

DEMETRIOS CAPETANAKISAN INTRODUCTION TO MODERN GREEK POETRY

An introduction to the poetry of a foreign country is one of the most difficult things. Poetry means language - the inmost essence of language - and since the days of Babel men have been condemned to speaking different languages. "Let us go down," God said, as we read in the Bible, "let us go down, and there confound the language of men that they may not understand one another's speech." This is true not only as regards countries, but also as regards individuals. Yet in this talk we are not interested in the tragedy of individuals. We shall also say very little about the tragedy of the countries whose poetic voice is not understood by the world.

In spite of the curse of Babel I'll try to give you a picture of modern Greek poetry. In spite of all differences of language, all people have many things in common. There are things like life and death, love and hatred, nature and dreams which are common to all mankind.

All human beings come from the unknown to live in this world for a few years, trying to give a meaning to their lives, and then they go back to the unknown again. The questions of life, of the meaning of life and of death are subjects we find in the poetry of all ages and all countries.

In order to give you a picture of modern Greek poetry, I shall try to shew you what form these eternal questions take in the work of the national modern Greek poets. I shall speak to you about the question of life and death as we find it in the Greek ballads, and in the work of two nineteenth century poets, who are considered as the national poets of modern Greece, Solomos and Calvos.

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The origin of the modern Greek ballads, just like the origin of the popular English ballads, cannot be easily traced. Various specialists think that most of the Greek ballads must be the work of 18th century anonymous poets. What is certain is that some of these Greek ballads, like some of the English ballads, are among the most beautiful poems of their language. I shall first read a very short ballad to you - a very moving poem about nature and death, in which we see quite clearly what the world means to the anonymous Greek poets, or rather to the common Greek people. I shall read it in Greek first because even those who do not understand the language, if they are interested in poetry at all, would be interested to hear what a modern Greek ballad sounds like. The metre of the modern Greek ballad is not very much unlike the usual metre of the English ballad and of the English church hymns. The Greek line is the "δεκαμετασύλλαβος", one line of fifteen syllables. The stanza of the English ballad usually has two distichs of fourteen or fifteen syllables each, so that the stanza

of an English ballad has more or less the same effect as two lines of a Greek ballad. But let us read the poem:

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You lucky mountains, lucky fields,
You have no fear of Death;
You don't expect the Murderer,
But only lovely springs,
Summers that make the mountains green,
And strew the fields with flowers.

In modern Greek poetry, especially in the ballads, we find an astounding awareness of death. This awareness is not at all like the awareness of death we find in the English mediaeval mystery plays and moralities, or in the Elizabethan plays.

O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind,
says "Everyman" in the well-known English mediaeval morality.

This line shows that death was not always in the people's mind, and that the writers of plays such as "Everyman" wrote them to remind people that they must be always prepared to leave the world. The Elizabethans, on the other hand, made so much fuss about death, because death was a new discovery to them. A new age was then beginning for England, a new type of man, full of vitality and possibilities, was taking shape, and this new age and this new man, while they were becoming aware of their own potentialities, they were also discovering their own limits - the

worst of which is death. And that is why death plays such an important part in the great Elizabethan plays. In the modern Greek ballads, on the contrary, the people do not need to be reminded of death, as in "Everyman" and if they seem so aware of death, it is not because they have just discovered it. The Greeks have a very long history behind them, and this long history has given them the knowledge of the human limits. The poets of the Greek ballads seem to be so aware of death, because every Greek, even the least educated, has been given a profound wisdom by the history of his country. But this wisdom, this knowledge of the human limits the modern Greek has, which makes his poetry so thoughtful and melancholy, does not make him accept these limits and resign to his fate. This same history the Greek has behind him and which gives him his wisdom, his irony and his scepticism, gives him also an astounding belief in some ideas, a strong sense of honour, and an unheard-of pride. The Greek of the ballads is melancholy because he knows that no one can escape death, - but when death comes this same meditative person does not give up himself to the Murderer, to the *φονιά*, but, although he knows too well that he will be defeated, he wants to fight, and die an honourable death. The fight of the Greek "pallikari", the Greek hero with Death, is the subject of another Greek ballad, which I would like to read to you. I shall read it in Greek first:

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And this is how I translated it:

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Your arms and cross your hands.

My name is Death and I have come
To take your soul away."

"I won't take off my clothes, I won't
Lay down my arms," he answered.

"You may be Death, but I won't let
You take my soul away.

We both are men, and both are brave,
Let us then go and fight,
Wrestle in iron threshing floors,
Lest we destroy the country."

They went and fought like man with man
In iron threshing-floors.

Nine times the young man knocked down Death,
And Death got hurt at last.

He took the young man by his hair
And forced him to his knees.

"Death, leave my hair alone," he cried,
"And take me from the waist.

Then I shall show you what it is
To wrestle with a man."

But Death replied: "It is the hair
I like to grasp and hold;
The hair of boys and lively girls,

Of warlike men and children."

This poem is a wonderful illustration of the Greek's attitude to life. During this war the way in which the Greeks fought the invaders of their country, made people wonder. What inner, spiritual power enabled the Greeks to fight as they fought? The poetry of the Greek ballads which throws light upon the psychology of the modern Greek, gives also an explanation to this problem. And it is not only the poetry of the Greek ballads which shows what life and death and freedom mean to the Greek of to-day. What life and death and freedom mean to the Greek is the central theme of all modern Greek poetry.

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Now I shall speak to you about Dionysios Solomos who is considered as the national poet of modern Greece. The words of the Greek national anthem are his; he lived during the war of Greek Independence and his poetry is burning with patriotism and the love of freedom; but, in spite of that, Solomos was not only a patriotic poet, and his poetry is significant not only for the Greeks. Actually there is an excellent book about him in English by Mr. Romily Jenkins, of the Cambridge University, published three years ago. Solomos' poetry has a freshness - and at the same time a depth which make him one of the most interesting poets of the nineteenth century. His poetry has such a freshness because when he started writing it was before the liberation of Greece, and the

modern Greek language was something fresh, which had not been much used by deliberate poetry. Solomos could use in his poetry the simplest and most ordinary words such as "kalos" = good, "omorfos" = beautiful, "glykos" = sweet, words which the poets of a worn-out language rather avoid, and he could make poetry, a poetry full of freshness, out of them. Listen to these admirable lines for instance:

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Blond April dances with the God
 Of Love, and Nature's happy.
 And in the growing shade which hides
 Riches of fragrant coolness,
 One hears unheard-of, fainting songs
 Of birds. Clear, lovely waters
 Run into scented depths of earth,
 And robs them from their perfumes,
 And showing all the treasures of
 Their sources to the sun,
 They run hither and thither, mad,
 And sing like nightingales.
 A butterfly which scented her
 Sleep in the heart of lilies,
 Played on the silent surface of
 The lake with a small shadow.
 - You who can see the spirits move,

What did you see to-night?

- The night was full of miracles,
The night was full of spells.

This lovely passage, full of the freshness of nature described in a new, fresh language, is not only a charming description. It is much more than that. This passage belongs to a long, unfinished poem called The Free Besieged, inspired by one of the most stirring incidents of the Greek War of Independence, the Siege of Missolonghi. Missolonghi, the Greek town where Byron died, had been besieged by enemy forces so overwhelming that there was no doubt about the issue of the struggle. In spite of that the Greeks were not giving in. Mr. Jenkins in his book on Solomos, says about the poem: "The scene is Missolonghi, but Missolonghi now stands for the world of men. The protagonists are Greek heroes, but their adventures are those of the human soul. We have passed from historical and political poetry to Greek tragedy. The conflict of the rational soul in opposition to the brute forces of matter, the weakness of the flesh, and the temptations of the senses, are now the theme. The Besieged are led into temptation, in order that they may overcome it and win the crown that shall not be taken away from them. Brutality and cruelty strive to intimidate them; their starving bodies are tempted at the sight of the vigorous enemy, strong in the plenty of unhampered supplies; the women must survive their children's slow death; the men must endure a final, heartrending failure of nerve on the part of the women, as

the hour of dawn draws nigh when the sortie is to be made; hopes of relief are raised only to be dashed when it is seen that the approaching squadron is not Greek. And last and most powerful of all, nature and spring time conspire to defeat their resolution by appearing all round them in their most alluring manifestations. In vain: they have the courage never to submit or yield, - reason is triumphant, and the Besieged by their indomitable endurance become finally and absolutely free."

This absolute freedom of man in life, a freedom which is there as an attitude in spite of the facts of bondage, of failure and death, pictured in a wonderful way by the Greek ballads in which man does not surrender to death, but wrestles with him in iron-threshing floors, - this absolute freedom, which means everything to the Greek of to-day, is also the theme of our national poet's most important work, "The Free Besieged". An attitude of absolute freedom similar to the one we find in modern Greek literature, we find in some works of Russian literature, in Dostoevsky's "Letters from the Under^{world}ground", for instance. The hero of "Letters from the Underworld" speaks of the limitations of man, which make absolute freedom impossible. He describes them as a stone wall and says: "Of course, I am not going to beat my head against a wall if I have not the necessary strength to do so; yet I am not going to accept that wall merely because I have run up against it, and have no means to knock it down." Yet, Dostoevsky's attitude of absolute freedom is expressed with too much passion while

Solomos' attitude of absolute freedom has no bitterness in it, - it is full of dignity and pride.

What could be more dignified than this verse by Calvos, the other Greek national poet, in which he gave us a most moving, because of its dignity and pride - self-portrait:

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No passion disturbs me -
I strike the lyre
And I stand upright
By the open mouth
Of my grave.

Calvos was born at the end of the eighteenth century in Zante, one of the loveliest Ionian Islands, restored to Greece and to freedom some years after his death by Great Britain. Although he was brought up in Italy, he left her for England, where as he says in one of his poems "The rays of sweet Freedom" nourished him. He lived in this country for many years and he died in this country. Married twice, both times to an English woman, he was deeply influenced by the manners, the thought and the poetry of this country. Bu in spite of that - or perhaps because of that - he is one of the two great national poets of Greece. When his native country - so weak against such a powerful enemy - rose, in 1821, in the desperate determination to die or to regain her freedom, he was so much stirred by the greatness of the event that he became a poet to proclaim its meaning to the world. In his poetry we find

the same attitude of absolute freedom we found in the Greek ballads and in Solomos' poetry. Let us hear one of his most important poems, his "Ode to Death":

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And now I shall read the translation:

(The poet suddenly finds himself in a very old temple):

Peaceful, frozen,
The vast wings
Of the deep night
Cover
The whole world.

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Be silent here; there are bodies of Saints
Sleeping in this place.
Be silent here; do not disturb
The sacred rest
Of the dead.

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I hear the fury
Of the raging wind;
It strikes violently; the windows
Of the temple open
Torn to pieces.

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From the sky

Where the dark-winged
Clouds sail,
The moon throws
Its cold silver.

It lights up a cold,
White, silent piece of marble;
One sees on the grave
A censer without fire,
Candles without flame, and funeral cakes.

.....

Look, the gravestone moves.
Look, from the cracks of the grave
A thin vapour comes out
And stands
In front of me.
It grows thicker; it takes
Human shape.
What are you? Tell me!
A creation, a phantom
Of my disturbed mind,
Or a human being
Living in graves?
Do you smile?

.....

And the ghost speaks:

- Don't ask me questions; don't search
The inexpressible mystery
Of death ..

.

The ghost is the poet's mother:

Oh, my son, my son,
My dear child,
Our fates are different
And it is in vain that you try
To embrace me.
Do not cry. You had better smile.
Why do you cry? You don't know
What the fate of my soul is.
And in this grave
My body rests
From pain.

Oh, yes, life is an unbearable
Pain; the hopes,
The tears, and the pleasures,
The sweetness of the world
Torture you.
We the dead enjoy
Eternal peace,

Free from fear,
Free from sorrow
Our sleep is free from dreams.

You, the cowards,
When someone whispers
The name of Death, tremble;
But no one, no one
Can escape Death.

My son, you saw me breathing;
The sun revolving
Like a spider, folded me
In light and in death
Incessantly.

The spirit which was my life
Was a breath of God
And went back to Him,
My body was earth and it fell
Here, in the grave.
But the light of the moon
Vanishes; I must leave you;
Farewell, my son.

- Oh, do not go!
Do not leave your son
In sorrow.

But she has vanished.
And my eyes are open
In deep darkness.

- Now, now my lips
Could kiss
The knees of Death;

Where are the roses? Bring
Never-fading wreaths;
Give me the lyre; sing;
The terrible enemy
Became a friend.

How can Death, who kissed
The forehead of frail women
Frighten
The heart of a man?

Who is in danger?
Now that I face
Death with courage
I hold the anchor
Of salvation.

The attitude of absolute freedom in facing Death with courage is a theme we often find in modern Greek poetry. We found it in

the Greek ballad of the man wrestling with Death in iron-threshing floors; we found it in Solomos' "Free Besieged"; we found it in Calvos' "Ode to Death". If we had more time I could give you many similar examples. I could speak to you about our other important poets, about Cavafis, about Sikelianos, about Kazantzakis, about Seferis. Cavafis' poems have been translated into English by Prof. John Mavrogordato in an admirable way. Some of them have been published in various periodicals, but I hope that these excellent translations will soon be brought out as a book. Some good translations of Seferis' poems were published by John Lehmann in "Daylight".

I think I shall conclude this lecture with a poem by the young Greek poet Prevelakis, a translation of which was published by John Lehmann again in his "Folios of New Writing". This poem, written just before this war, shows that the traditional theme of modern Greek poetry is still alive in the hearts of the young Greek poets:

.....

Death is frozen waiting outside my door.
Open to him! Open the door!
Because I still have a soul in my breast,
This morning, as I was passing by,
The cypresses presented arms
And the wet earth longed
For the handful of my dust.
Let us open and receive Death!

Because I still have a soul in my breast!
The standing furrows that I ploughed
This year also expect my sowing.

1/3/21

D.M.

Lecture on Modern
Czech Poetry, unpublished
at his death.

Gwin at ?

An Introduction to Modern Greek Poetry

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The origin of the modern Greek ballads, just like the origin of the popular English ballads, cannot be easily traced. Various specialists think that most of the Greek ballads must be the work of 18th century

anonymous poets. What is certain is that some of these Greek ballads, like some of the English ballads, are among the most beautiful poems of their language. I shall first read a very short ballad to you, - a very moving poem about nature and death, in which we see quite clearly what the world means to the anonymous Greek poets, or rather to the common Greek people. I shall read it in Greek first because even those who do not understand the language, if they are interested in poetry at all, would be interested to hear what a modern Greek ballad sounds like. The metre of the modern Greek ballad is not very much unlike the usual metre of the English ballad and of the English church hymns. The Greek line is the "δεκαπεντασύλλαβος", one line of fifteen syllables. The stanza of the English ballad usually has two distichs of fourteen or fifteen syllables each, so that the stanza of an English ballad has more or less the same effect as two lines of a Greek ballad. But let us read the poem:

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The ghost is the poet's mother:
Oh, my son, my son,
My dear child,
Our fates are different

And it is in vain that you try
To embrace me.

Do not cry. You had better smile.

Why do you cry? you don't know
what the fate of my soul is.

And in this grave

My body rests

From pain.

Oh, yes, life is an unbearable

Pain; the hopes,

The tears, and the pleasures,

the sweetness of the world

Torture you.

We the dead enjoy

Eternal peace,

Free from fear,

Free from sorrow

Our sleep is free from dreams.

You, the cowards,

When someone whispers

The name of Death, tremble;

But no one, no one

Can escape Death.

My son, you saw me breathing;

The sun revolving

Like a spider, folded me

In light and in death

Incessantly.

The spirit which was my life

Was a breath of God

And went back to Him,

My body was earth and it fell
here, in the grave.

But the light of the moon
Vanishes; I must leave you;
Farewell, my son.

- Oh, do not go!

Do not leave your son
In sorrow.

But she has vanished.

And my eyes are open
In deep darkness.

- Now, now my lips

Could kiss

The knees of Death;

Where are the roses? Bring
never-fading wreaths;

Give me the lyre; sing;

The terrible enemy

Became a friend.

How can Death, who kissed

The forehead of frail women

Frighten

The heart of a man?

Who is in danger?

Now that I face

Death with courage

I hold the anchor

of salvation.

The attitude of absolute freedom in facing Death with courage is a theme we often find in modern Greek poetry. We found it in the Greek ballad of the man wrestling with Death in iron-threshing floors; we found it in Solomos' "Free, Besieged"; we found it in Calvos' "Ode to Death". If we had more time I could give you many similar examples. I could speak to you about our other important poets, about Cavafis, about Sikelianos, about Kazantzakis, about Seferis. Cavafis' poems have been translated into English by Prof. John Mavrogordato in an admirable way. Some of them have been published in various periodicals, but I hope that these excellent translations will soon be brought out as a book. Some good translations of Seferis' poems were published by John Lehmann in "Daylight".

I think I shall conclude this Lecture with a poem by the young Greek poet Prevelakis, a translation of which was published by John Lehmann again in his "Folios of Bew Writing". This poem written just before this war, shows that the traditional theme of modern Greek poetry is still alive in the hearts of the young Greek poets:

.....

Death is frozen waiting outside my door.
 Open to him! Open the door!
 Because I still have a soul in my breast,
 This morning, as I was passing by,
 The cypresses presented arms
 And the wet earth longed
 For the handful of my dust.
 Let us open and receive Death!
 Because I still have a soul in my breast!
 The standing furrows that I ploughed
 This year also expect my sowing.
