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Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Greek Literature for Children and Youth in the Last Decades of the Twentieth Century

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Placing Greek literature for children and youth between modernism and postmodernism during the last decades of the twentieth century, this article aims to minimize uncertainty about the status of Greek children's literature as an art form and to highlight its ability to both incorporate narrative changes and address the needs of contemporary readers. Following on the heels of European classic authors such as Michel Tournier and Gianni Rodari, contemporary Greek writers—such as Eugene Trivizas, Manos Kontoleon, and Christos Boulotis—provide alternative representations of everyday life, interweaving fantasy and social awareness. Like several other European texts, Greek metafictional literature for children and youth is indicative of a subversive tendency that relies on specific postmodernist techniques, offering readers multiple perspectives and diverse realities.

Introduction

Matching the scope of this special issue, the present article looks (meta)critically at a rather understudied aspect of Greek Literature for Children and Youth: the transition from modernist tendencies to postmodern trends during the last decades of the twentieth century. Furthermore, within the limited length of a short essay, it considers the ways in which this transition can be identified in representative literary texts for young readers by prominent Greek authors such as Eugene Trivizas, Manos Kontoleon, and Christos Boulotis. The main criterion for focusing

on these specific authors was that they are regarded as daring and noteworthy; in addition, many of their books are experimental and stand as important in the renewal of literary writing paradigms and reading processes. This article highlights the dynamics of a literature such as Greek literature for children and youth, which continuously strives to both incorporate narrative changes and address the needs of contemporary readers.

Despite frequent unfair challenges to its quality as an art form, children's literature reflects the aesthetic values and social practices of every historical

decline because of disappointment with several social movements and political developments. At the same time, the writing and reading of alternative texts regarding the ideology of gender, race, and ethnicity was welcomed by society and those involved in the publication process. The literary act was no longer opposed to a systematic and formal ideology but to a latent unwritten ideology that still reproduced clearly distinct social stereotypes (Kanat-souli). Consequently, the unattainable was simultaneously disputed and accepted, which is indicative of postmodernism. As a result, literary writing abandoned the ideological struggle and the possibility of social intervention and instead turned to itself, thus proving the relativity of reality and its historical representation (Oikonomidou 39).

The adaptation of Defoe's *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* by Michel Tournier in 1967 seems to have been the signal for the writing of postmodernist texts for children in Europe. Tournier altered Defoe's classic and created his own fable, under the transposed title *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique* (Friday or Pacific Limbo). Four years later, in 1971, the same fable was adapted by Tournier for children, but this time under the title *Vendredi ou la Vie Sauvage* (Friday or The Wild Life), reflecting the French author's willingness to express his antiracist and anticolonial views in a text for children. The role this work played in the history of adaptations was decisive. The writer borrowed the fable in order to change and distort it, thus creating a new world of linguistic material and increasing the distance between the heroes of the new work and the heroes of the original.

The presence of the Italian Gianni Rodari on the European stage was also decisive in the writing of texts that were innovative, both in content and technique. For example, his *Tante Storie per Giocare* (Many Stories for Playing), edited in 1980, approached the world and human relations with a "deviant thought" that reconsidered "the patterns of experience" and provided alternative representations of everyday life. Rodari aimed to inspire a creative reader who rejected standardization and conformism (Rodari 206).

By the last decades of the twentieth century, noteworthy postmodernist children's literature was being produced in Greece. We highlight a number of representative books that dispute the objective events of the *real world* and focus particularly on the

role of linguistic conventions in the creation of fiction. Such texts, in many ways, help young readers to deconstruct the reality that surrounds them and shape their own role in it. They do this either by creating a new literary composition, as in the story "I Christougeniatiki Historioula pou Graftike apo Monitis" (The Little Christmas Story that Wrote Itself) by Christos Boulotis (11–17), or by deconstructing and altering an earlier work, as happens in *Ta Tria Mikra Lykakia* (The Three Little Wolves and the Big, Bad Pig) by Eugene Trivizas.

Through the diffusion and dispersion of meanings, such texts lead to a temporary reality—chicanery of an *agreed truth*—and rather than being consumed by subsequent hostilities and disagreements with classic texts and fairy tales, they confer with them and constitute a writing palimpsest. The aim of such texts is not to retire the old literary structures but rather to subvert them by rephrasing stereotypical topics and characters. However, they serve as parodies of earlier literary conventions and provoke antagonism towards the earlier texts with which they are in conversation, while at the same time disengaging young readers from stereotypical and habitual modes of perception, freeing them from the one-dimensional logic of the one-and-only message (Zipes 180).

As in the rest of Europe, the writing of subversive texts for children in Greece did not result from writers' narcissistic or selfish attitudes or their desire to wreak revolutionary havoc on the literary establishment; it was rather the result of authors' humoristic and subversive linguistic playfulness (Oikonomidou 40–43). This is particularly apparent in Trivizas' work, in which the beginning of the fable rarely foretells what follows, especially the ending. As a rule, it is the language—and not the writer's conscience or intention—that is the main focus of postmodern literary texts for children. Cultural or ideological intervention is not the priority; rather, multiple linguistic possibilities form the works' frameworks and their perspectives on language, characters, and realities. For this reason, such texts may be approached, read, and interpreted several times and are not easily classified as specific types of texts; they are characterized by a flexibility that corresponds with the childishness of their readers.

In terms of postmodernism in literature for children and youth, there are no purely postmodernist texts but rather individual postmodernist techniques

Conclusion

It is important to note that the texts mentioned above are essentially commenting on, or even trying to change, what counts as a children's narrative, thus signaling the transition from modernism to postmodernism in Greek children's literature. The ideas and views of children are challenged and stimulated, with multiple implications about the ways in which narratives can be structured and created. Greek postmodern texts for children and youth offer their readers multiple perspectives and familiarize them with the multiplicity and diversity of reality and its literary representations. While these works were not explicitly revolutionary or subversive, they were influential in expressing an indisputable need for renewal in Greek children's literature; this becomes even more important when one acknowledges that, even today, this field is often too conservative in the name of protecting the child-reader.

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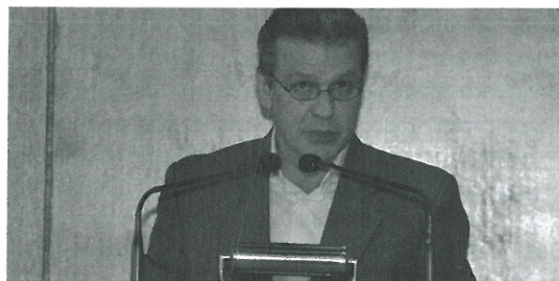
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