voula Mastori, Eleni Mantelou, Toula Tinga, et al. This literary reality comes to cover the void dictated, among the others, by the reading needs of adolescents but also by the enlargement of the reading and aesthetic horizon of younger readers.

With regard to the illustration, there are several and very good illustrators in Greece. We indicatively report: Tzortzis Parmenidis, Sofia Fortoma, Vasso Psaraki, Diatsenta Parissi, Nikolas Andrikopoulos, Vassilis Papatsarouchas, Maria Bacha. Finally, an evolutionary tendency is presented in their work: they do not just represent reality through the main points of the texts but they interpret and give extensions to it.

Completing, we believe, a very concise report on Greek Literature for Children, a short comment for its criticism should not be missing. Despite the efforts were made by a few critics for the establishment of methodological tools, criticism is still found on the level of simple presentation or the "intuitional" assessment of literary books. However, the admission of Literature for Children to the Universities (Departments of Education), its systematic teaching and its more serious study, with the help of the Theory of Literature, have contributed decisively in the responsible confrontation of it by both writers and readers. In addition, two journals dealing chiefly with literary criticism and critical theory, have contributed a lot to the study of modern Greek Children's Literature: the journal *Diadromes* (Itineraries) from 1986 until today, and the periodical publication *Epitheorissi Paedikis Logotechnias* (*Review of Children's Literature*) from 1986 until 2003 (Tsilimeni, 2004, pp. 1069-1071).

5. Conclusion

Conclusively, we would say that Greek Literature for Children, in the last years, presents an ascendant tendency in the "imprinting" of modern subjects-problems and many qualitative evolutionary tendencies, in regard to the issues of the novel and less in the regions of small stories and short stories. Concerning the genres, poetry is mainly observed in stagnation. Although that "didacticism" of the past has receded, especially from the 1990s (Tsilimeni, 2004, p. 1071), it remains in enough books that are usually read by minor ages. Even if in general lines Greek Literature for Children has, indisputably, an intention of qualitative rise, we would say that it needs more "boldness" not only in the choice of its subjects, but also in the ways it treats them.

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Notes

Note 1. Since all the literary books mentioned in this article edited out (first edition) in Greek language, an English translation of the Greek title is given in brackets.

Note 2. The books mentioned (in all three categories), edited out in Greece and in Greek language after 1985.

Note 3. We do not include in this reference the classic writers of past centuries and the first half of the 20th century whose books have been translated into Greek and published in Greece (J. Verne, R. L. Stevenson, M. Twain, Ch. Dickens, L. M. Alcott, L. Carroll, L. F. Baum, P.L. Travers, J.M. Barrie, et al.).