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The Limits of Civility: Culture, Nation, and Modernity in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man

By MARIA KOUNDOURA

TOWARD THE END OF The Last Man, her rather bleak futuristic novel about a Greek-born plague that destroys the world, Mary Shelley offers the following vision of a new beginning of modernity:

We first had bidden adieu to the state of things which having existed many thousand years, seemed eternal; such a state of government, obedience, traffic, and domestic intercourse, as had moulded our hearts and capacities, as far back as memory could reach. Then to patriotic zeal, to the arts, to reputation, to enduring fame, to the name of country ... To preserve these we had quitted England ... trusting that, if a little colony could be preserved, that would suffice at some remoter period to restore the lost community of mankind.

We would make our home of one of the Cyclades, and there in myrtle groves amidst perpetual spring, fanned by the wholesome sea-breezes—we would live long years in beatific union.1

This dream of universality for the nation, typical of the colonialist imaginary, belongs to Lionel Verney, the self-titled last man and narrator of the novel. For him, and the novel’s Eurocentric frame, Greece is central to the nation’s future. Yet, as the origin of the plague, it is also the cause of its demise. Verney’s ambivalent relation to Greece, while particular to The Last Man’s negotiation of it, is also representative of the West’s encounter with it. Simultaneously dismantled and reconstructed in the dream of recovering lost origins and inaugurating new times, Greece has been the site of the West’s phantasmatic reconstitution, its “dream nation.”2 The examples are countless. In England, from the late eighteenth century when it began to displace Rome as the point of origin of English culture, to the nineteenth century when, as cultural fantasy, it served as its model, Greece consistently was evoked as the historical abstraction that ensured the concreteness of English “civility.”3

The Last Man exemplifies this usage of Greece in the production of English civility as it also illustrates its limits. Although it is initially set in a

future Republican England, not only directly in volume II of this book but also in its 1818 preface and even in volume I’s thinly veiled autobiographical elements, the story is centered on Greece. It is a Greece situated in the interstices of East and West, the Orient and Hellas, and ideologically constructed by colonialist Europe, even though, unlike the Orient, it was not, strictly speaking, colonized. In typical orientalist fashion, the novel paints a picture of Greece as a “picturesque” place filled with a “noisy populace” dressed in “gaudy colors” (170). At the same time, in typical philhellenic fashion, it also represents it as a place of “grand historic association” that “should be rescued from slavery and barbarism, and restored to a people illustrious for genius, civilization, and a spirit of liberty” (176).4 As nineteenth-century English subjects (despite their twenty-first century setting), and long-term objects of classics, the main characters in the novel, learn to fantasize early on about the Hellenic world, to desire to know it, to see it. Their fantasies are typical of Hellenism and its interest in ancient traces. Typical of philhellenism, and its interest in the resurrection of ancient traces, is their actual encounter with it.5 For how does one confront one’s social imaginary, one’s ideal? The Last Man represents it as an ambivalent experience. It is both devastating (the plague, after all, destroys the world) and regenerative when elevated to the realm of knowledge (made the subject of a novel like The Last Man) and sublimated as part of the ideological fantasies of Greece. This sublimation betrays the discursive coincidence of philhellenism and orientalism and shows that it is not only the result of history (both are characteristic ideological industries of the nineteenth century) but also of their co-existence in subsequent European scholarship.6 The novel’s criticism, itself part of the discourse of knowledge instituted with classics (or philology, that most orientalist of inventions, according to Edward Said, and at the core of Hellenism and philhellenism), demonstrates the long life of such self-serving fantasies.7

Most of the scant and primarily feminist criticism, concentrating primarily on its autobiographical elements, reads The Last Man as a self-conscious

4. Of the thirty-five books on Greece that were published between 1800 and 1826, Mary Shelley’s novel The Last Man is the most striking and the best example of the wave of philhellenism that hit Britain during the years of the Greek struggle for independence from Ottoman rule (1821–1830). See Helen Angelomatis-Trisogarakis, The Eve of the Greek Revival (London: Routledge, 1990) for a bibliographical listing of all the texts on Greece of the period. In addition to the published books, she also notes that ten unpublished diaries and journals of that same period exist in libraries and archives in Britain (6-7).

5. Richard Jenkyns in The Victorians and Ancient Greece (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980) makes the distinction between Hellenism and philhellenism clear when he defines philhellenism as non-Greek sympathy for modern Greeks, particularly the Greek cause of emancipation and self-determination. This sympathy, derived from a love for the cultural heritage of ancient Hellas, should be distinguished, he tells us, from Hellenism, the antiquarian interest in Hellas.

6. Its “Hellenic” past is evident in the idea of a common ground that haunts contemporary criticism even of the radical kind. Andrew Ross, “Defenders of the Faith and the New Class,” in Bruce Robbins, ed., Intellectuals, Aesthetics, Politics, Academics (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) argues for this “common ground” and asks those of us who are interested in changing the times to use it as the stepping stone “from which to contest the existing definitions of a popular-democratic culture” (129); for an account of how nineteenth-century culturalist projects are unwittingly mirrored in contemporary radical critical positions see my “Multinationalism or Multiculturalism?” in David Bennett, ed., Multicultural States: Rethinking Difference and Identity (New York: Routledge, 1998), 69-87.

attempt by Mary Shelley to represent the erasure of history. Anne Mellor, for instance, sees *The Last Man* as “the first English example of what we might call apocalyptic or ‘end-of-the-world’ fiction,” in which Shelley “finally demonstrates that no ideology, including her own theory of the egalitarian bourgeois family, can survive the onslaught of death.” Citing the fact that the novel was written at a time of great personal crisis—three of her four children had died, her husband Percy Shelley had drowned in a shipwreck, and Byron had just died in Greece—Barbara Johnson argues that Mary Shelley documents not only the erasure of her personal history but also of the history of Romanticism. Finally, Steven Goldsmith, in his argument that the novel marks the origin of a feminist discursive practice, claims that “*The Last Man* seems to represent ... the erasure of identity and its displacement by difference in discourse.”

All of these critics are curiously silent about Greece, even though most of the novel’s action is set in it. When they do address it, they treat it as a metaphor for the “real” history in the novel—Shelley’s gender politics and her critique of Romanticism’s ideology and the idea of a universal discourse—and use it to provide coherence to their argument on history’s erasure. Nowhere do they discuss that the history that is erased is also, in fact primarily, Greece’s. The monstrous plague that descends upon the Greek revolution and stops it dead on its tracks, for example, is not read as obstructing the birth of Greece’s modernity (its birth as a new nation freed from Ottoman oppression) but as a critique of “a certain male fantasy of Romantic universality” (Johnson, 33). Barbara Johnson broaches the fact that the novel is silent about “the political consequences of this suspension of the final confrontation between East and West” (the plague, after all, stops the Greco-Turkish war) but only to tell us cryptically that this silence exists because the “question of the relation or of the non-relation between East and West” is “badly posed” in the novel (264). How and why, and what the consequences of this silence are, are questions that are left frustratingly unanswered by Johnson, whose primary aim is to argue that “in the last analysis [The Last Man is] the story of modern Western man torn between mourning and deconstruction” (265).

The novel’s ambivalent representation of Greece as both the origin of civilization and, in that it is plague inflicting, the cause of its destruction, is at the root of these critics’ difficulty with it. In its representation of Greece as a place of “grand historic association” (176) that must be resurrected and as “a darksome gulph” (184) full of monuments and dead Greeks that must be represented, *The Last Man* demonstrates the coincidence of philhellenism and

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9. “In this novel, Mary Shelley,” she writes “does more than give a universal vision of her mourning, she mourns for a certain type of universal vision.” “*The Last Man*,” in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, eds. Audrey Fisch, Anne Mellor, Stephen Goldsmith, and Esther Schor (Oxford UP, 1993), 263.
orientalism. This coincidence and ambivalence, this essay argues, reveals philhellenism's ultimate discomfort with modern Greece as a cultural reality, that is, an independent nation-state with its own national-cultural imaginary (however ideologically constructed itself). It also reveals the overtly anti-Hellenic (that is, anti-Greek) essence of its discourse. In other words, it demonstrates how and why the question of the relation or nonrelation of East and West is "badly posed" in the novel.

Sounding as if he is writing after the plague had wrought its devastation, Lionel Verney describes his first encounter with the "real" Athens:

To our right the Acropolis rose high, spectatress of a thousand changes, of ancient glory, Turkish slavery, and the restoration of dear-bought liberty; tombs and cenotaphs were strewed thick around, adorned by ever renewing vegetation; the mighty dead hovered over their monuments, and beheld in our enthusiasm and congregated numbers a renewal of the scenes in which they had been the actors. (170)

It is the future, Greece is free but the Acropolis, still engendering feelings of awe as it did for Shelley's Romantic contemporaries, has not changed. Nor does it belong to the free Greeks, after all, as Ernest Renan quite stereotypically in his philhellenist/orientalist accounts wrote later, "it is a type of eternal beauty without local or nationalist color." Yet the "our" of the enthusiasm that the "mighty dead" Greeks observed was not the enthusiasm of the populace that was just liberated—but the enthusiasm of the English Verney and his friends—the ones that really renewed the "scenes" in which the dead Greeks were the actors. The novel's line of vision, then, is clear. Verney makes it explicit at the end when, truly the last man, he bids "farewell to matchless Rome [and] to civilized life" (468), selects a "few books; the principal [being] Homer and Shakespeare"(469), and embarks on a journey to Greece to place himself among "the spirits of the dead" (470).

This Greece emptied of life functions as what Michel de Certeau has defined as the original "nothing" which is indispensable for any orientation and which cannot have a place in history because it is the principle that organizes history. In The Last Man, it is through this principle that Lionel Verney—who calls himself an "outcast" (13) because of his "uncouth" and "savage" ways (14) and his "war on civilization" (19)—defines himself. He tells us that he "began to be human" (29) only after he "studied the wisdom of the ancients ... [and] the metaphysics of Plato" (77). Only then can he tell the reader at the beginning of his story: "I am a native of a sea-surrounded nook ... the earth's very centre was fixed for me in that spot, and the rest ... 11. For an extensive account of reactions and representations of the Acropolis, see Artemis Leontis, Topographies of Hellenism (Ithaca: Cornell, 1995), 40-66. 12. Ernest Renan, "Priere sur l'Acropole" (1865), cited in Leontis, 51. 13. "By allowing the present to be 'situated' in time and finally, to be symbolized, " de Certeau writes, "narrative posits it within a necessary relation to a 'beginning' which is nothing, or which serves merely as a limit. The anchoring of the narrative conveys everywhere a tacit relation to something which cannot have a place in history—an originary non-place—without which, however, there would be no historiography ... This initial nothing traces out the disguised return of an uncanny past." See "The Historiographical Operation," in The Writing of History, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 90-91.
her orb was a fable, to have forgotten which would have cost neither my imagination nor understanding an effort” (9). As a “fable,” Greece is transformed into a chronological postulate that is at once erased in the narrative but everywhere presupposed in it, impossible to eliminate. Verney thus begins his story with a lie, because to forget plague-inflicting Greece is all that his efforts are about and that cost him dearly: his friends, his countrymen, the world. His insularist belief that the plague “drinks the dark blood of the inhabitant of the south, but it never feasts on the pale-faced Celt” (233) does not bring him and his world much protection. England might be an island but, mirroring Constantinople, “hemmed in by its gulphs,” its inhabitants die “like the famished inhabitants of a besieged town” (148). He also ends his story with a lie when he denies the fact that his efforts to erase this memory of Greece as deadly have also brought forth history: the history of his narrative and, in that we are reading it, the history of our time. “At first I thought only to speak of plague, of death, and last, of desertion,” he writes, denying the dominant content of his narrative, “but I lingered fondly on my early years, and recorded with sacred zeal the virtues of my companions. They have been with me during the fulfillment of my task” (466).

Whether he writes about it or not, however—and in the novel, despite his telling us otherwise, he does—the plague (and Greece) will be and is heard. Personified in Evadne, the first named carrier, who in turn personifies Greece (she is “the beloved Ionian,” 35), the plague lives on, despite Evadne’s death, Greece’s silencing, and even Verney’s death. Not, in Goldsmith’s affirmative and somewhat utopian reading, as the site of a “feminist discursive practice,” not also as “the nightmarish version of the desire to establish a universal discourse” (Johnson) but as the historical reality that is modern Greece in the text. The Greece, that is, which is part of the orient (the Ottoman empire) and is struggling to define and produce itself—following the course of the plague—out of Asia. This Greece of “gaudy colours,” unruly populace, and warlike chieftains (185) was the fertile ground and transmitter of the plague and, as such, it and not the already absent from Constantinople Moslems is the power that “must be eradicated from Europe” (189). It is the “monument to antique barbarism,” and not the Turks as the philhellenic frame of the novel would have us believe (175). As Adrian, very Apollonian (26-27) hence “truly Greek,” reports upon returning to England from the Greek front, there is an indistinguishable savagery between Greek and Moslem (161-162). Thus the “mighty struggle there going forward between civilization and barbarism” (153) is not as the Eurocentric historical frame of the novel would have it between the Greeks and the Turks, but between “truly civilized” men and barbarians, among whom one also finds the Greeks. The impossible presence of these later Greeks, so different from the classical ideal, demonstrates the tension in the novel between representing the erasure of history and its impossibility. This tension is evident in the uneasy coexistence between the violent Eurocentrism at the heart of the novel, which reads Greece as its origin and justifies the Greek siege of Constantinople and the discourse of eth-
nocentrism that Shelley cannot escape, and which has her openly criticizing the Greeks and in so doing undermining the very language of hierarchy necessary to the European rationalization of domination.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in the novel's representation of Evadne as not only unassimilable but also as the destructive gendered outsider. Her textual space is occluded. Not without consequences though. Because she is excluded from authorship, her very accurate story of the plague is read as the ravings of a lunatic by all (184), Evadne destroys the novel's center from within. Not only is she the carrier of the universal devastation of the plague but also of a series of individual disasters that destroy all the relationships—personal and public—among the band of friends of which she was a member (albeit a peripheral one). Married once, and the cause of her husband's ruin and eventual suicide, Evadne's affair with the philhellenic Raymond brings down the sign of the male's social power—the family and its ideal of monogamy—as it also brings down the entire English government. His domestic private and public life ruined, Raymond goes to Greece in pursuit of personal glory only to end up dying conquering a plague-ridden and deserted city. His wife, Perdita, commits suicide and Adrian, who had escaped his initial love of Evadne with only a brush with madness, dies of the plague on his way to Greece. Evadne, the "clever Greek girl" (33), the "monument of human passion and human misery" (182), leaves a trail of destruction wherever she goes. As Steven Goldsmith has argued, she "not only threatens the patriarchal order but in fact collapses it" (148). She "remains unpredictable and beyond patriarchal assimilation" (149).

Evadne, however, also collapses the matriarchal order, for she is excluded from authorship not only from the text proper but also from, what feminist readers of the novel see as, the distinctively female space of the preface’s Sibylline cave. 14 Although (through their reworking by classics) by culture and, as another unassimilable other, by function, closer to the Sibyl, because of the Sibyl’s “scattered and unconnected” pages (6) and her own “wild and lost exclamations” (181) Evadne’s, like the Sibyl’s, “verses” are also either excluded or transformed. “I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form,” Shelley, who is also the narrator, tells us in the preface (6). “My only excuse for thus transforming them,” she explains, “is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition” (7). This exclusion allows the reader to see that, what appears to be outside the text and its patriarchal order, the preface, which has been celebrated by all feminist readings of the novel as the highly feminized and highly empowered place of the imagination, is already inside the highly disciplined, masculinist, and culturally mediated history of origins in the text. This history has England and the male as its center, despite its assertions otherwise. Although Shelley desig-

14. Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, in Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), 95-104, are the first to point to the "dim hypaethric cavern" as being a distinctively female space.
nates her source in a woman’s vision, “the Cumaean damsel” (6), she transcribes that vision “with the selected and matchless [male] companion of my toils” (6). This male companion is also instrumental in identifying the cave as the Sibyl’s (5) and in gathering the leaves upon which the Sibyl’s “verses” were written, using his understanding of their inscriptions as his measure (6). Shelley’s argument then, that “obscur and chaotic as they [the verses] are, they owe their present to me, their decipherer” (6), is not exactly true. They are already mediated by her male companion’s (Percy Shelley) knowledge, and his power to name a new “Hellas.” To translate the prophetic leaves through this mediation necessarily excludes something of the Sibyl’s discourse. It puts her in an “English dress” in which she can never fit, hence Mary Shelley’s snips and tucks (6).

Despite its portrayal of the gendered subject as the outsider, The Last Man uses the discourse of ethnocentrism to incorporate that outsider into a masculinist and Eurocentric narrative of origins. Evadne’s recalcitrant and nationalist self (she fights and dies in the Greek War of Independence in an effort to “realize” the cultural fantasy of Greece) makes it impossible to include her in this history. She might have an “English dress” and be a master of disguise—twice she has passed as a man, once anonymously submitting drawings for an architecture competition, and once dressing as a foot soldier—but the “too great energy of her passions” never allows her to pass as the sublimated English subject (the real/dead Greek of classics) with whom readers can identify (113). Hence, Verney—trained in “the wisdom of the ancients” (75) and, as we see in the last pages of the novel and in his journey to Greece with Homer in hand, well on his way to joining them—does not recognize her when he encounters her in the battlefields of Greece. This is why he goes against the novel’s (and his own) initial Eurocentric claim on Evadne and sees the erstwhile “beloved Ionian” (35) as a thing of darkness, “a form [that] seemed to rise from the earth” (180), “a Sultana of the East” (182). This is also why Mellor, Johnson, and Goldsmith—despite their efforts to rewrite masculinist fictions of origins and show the gendered limits of English civility through Shelley’s text—cannot identify (with) Evadne. In their readings of The Last Man, they either do not see her at all (Johnson) or see her as a duplicitous homewrecker (Mellor) or as a general metaphor of otherness with no specificity to her displacement (Goldsmith).

Because of her inability to be translated in the novel’s and its criticism’s Eurocentric terms, Evadne will always remain an outsider—the Sybil had she been able to represent herself and not, as Goldsmith argues, “as she might have represented herself” (148). To speculate on how she might have, is, like Shelley, to ask questions of the Sibyl that are the measure of our own self-knowledge, that is, our own ideological fantasies of civility. For, as her textual history shows, the Sibyl always echoes another. Ovid has her say that she is “known by voice alone,” but that voice is never hers.15 In Virgil’s

account we see the violence of her speech: “So did Apollo/Shake reins upon her until she raved, and twist the goads/Under her breast.” Apollo’s violence on her corresponds directly to her prophetic ability: the Sibyl predicts the future only under the whip, and the words are never her own but those of the power that enters her as an alien presence (whether it is Apollo or, like Shelley, another woman wielding his power).

The Sibyl and, by the novel’s metonymic register, Evadne and Greece, cannot represent themselves. And, as both the text and the criticism of The Last Man show, nor can they be represented. Instead, their stories are replaced by the self-generated and projected images of otherness in which its observers (novelist and critics) need to see themselves. These images have not only aesthetic repercussions, as Edward Said has argued of orientalist practices but also, as the institutional history and hold of the methodology of classics shows, political ones. It may not have its old glory—after all the West’s gaze has shifted elsewhere—but the institutions put in place by Hellenism continue to function as a means of negotiating the Western world’s (now calling itself transnational) own contemporary necessities. The most resilient of these is criticism, the legacy of classics nurtured by English studies. Thus, while Shelley’s text reflects Romantic aesthetic representations of Greece in incorporating Evadne’s (and the Sibyl’s) discourse as part of her narrative of origins, it also performs the political move of appropriating the terms of Evadne’s otherness: she replaces (puts in English dress, renders “intelligible” is her justification of her interpretive practice) those qualities of Evadne that are the very reason she is denied the right and the ability to represent herself.

The primary of those qualities is her teleology, literally, her end, and the traces that it leaves behind (in the form of the Sibylline leaves that Shelley calls “my”). This is why the novel, we are told by Verney, is a “monument of the existence of Verney, the Last Man” (466) and why every character in the novel has an obsession with monuments. “All I ask of Greece,” says Raymond after he hears of the death warrant that Evadne has put on him, “is a grave. Let them raise a mound above my lifeless body, which may stand even when the dome of St Sophia has fallen” (187). By representing the end of history and the last man as English, Shelley represents the impossibility of this history’s end. For the history, and the end upon which it is based, is that of the “illustrious” and dead Greeks whose “scenes” the Englishman Verney and his friends “renewed,” that is, in true orientalist fashion, replaced with the self-generated images of otherness that they needed to see themselves in and define their civility through.

Although it might appear that he is also hoping for such a renewal when, after resolving to write his “monument,” he dedicates it “TO THE ILLUS-

17. There are many studies that trace the role of classics in the rise of English studies. See Chris Baldick, The Social Mission of English Criticism 1842-1942 (Blackwell, 1988) and the essays in Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, eds. Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920 (Croom Helm, 1987).
TRIOUS DEAD/SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!/
BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN" (466), the fact that it is not clear which shadows he is addressing here makes his history irreplaceable. Are the shadows those of the dead Greeks, those of his world or those of his future readers whose fate, simply by touching his book and thinking about it (for that is how the plague is transmitted in the book by touch and by thought), is sealed? Replacing past, present, and future, The Last Man’s teleology enacts a historical totalization that the Greeks could never achieve. Had they been able to, the plague that personifies them in the novel, would have been victorious and would “really” have brought about the end. In other words, we would all be “real” Greeks, which, in the terms of The Last Man, means that we would all be dead. Because they have not been able to, Western culture continues to define “itself” through them. In the United States today, despite the efforts of multiculturalist and postcolonialist critics to question the universal validity of Eurocentric norms, Greece still tends to represent “our civility.” Neoconservative public intellectuals like the former Reagan- and Bush-era drug and education “czar” William Bennett (enjoying a renaissance under the newly elected Bush administration) and conservative critics like Roger Kimball see the efforts of multiculturalism as a direct attack on patriotism, democracy, and civilization. Kimball argues that “despite our many differences, we hold in common an intellectual, artistic, and moral legacy, descending largely from the Greeks and the Bible [that] preserves us from chaos and barbarism.”

Critiques of Eurocentrism, albeit unintentionally, also define their civility through Greece. Fredric Jameson, for example, a critic with a considerably radical reputation and with an interest in outlining “a genuinely dialectical attempt to think of our present of time in History,” seems to be collaborating with the repressive politics of postmodern cultural production whose power he has made it his project to expose and combat.19 In “Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” he attempts to explain this discrepancy in his position:

The postmodern is the force field in which very different kinds of impulses—what Raymond Williams has usefully termed “residual” and “emergent” forms of cultural production—must make their way. If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall into a view of history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable (6).20

20. This essay of Jameson’s (and the subsequent book that contains it) has come under much critical discussion ranging from attack, as in Aijaz Ahmad’s in his book In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures (London: Verso, 1992), to friendly criticism as in Gayatri Spivak’s A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1999) in which she writes: “Transnational literacy keeps the abstract as such, the economic, visible under erasure. Yet it cannot afford to ignore the irreducible heterogeneity of the cultural in the name of the ‘cultural dominant’ simply because it is dominant” (315).
In his desire for historical effectiveness, he ends up sounding very much like Matthew Arnold who, in the mid-nineteenth century, was proposing Hellenism as the cultural dominant that would stave off the confusion of barbarism. Of course, unlike Arnold, Jameson wants us to focus on the dominant so that an analysis of its power can unmask its repression of diversity. His unintentional collusion with Arnold, however, illustrates the problem of concentrating only on the dominant (whatever it may be at any historical instance). As Gayatri Spivak points out, the difference between radical and conservative resistance to it is erased.

This contradiction in Jameson’s work poignantly demonstrates that, in the process of defining cultures even in our “new” time of criticism, despite assertions of undermining progressive, singular development, the past can easily be interpellated into the present. In Jameson, this interpellation is evident in the residual Hellenism of his practice, that is, in his insistence on the need for a cultural dominant. In contemporary Anglo-American criticism it is evident in readings that, in their eagerness to undo Eurocentrism, conflate Greece’s modernity and antiquity. Such a conflation—traditionally the province of Greek nationalists, nineteenth-century Romantic idealists like Shelley, and contemporary neoconservatives—effectively erases the cultural reality of modern Greece. In this instance, this erasure is not performed in the name of Hellenism and its belief in the metaphysical integrity of Greek culture through the ages. Rather, the erasure is performed in the name of a postmodern multiculturalism that should include Greece and a postcolonialism of which Greece is also a part, even though its is a colonization of the ideal. Despite their desire for rupture, then, these critiques, even if by negation, end up bearing the burden of the discourse of continuity. Only by acknowledging Greece’s otherness, its ambivalent position in the interstices of East and West, in other words, only by utilizing the lessons of texts like The Last Man, can visionaries of a future, non-Eurocentric civility, “detect the incidence of interruptions” beneath “the great continuities of thought,” “suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time.” A time in which we do not “merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live, to be, in other times and different spaces, both human and historical.”

22. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, 313-20. Spivak attributes this erasure to Jameson’s resistance to poststructuralism which is a result of his Marxism unmediated by present conditions.