The sub-canonical meets the non-canonical: rebetika and inter-war Greek literature

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The nexus between rebetika and inter-war Greek literature is most conspicuous in literary texts of the period where songs which are now called rebetika are quoted, usually by way of local colour in the depiction of urban low-life. Inter-war literature thus becomes a source for rebetika (often in idiosyncratic variants), even though, to my knowledge, the songs are never referred to by that name. This was not the first occurrence of songs now called rebetika in Greek literature: realist fiction dating from the 1890s is a source of "protorebetika" (Gauntlett 1985: 226-8), as is the Greek review-theatre of the same era (Hatzipantazis 1986: 85 ff., n. 78). But the particular interest of the inter-war occurrence is heightened by the fact that this was a period when the recording industry was setting the parameters of rebetika as a genre under that name with occasional (mostly hostile) input from music journalism and, from late 1937 onwards, state censorship.

This paper therefore seeks to examine the role of creative literature in the process of construction of the rebetika genre – in substance, if not in name. This will involve side-stepping the prohibitive declaration by the late Elias Petropoulos in his seminal work *Ρεμπέτικα τραγούδια* (1968: 33) that the literary Generation of 1930 ignored rebetika. Like many of Petropoulos's summary pronouncements, this claim does not stand close scrutiny. I have enumerated elsewhere some readily available examples of the contrary from the canon of the poetry and prose of the Generation of 1930 (Gauntlett 2001: 69, n. 16) and have collected several more intertextual references, such as Nikos Kavadias's use of the

rebetika motif of trafficking drugs to Hades at the end of the poem "Ένας νέγρος θερμαστής από το Τζιμπουτί" (1990: 29).

Admittedly, while they clearly do not ignore rebetika, several authors of the Generation of 1930 do not appear greatly enamoured of rebetika. Myrivilis, for example, derides the classic rebetiko song "Λαχανάδες" (in an idiosyncratic variant) and disparages this whole "heroic poetic cycle of the noble order of pickpockets and jailbirds" (1956: 59). Theotokas also seems to mock the world of rebetika in a particularly mischievous episode of the short story "Ευριπίδης Πεντοζάλης" (first published in 1934) which pits the inter-war Athenian intelligentsia against the established hashish-smokers of Philopappou Hill in hand-to-hand combat over occupancy of the moonlit Acropolis precinct and the amorous attentions of the debutante Aspasia Kalamogdarti (who does not fail to live up to the blue-stockinged promiscuity suggested by her name). However, the narrator seems at pains to emphasize that the twenty-three hashish-smokers defending their "club" are no Philistines: they are initially kept at bay by the exquisite lyricism of Palamas's "Hymn to Athena" and when the spell is broken by a prosaic comment, they enter the ensuing fray chanting a gruffly improvised example of their own poetic art. And finally the ethereal Miss Kalamogdarti adds her own testimony to the poetic prowess of her hashish-smoking abductors: "Tonight [...] I have savoured the poetry of life" (Theotokas n.d.: 27). Insofar as anything serious can be extracted from this patently whimsical narrative, Theotokas might conceivably be seen to salute the poetry-loving hashish-smokers for the heroine's momentary release from the stifling grasp of Athenian philistinism. It is more likely though that Theotokas's interest in them is limited to their usefulness as pawns in his nuanced contest for cultural authority in inter-war Greece; placing the Athenian intelligentsia on a par with "χασικλήδες" is primarily a statement of his contempt for the former.

A less flippant engagement with the world of rebetika can be found at some distance from the Modernist project of the Generation of 1930 in the fiction of Karagatsis. Urban squalor is

Karagatsis's trademark milieu and some of his inter-war stories included in the compilation *Το μεγάλο συναξάρι* (1952) are extremely provocative examples of writing about low-life, particularly those where he weds the sacred to the profane. A signal example, with obvious rebetika connections, is the short story "Η Μεγάλη Εβδομάδα του πρεζάκη", first published over the dateline "1934-1944" in the collection *Πυρετός* (1945). Here Karagatsis takes irreverent parody of religious scripture to heights worthy of Kostas Varnalis, to whom the story is dedicated. Karagatsis's "Passion Story" propels a Piraeus drug-addict (appropriately named Christos Nezeritis) through seven daily stages, from vilification to enforced resurrection and fortuitous redemption, to the refrain "Go to the devil, junkie", which the narrator describes as "the leitmotif of his tragedy". The human "tragedy" of Christos Nezeritis is retrieved from the brink of some rather misogynistic melodrama (involving a Magdalene) by mordent satire, which is mainly directed at institutions of the Greek state ranging from the police to the communist party (headed by the devil incarnate). A gratuitous *dénouement* sees Christos press-ganged aboard the American steamship "Redemptor" and, even less plausibly, entrusted to steer its westward course; this makes a mockery of the dedication to the Marxist Varnalis. Though clearly ironic, the story's engagement with the world of rebetika at least supplies some details of the "etiquette" of the hashish-dives of Piraeus and its musical accompaniment, asserting *inter alia* that "σερέτικα" and "χασικλίδικα" songs, such as "Από κάτω απ' τα ραδίκια", and the *zeibekiko* and *tsifteteli* dances, all have their appointed time and place (1945: 23). Perhaps more significantly, Karagatsis's "Η Μεγάλη Εβδομάδα του πρεζάκη" is at a number of points thematically analogous to two rebetika of the mid-1930s about heroin addiction, "Ο πρεζάκιας" by Yiovan Tsaous and "Ο πόνος του πρεζάκια" by Anestis Delias (Aulin and Vejleskov 1991: 70 and 111 respectively). Both songs give graphic first-person accounts of rejection, vilification and implacable hostility at every turn; in the former song, the degradation of the addict, like that of Karagatsis's anti-hero, continues after his death with a parody of a

funeral in a municipal cart. The potential for an intertextual reading might suggest that Karagatsis was more favourably disposed towards rebetika than his aforementioned contemporaries, but a piece of his post-war journalism in which he reviews nocturnal musical entertainment in the environs of Athens exudes disdain for this form of popular culture (at least in its commercialised version), its exponents and its devotees (Karagatsis 1946).

The search for a more substantial literary engagement with rebetika leads to the largely non-canonical works of the older generation of inter-war writers and to the earlier years of the inter-war era, when, particularly in the aftermath of the Asia Minor disaster, "all roads led to the mean streets", to paraphrase Moullas (1993: 47). Several Greek writers seem to have taken more than just a literary stroll into low life during those years, some impelled by high-class bohemianism, others by journalism, others by ideology, and others simply by destitution. The crusading anthology compiled by Thomas Gorbas, *Περιπετειώδες, κοινωνικό και μαύρο νεοελληνικό αφήγημα* (1981), offers sympathetic biographies for some of the footloose and unacknowledged writers of the inter-war years, several of whom he alleges to have frequented the hashish dives of Athens and Piraeus, including Napoleon Lapathiotis, Mitsos Papanikolaou, Themos Kornaros, Dolis Nikvas, George Tsoukalas and Nikos Saravas. He further claims that Saravas was well acquainted with the low-life musicians of Piraeus (Gorbas 1981: 148).

The dividing line between what might be styled "ρεμπετίζοντες λογοτέχνες" and "λογοτεχνίζοντες ρεμπέτες" seems difficult to draw in that period, and there are tantalising suggestions that the published corpus of rebetika-related literature (or paraliterature) is just the tip of an iceberg. Submerged works eventually brought to visibility almost by accident, include some rebetika-related prose fiction allegedly rescued from a lunatic asylum by Varnalis and published under the title "Χασικλίδικη λογοτεχνία" (1978). Another notable example is a lengthy poem titled "Ο βίος και η απελπισία" attributed to the pickpocket-rhymester Christos Makris and published by Arnellos (1988: 194-

5), long after some of its verses were recorded in Athens for export to the USA in May 1931, at the behest of the Greek-American "artist-and-repertory" agent for the RCA Victor, Tetos Demetriadis. (A 12", 78 rpm record titled "Toumbeleki" was duly pressed from the matrix in America on the Orthophonic label [S-613]; cf. the Artist Sheets of The Gramophone Co. Ltd. held in the British Library: BIRS Microfilms, reel 395 frame 208.)

Considerations of space permit me to mention only a few of the writers of the 1920s whose work significantly connects with rebetika. I hope that this will nonetheless give an indication of the range and nature of the engagement of the fuller list of writers with the genre, and of some of the issues arising. The authors in question are variously assigned by literary historians to literary "generations", whether dated generically to the decade of 1920 or to the specific years 1907 (marking the foundation of the periodical *Ηγησώ*), or 1909 (the Goudi coup), or 1922 (the Asia Minor Disaster), or named after a place of congregation, as with the "Ομάδα του Μπάγκειου" (the café and clearing house for literary gossip and factionalism in Omonia Square). Several of these writers were prolific and original, but with few exceptions they are seldom invoked in recent criticism, as the bibliographies in Moullas (1993) and Dounia (1999) attest. Few of their works are still in print and older copies of many of them have been purged from public libraries by right-wing regimes, commencing with the book-burning dictatorship of Metaxas. Indeed, it is opportune to note here that Metaxas's censorship may have inhibited the scope for literary engagement with rebetika in the last third of the 1930s, just as it changed the course of rebetika. (This may in part explain, for example, the inordinately long gestation of Karagatsis's "Η Μεγάλη Εβδομάδα του πρεζάκη", mentioned earlier.) Yet paradoxically, the link between the worlds of *belles lettres* and rebetika took a new form under Metaxas, involving the writers Yiannis Beratis and G. N. Politis, who were appointed to the censorship board (Vlisidis 2004: 51). In that capacity Politis, one of the founders of the periodical *Ηγησώ*, not only approved or rejected song lyrics proposed for recording, but seems to have had

a hand in "improving" some well-known rebetika of the period (Vlisidis 2004: 51 n.73; cf. Christianopoulos 1994: 22 f.).

Of the better known writers, Kostas Varnalis's engagement with rebetika is framed in politically charged satire. He blazed the trail of satirical depiction of Greek low-life in major composite poetic works such as *Το φως που καίει* (1922) and *Σκλάβοι πολιορκημένοι* (1927). His well-known shorter poem "Οι μοιραίοι" (1921) succinctly established the coordinates for such writing: an insalubrious subterranean tavern infested by degenerate specimens of humanity whose fatalism prevents them from breaking out of the physical and moral degradation that afflicts their successive generations. The poem further alludes to the other regular settings for this type of writing, the brothel/red-light district (το Γκάζι) and the prison (το Παλαμήδι), and also to strident music, another standard ingredient. The strophic structure of the poem, featuring a couplet tailpiece to each stanza, recalls the structure of some rebetika, but it is above all Varnalis's use of the low-life argot that resonates with rebetika and provocatively distances his diction from the linguistic aesthetics of bourgeois Greek poetry. His choice of poetic idiom thus makes rebetika a constant intertext of much of his poetry in this period, "Καλός πολίτης" (1926-7) and "Εξαγνισμός" (1928) being particularly good examples (cf. Papaioannou 1984). Occasionally Varnalis takes a direct quotation from rebetika, such as "Πάλι μεθυσμένος είσαι" at the opening of the prologue to *Σκλάβοι πολιορκημένοι*.

Politically motivated satire is also the context of the use of rebetika-like diction by the Cypriot poet Tefkros Anthias, another habitué of the "Μπάγκειον". Having failed as a teacher in the provincial primary schools of Greece in the 1920s, Anthias became an embittered and impecunious poet-vagabond, producing his best known collection *Τα σφυρίγματα του αλήτη* in 1929, under the manifest influence of the Knut Hamsun and Kostas Karyotakis. His subsequent espousal of Marxism led him to invest the residue of his acquaintance with Athenian low-life in the poem "Δευτέρα παρουσία", first published in 1931 and more reminiscent of Varnalis's larger compositions. Its theme is the trial and over-

throw of the Christian God, and of interest here is a sequence of pastiche-rebetika verses which form part of a long (and rather lame) metrical tirade directed against the erstwhile Almighty by a syphilitic whore; she relives her various experiences of low life in verses such as the following:

> Θαν τα κάψω ντερβισάδες,
> βάλτε χασίσι στους λουλάδες.
> Έλα, ρε βάσανο Τερέζα,
> κουνήσου φέρε μου μια πρέζα. (Anthias 1962: 92)

Pastiche-rebetika of varying degrees of plausibility were also being written by other members of the "Μπάγκειον" fraternity. An unpublished example by Napoleon Lapathiotis titled "Κάτω στου Μήτσου τον τεκέ κάναν οι μπάτσοι μπλόκο" was brought to light by Aris Diktaios long after the poet's death (1984: 54). It is more competent metrically than Anthias's pastiche, but it borders on parody in its combination of rebetika themes with formula patterns from historical and lyrical folksongs:

> Πήραν τις ντουμανότρυπες, πήραν και τους λουλάδες,
> πήραν και τις διμούτσουνες, τα δεκαοχτώ μαρκούτσια...

one of which also echoes Solomos's "Ξανθούλα":

> Δεν κλαίω που με τσιμπήσανε και στο πλεχτό με πάνε,
> μόν' κλαίω που μου τη σκάσανε κι ακόμα είμαι χαρμάνι.

The most reverential literary engagement with rebetika at this time was surely that of Kostas Faltaits. His rather melodramatic and predictable novel *Οι παραστρατημένοι* (1925) belies its subtitle *Πρωτότυπο αθηναϊκό μυθιστόρημα* in all but its very full depiction of an Athenian hashish-den, its etiquette and poetic practices. The narrative is copiously illustrated with sample verses which bear no trace of the parody seen above. Indeed, some of these couplets reappear in a lengthy feature article on the songs of the hashish dens of Athens titled "Τραγούδια του μπαγλαμά", which Faltaits also wrote in 1929 for the Athenian magazine

Μπουκέτο, edited by the bohemian poet Mitsos Papanikolaou. Faltaits claims these hashish songs include "veritable masterpieces" worthy of the attention of folklorists for their "spontaneity and sincerity which both surprise and charm", and the "artistry of their versification". Similar advocacy is to be found in another article which appeared in *Μπουκέτο* in 1933 under the by-line "Reporter" and described the songs of Greek prisons as a treasure unknown to those fortunate enough not to go to prison.

During the 1930s Faltaits was placed in charge of the Greek popular-song catalogue of Columbia Records. To judge from the recently published testimonies of the singer Daisy Stavropoulou (Hatzidoulis 2003: 27 f.) and the bouzouki-player Mitsos "Bayianderas" Gogos (Papadopoulos 2004: 126), Faltaits took a distinctly hands-on approach to managing the format of what was recorded for his catalogue.

Perhaps surprisingly, Faltaits escapes inclusion in Gorbas's 1981 anthology of "black" uncanonical prose, as does Petros Pikros, who was surely one of the most intriguing and shadowy literary figures of inter-war non-canonical literature. But then, as a disgraced communist, Pikros is also one of the most vilified characters in Greek literary history: a singularly unflattering pen-picture of him in Panselinos's *Τότε που ζούσαμε* includes a vicious pre-emptive epitaph for Pikros published by disaffected comrades even before his formal expulsion from the Communist Party (1974: 201).

Pikros died in poverty and oblivion at the height of the Cold War, apparently not dangerous enough to be sent into exile. He is best remembered, if at all, for what he called "Η τριλογία των χαμένων κορμιών", two collections of short stories and a novel published between 1922 and 1927, all three of which were popular enough in their time to warrant two or three editions. Of the nine stories in *Χαμένα κορμιά* (first published in 1922), three are set in Greek brothels, one in a Greek prison, and one involves Parisian low-life. From the outset they reveal Pikros's most distinctive contribution to Greek fiction, the composition of complete narratives in the argot or "Lumpen-language" in which rebetika are also

composed. This is justified by placing the narratives in the mouths of low-life characters. Rebetika thus become the ever-present intertext to Pikros's prose, as they were to much of Varnalis's poetry. Pikros delights in reducing the terminology of politics and economics to the idiom of rebetika, and matches Varnalis's penchant for mixing the divine and profane by making prostitutes use liturgical language. Whether to facilitate comprehension of his argot or to draw greater attention to his literary heresy, Pikros supplied a glossary in the last work of the trilogy, the novel *Τουμπεκί...*, whose very title is slang. The pause-marks, a little observed detail of the title, are another hallmark of Pikros's prose, denoting a pregnant pause, ambiguity or a conspiratorial wink to the reader.

Like Karagatsis, Pikros wallows in excessively detailed descriptions of the minutiae of physical squalor and moral degradation. But while Karagatsis dabbles in Freudian psychology, Pikros is obsessed with demonstrating Marxist precepts about class-based societies, which he further expounds in his prologues. Prostitution is his exemplar of the capitalist order and the pimp is his model capitalist, living in fear and loathing of communism.

Pikros's second collection of short stories *Σα θα γίνουμε άνθρωποι* (1925) raises the stakes of sexual perversion to include incest and bestiality, but of greater relevance to present purposes is the setting of the title story in a subterranean καφέ αμάν, an oriental musical café which was the principal venue for Smyrna-style rebetika in the inter-war years. An exemplary capitalist, its low-life proprietor markets his human and cultural commodities well enough to turn the place from a *kafe-aman* playing *alla Turca* into a *café chantant* equipped with European orchestra and three blonde Hungarian artistes (supplied by the vice squad). The older female personnel are duly relegated from artistes to sex workers of the lowest order, notably the plump belly-dancer Güzel Marika from Smyrna, who smokes ever more hashish and dreams of returning to her lost fatherland.

Such Orientalist juxtapositions of East and West culminate in Pikros's novel *Τουμπεκί...* (1927), whose hero, named Αράπης, is

a criminal entrepreneur from Istanbul, where he learned his trade from the grand masters of the Levant. It is significant that Arapis went on to "higher studies" in the seaports of the western Mediterranean before establishing himself in Athens. This parody of a rounded education recalls the grotesque world of professional beggars in Karkavitsas's *Ο ζητιάνος*, but Arapis's career also uncannily mirrors the notoriously unverified *curriculum vitae* claimed by Pikros for himself, which allegedly culminated in a French medical degree (with parallel studies in philosophy and sociology). In the novel, Arapis is obsessively fearful of being marginalised by the Western-based advances in his "industry", and makes the mistake of recruiting a tertiary-educated assistant for one of his enterprises, which leads to his imprisonment (for the wrong crime). Arapis prospers in this patently Levantine environment, conquering an adversary called "Εγγλέζος", and causing the jail to resound with traditional prison songs extolling his exploits in the traditional Levantine way.

Pikros's variations on Orientalism range widely, from the exotic soft-pornography of the story titled "Ανατολίτικο" in *Χαμένα κορμιά* to the depiction of the Levant as the source of the inter-war Greek underworld and its surest foundation (for the present at least), in the novel *Τουμπεκί...* He persistently marginalises oriental Greek culture by identifying it with low life and sordid corruption. The lugubriously fatalistic or macho rebetika verses with which the trilogy is laced (variously called "τραγούδια της φυλακής" or "ασίκικα" or "τραγούδια που λέμε στους τεκέδες") are components of this Orientalist discourse.

Before we conclude this survey of the role played by inter-war Greek literature in the construction of the genre rebetika, the issue of nomenclature raised at the outset must be revisited. Pikros is not alone among inter-war literati in his ignorance or avoidance of the genre term "rebetika". It was gaining a foothold on record labels and in catalogues by the late 1920s, but not until the mid-1930s did it achieve acceptance in journalism, commencing with an article in *Μπουκέτο* in 1936 (Vlisidis 2002: 206). By late 1937 an article in the Athenian newspaper *Έθνος* reported that more

than 80% of hit records were either of tango music or rebetika (Vlisidis 2002: 86), but at the same time an article by Sophia Spanoudi in *Ελεύθερον Βήμα* ominously congratulated the Metaxas regime on banning the recording of "amanedes" and called for a similar prohibition to be applied to "rebetika", which, while native to Greece, "flow in the same stinking sewer" as the imported amanedes (Vlisidis 2002: 225). The recording industry duly sacrificed the term "rebetika" to Metaxas's censor, inasmuch as the term disappeared from record labels and catalogues printed in Greece, but songs displaying many features of erstwhile "rebetika" continued to be recorded and marketed as "laika", as the HMV Catalogue of Greek Records for 1938 attests.

A novel first published in the inter-war period provides some insight into development of the usage of the relevant genre-terms. The 1939 edition of Pindaros Bredimas's novel *Ο τροφοδότης* describes the song "Λαχανάδες" as an example of σερέτικα, whereas the second edition of 1957 appears to make retrospective amends by substituting the term ρεμπέτικα. Both editions offer the same definition for the divergently named genre: "δηλαδή τα τραγούδια με τους συρτούς και βαριούς, όλο πίκρα στόνους της κοινωνικής υποστάθμης της Αθήνας, που αναπνέει σε μιαν ατμόσφαιρα παραπόνου, αγωνίας και ανημποριάς", further noting that: "οι κυρίες βρίσκανε τα τραγούδια αυτά κακού γούστου".

It is inter-war Greek literature that also supplies the earliest extant attestation for the word "ρεμπέτης", which denotes the protagonist of the songs, and on current indications, Pikros is to be credited with its use even before it appears in the songs. In fact Pikros uses the feminine form "ρεμπέτα", referring to the deranged female protagonist of the story "Μπαλάντα στο φεγγάρι" (1925: 98 f.). Up to this point Greek writers had exhausted a broad gamut of near synonyms without once using "rebetis" (Gauntlett 2001: 35). Thereafter Angelos Terzakis used the word in 1937 and then both Seferis and Theotokas in 1941 (Gauntlett 2001: 34 f.).

Overall, inter-war Greek literature seems to have made a modest and largely indirect contribution to the long-term con-

struction of rebetika as a genre, by signalling its existence (albeit by other names), creating a mystique around its performance context and, at a safe distance, cultivating awareness of its myths, forms and idiom (albeit in a negative or parodic vein). In the process it also planted or reinforced the prejudices behind the well-known post-war controversy about rebetika, which in turn determined its further evolution.

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