

MICHAŁ BZINKOWSKI

***ELEUTHERÍA E THÁNATOS!*
THE IDEA OF FREEDOM IN MODERN GREEK
POETRY DURING THE WAR
OF INDEPENDENCE IN 19TH CENTURY.
DIONYSIOS SOLOMOS' "HYMN TO LIBERTY"¹**

Travelers who had the opportunity to visit Greece in years 1780–1810 did not notice any signs of arousing of the spirit of the nation being for almost 400 years under Turkish domination². Interesting in this matter is the testimony of a well known French writer of that time Chateaubriand who, visiting Greece in 1807, wrote in his *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem* such remark: *Je crains bien que les Grecs ne soient pas sitôt disposés à rompre leurs chaînes; quand ils seront débarassés de la tyrannie qui les opresse, ils ne perdront pas en un instant la marque de leurs fers*³. Whatever might have been the impression of him and other travelers, in fact together with the development of education in the last decades of 18-th century increasingly grew also the national orientation towards unity and liberation from Turkish occupation⁴. The end of the eighteenth century and the first two decades of the nineteenth turned out to be the most important and decisive years for forming mod-

^{1/} Paper given at the conference „*To Be Free. Freedom and Its Limits in the Ancient World*” that took place in Krakow 21–23.09.2003.

^{2/} R. Ristelhueber, *Histoire Des Peuples Balkaniques. Les Grandes Etudes Historiques*, Paris 1950, p. 112.

^{3/} *Ibidem*, p. 112-113.

^{4/} L. Politis, *A History Of Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford 1973, p. 4.

ern Greece and modern Hellenism⁵. After centuries of Turkish domination the subjugated people, without any form of state organization or leadership, gradually built up the earliest pockets of the Greek enlightenment, as well as providing much of the focus for the struggle for national independence⁶. The period preceding the war of independence marked by a relative economic prosperity, the rise of middle class and the thirst for education had definitely changed the national consciousness and brought about a great desire for liberation⁷.

All those features contributed at last to a decisive point in Modern Greek history which was undoubtedly the revolution of 1821 and the creation of the new Greek State. In 1821, the Greeks, after nearly 400 years of slavery under the Ottomans decided to take up the arms and fight for their freedom. They rushed to struggle for liberation from foreign domination. On 25 March 1821 Bishop Germanos of Patras hoisted the Greek flag at the monastery of Aghias Lavras in the Peloponnese, an act that marked the beginning of the War of Independence. Hellenes had decided to end the Turkish tyranny or to die. Outnumbered 1 to 10 by enemy, they declared LIBERTY or DEATH (Ελευθερία ή θάνατος). The leaders and their men swore these words which became the slogan in all of the fierce battles that followed.

The development of Modern Greek literature of that period as well as of earlier times is incomprehensible without a clear understanding of so called 'language question'⁸. Although we're not going to deal in details with this problem here, it seems advisable to remind some facts concerning it. The problem of Greek language question is not comparable at all with any other European language. What may seem unbelievable, in Greece at least until 1976 existed two forms of one language that differed from each other in vocabulary, phonetics, accent and syntax. One branch was the common Modern Greek language, nowadays spoken and written by all Greeks called *demotic* (δημοτική) the other one spoken by no one but written, so called *katharevousa* (καθαρεύουσα), the official language of the state.

⁵/ *Ibidem*, p. 101.

⁶/ E. Tsirimokou, *Light And Shade, With A Smile And A Tear*, [in:] *Greece. Books And Writers*, Athens 2001, p. 59.

⁷/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 101-102.

⁸/ *Ibidem*, p. 10-13.

That curious diglossia is due to very particular historical and national circumstances. Shortly speaking the beginning of this phenomenon is considered to have originated Hellenistic times and later was common throughout the Byzantine period for thousand years⁹. In the Turkish period the learned people wrote in Ancient Greek that was completely incomprehensible for lower class people. Demotic language was confined only to church sermons and very rarely to books for people¹⁰. The problem appeared in the new meaning in the Enlightenment period together with the attempts to awake and educate the people and introduce in the country the ideas of Western Europe.

On one hand conservatives thought that only the classical language which until the 15th century had had an unbroken tradition is the right vehicle for that purpose¹¹. In their opinion people should not only learn to read but also to write and even speak Ancient Greek. On the other hand, some of them had the opinion that in order to achieve the purpose the common language has to be developed and people should be enlightened only through the use of it. There was the third way as well. The intellectual Adamantios Korais (1748-1821) proposed a sort of language based on popular speech but ‘corrected’ on the model of the ancient¹². Consequently he created the *katharevousa*, which means ‘cleaned’, namely cleaned from any foreign loanwords, especially, what it is obvious, Turkish. Although it became the official language of the state and was used mainly in official documents, soon inflicted also the literary language. In fact the phenomenon of *katharevousa* hampered the natural development of literature. Instead of writing in a living language used by people in everyday life authors, as for instance some figures of a powerful class of Phanariots in Constantinople, composed their works in a hybrid language based mainly on the ancient attic dialect and full of archaism completely incomprehensible to common people.

Considerable fact concerning that period of Greek history is that although the mainland parts of Greece had just recovered its relative prosperity and access to education, the situation was completely different in the seven islands of the Ionian Sea. The seven Ionian Islands called in Greek

⁹/ P. Mackridge, *The Modern Greek Language*, Oxford 1985, p. 6.

¹⁰/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹¹/ P. Mackridge, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

¹²/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

Επτάνησα (Seven Islands), due to their historic development as well as their geographical proximity to Italy, significantly influenced the growth of Modern Greek literature.

Never dominated by the Ottoman rule the inhabitants of the islands enjoyed an unprecedented prosperity under Venetian rule during the second half of the eighteenth century¹³. The Venetians treated them well because the Seven Islands were a key fortress and played a very important role in the defense system of the Venetian Empire. Thus both lower class and upper did not experience any kinds of sufferings similar to those of other Greeks living under Turkish occupation.

On one of the seven Ionian islands called in Italian Zante, in Greek Zakynthos, was born in 1798, the first truly national Greek poet, the singer of Liberty, Dionysios Solomos. Poet's father was a rich nobleman Count Nikolaos Solomos, known as 'Conte-Tobacco' because he had been granted the tobacco monopoly. His mother was a young and beautiful maid of Solomos, a servant in his house, Angelikí Nikli whom he married only one day before his death in 1807. When Dionysios was born his father was over sixty, while his mother was not yet sixteen¹⁴. The Solomos family was an aristocratic family of Venice with branches on the island of Crete, remaining there until the Turks conquered the island in 1669. Dionysios and his brother were brought up as young nobleman and took Italian education. Thus when Conte-Solomos passed away, in 1808 young Dionysios was sent to Italy to study, first at Cremona and later at the University of Padva. There he studied Latin and Italian philology and wrote Italian and Latin verses that greatly impressed his schoolmasters. One of his teachers once exclaimed: 'Greek, you will cause our Monti¹⁵ to be forgotten'.

In 1815 young Solomos graduated from the Cremona High School and entered the Law School of the University of Padva, where the children of most of the Ionian Islands' aristocracy studied. He had completed his law studies, though not very successfully, but during his stay in Italy he became acquainted not only with Italian literature but also with Classical Greek and Latin literature. Solomos leaved Italy in 1818 and returned to his native island Zante.

¹³/ S. Baud-Bovy, *Poésie de la Grèce Moderne*, Lausanne 1946, p. 27-28.

¹⁴/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

¹⁵/ Vincenzo Monti – then the doyen of the Italian classicists.

In his homeland the poet found a good company of the man that like him studied abroad¹⁶. Together with them he composed impromptu sonnets in Italian (on set rhymes). The Italian language was a natural form of expression for him. Because of having received most of his education in Italy, his literary taste was cultivated in the contact with Italian classical and classicist poetry¹⁷. Some of the sonnets mentioned above with many others were published in 1822 under the title of *Rime Improvvisate*. The decisive event for his further life is considered his meeting at the end of 1822 with Spyridon Trikoupis, a politician who was later to write a history of the Greek War of Independence. Trikoupis had studied in England and came to Zakynthos invited by Lord Guilford to wait for Lord Byron¹⁸ in the winter of 1822. Many claim that the outcome of this meeting resulted in Solomos' decision to devote himself to writing Greek poetry. As Trikoupis records the first meeting with Solomos, when the poet read him his Italian *Ode per prima messa*, after a while of silence, he said: 'Greece is waiting for her Dante'¹⁹. No doubt Trikoupis' comments – urging him to try to get the top place on the Greek Parnassus, instead of resigning himself to a lesser position on the Italian Parnassus – helped Solomos to concentrate on writing in Greek rather than in Italian. His doubts about his ability to use the Greek language effectively were soon swept away with Trikoupis' help. He eagerly started to study the Greek poets and very famous that time Fauriel's collection of the living Greek folk songs that he was greatly charmed by. His first poems written in Greek were just sentimental lyrics. The change in his poetics comes with the outbreak of the Greek revolution. The heroic fight for freedom, Hellas' War of Independence provided ample inspiration for Solomos to become the bard of Greek freedom.

Solomos is considered to be the starting point in the struggle that continued from Byzantine days between the *katharevousa* and *demotic* Greek²⁰. By choosing the living language of the people as the language of his poems he opened the way for all real subsequent Greek poetry. Solo-

¹⁶/ B. T. Tomadakis, *Ο Διονύσιος Σολωμός Και Η Ελληνική Επανάσταση*, Αθήνα.1957, p. 4-5; L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

¹⁷/ C. A. Trypanis, *Medieval And Modern Greek Poetry. An Anthology*, Oxford 1951, p. li-lii.

¹⁸/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

¹⁹/ *Ibidem*, p. 114, who cites a letter of Trikoupis to Polylys from London 6 June 1859, [in:] Έκθεσις Πεπραγμένων Επιτροπής Εκατοταετηρίδος Σολωμού, Zakynthos 1903, p. 221-224.

²⁰/ C. A. Trypanis, *op. cit.*, p. lii.

mos strove not only to retrieve his mother tongue (the Zakynthian idiom) but also to formulate a Modern Greek poetic language, which would replace the confused linguistic and literary forms of that time²¹. The War of Independence that had just started strengthened his awareness of his role as a founder of the reborn of nation's literature. Intentions of the poet are made plain in the works of that period.

In 1823, at a crucial point in the struggle of independence, he composed the first of his well-known poems, *Hymn to Liberty*. One of Solomos' best works, the poem is of a special importance for Modern Greek culture. The first two stanzas of the poem, with music by poet's close friend Nicolaos Mantzaros, became the national anthem of Greece in 1865, replacing the Greek translation of the Bavarian National Anthem, which had been used until that time²². Although King Othon decorated both the poet and the composer for their work (in 1845 and 1849), he did not think to replace the Royal Anthem of that time glorifying Othon and its Dynasty with the Solomos/Mantzaros Hymn. After the overthrow of the Othon's Dynasty, the new King George I and the Greek establishment decided to neglect the fashion of that time – to use the Royal Anthem also as National - and introduced a clearly Greek work, both with respect to the poetry and the music. For the *Hymn to Liberty* was extremely popular since the Revolution times, often recited or sung during patriotic meetings and celebrations.

The whole poem consists of 158 stanzas of rhymed eight and seven and eight-syllable trochaic verses. The trochaic meter used by Solomos, intensifies the image he captures – Freedom – personified Liberty, as a young woman or goddess rushing through the land²³. In the two first stanzas that later became a national anthem of Greece, the poet addresses and greets the reborn Liberty who up to that time dwelled in a tomb, but now awakes with all her strength. The poet greets her with words she has never heard before:

1.
 I know you by the sharp blade
 of your terrifying sword,

²¹/ K. Tiktopoulou, *Dionysios Solomos*, [in:] *Greece. Books And Writers*, Athens 2001, p. 94.

²²/ B. Lavagnini, *Storia della Letteratura Neoellenica*, Milano 1955, p. 103-104; P. Macrledge, *Dionysios Solomos. Studies In Modern Greek*, Bristol 1989, p. 61.

²³/ It is worth mentioning that *Eleutheria* is a common female Greek name used nowadays.

ELEUTHERÍA E THÁNATOS!

I know you by the form you made
taking the earth as victor lord.

2.
Sprung from Grecian bones scattered
Hallowed on every vale,
With your old valor unshattered,
Liberty, hail to you, hail!²⁴

Liberty is neither factious nor allegorical but is a poetical figure that reminds rather the ancient Goddess identified with Greece itself²⁵. The giant goddess awakes the slaves from lethargy.

Stanzas 3-16 refer to the attempts of the buried Liberty to prepare to the war of independence as well as to dilemma that faces the Greeks, the well known: *Eleuthería e thánatos!* – ‘Freedom or death!’ In the beginning of this fragment Liberty appears sad, because she is driven out from her home, Hellas. Even though people are not concerned with her fate and seem not to have heard about her she endures and hopes that some time her home will be glorious again. When she asks for help knocking on doors, she hears only false promises (11) turning into sarcastic remarks.

9. With blood-stained clothes
I know for a fact that you secretly sought help
in stronger hands of foreign lands.
On your journey you started alone
and alone you came back
doors do not easily open
when you need them so bad²⁶.

As a result she frantically returns to her tomb (13, 14). However the Greeks do not feel well and consequently are in a dilemma *Eleuthería e thánatos!* – as they comprehend that there is no other choice and no other way out:

15. Yet, behold now thy sons
with impetuous breath

²⁴/ Translated by M. Byron Raizis.

²⁵/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁶/ This one and all the subsequent quotations of the poem come from the translation of Rudyard Kipling.

Go forth to the fight
 seeking freedom or death²⁷.

In stanzas 17-34 Solomos speaks about the outbreak of revolution and its response inside the country and abroad. The attitude of Greeks to Freedom changes as they realize that the time has come to liberate their country. They are aware after so many years of life under the Turkish yoke that tyranny is terrible and they can not stand it any longer. Thus, in silence that is around suddenly one can hear the outbursts of many voices (18, 19). People are so deeply moved that they announce the happy news to Liberty. England is surprised and suspicious of this sudden change. The Turks behave frantically, as wild beasts tearing to pieces all things on their way, they hope for better results (26). Greece stands still and the Turks realize this is the end for them. The 'brave' Hellenic cities frighten away the enemy who is still trying to overpower Hellas. However the Greeks do not lay down their arms and don't give up.

Stanzas 35-77 bring the poetic synthesis of the events that took place during the first two years of the revolution. He describes in turn the main achievements of Liberty, the significant war episodes: the sack of Tripolitsa – the capital of the Morea – that was the first really important Greek victory, the cruel fights near Korynth, the first besiege of Missolonghi in Christmas 1822 and defeat of the Turkish troops at the river Acheloos, hanging of Gregory III and firing of a Turkish flagship²⁸. In all these places Liberty moves accompanying fighting Greeks. In the 78 stanza she calls all Greeks to throw away the discord and get united²⁹. She also summons the Christian leaders of Europe to come with help for fighting Greeks. She is almighty, immortal (αθάνατη) and divine (θεία). Although bloodied (ματωμένη) she is still rushing forward (stanza 82)³⁰.

At the end of the poem (stanzas 137-158) Liberty is invited back to her homeland because the discord (δισχόνοια) has been defeated and everyone is ready to welcome her and to honor her as before.

Resuming all remarks made above one can clearly see what Liberty was for the Greek poet. As it has been said Liberty isn't for Solomos any

²⁷ / In original the poet does not use the word „freedom” nor “liberty” but „victory” (Νίκη).

²⁸ / L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

²⁹ / P. Mackridge, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

³⁰ / S. Baud-Bovy, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

kind of allegorical figure. The poet on one hand personifies her as a goddess, however on the other hand identifies her with Greece itself. Liberty is for him a sort of overwhelming power that always lived at the Hellenic ground and was deeply rooted in Greek's minds. Although it was not clearly stated by the poet, one can suppose Liberty is a heritage form all generation of Greeks fighting for it until antiquity. Maybe the words from the first stanza, where the poet says Liberty is taken from sacred bones of Greeks (τερά κόκαλα των Ελλήνων) can constitute a proof for such suggestion. As a goddess Liberty living in a tomb is described by the poet as 'embittered' (πικραμένη) and 'diffident' (εντροπαλή – stanza 3). After awakening and reappearing she is called by him brave (ανδρειωμένη) and described as having sword in her hand (ξίφος έξω από τη θήκη – stanza 36). In stanza 94 the poet even intensifies her image adding for her person the features underlining and strengthening her divine nature. He describes the light she is surrounded by and ornamented all the time adding the words: 'the light (...) does not come from the earth' (το φως δεν είναι από τη γη). In the next stanza he intensifies the image giving the glance to parts of her body: lips, front, eyes, hands and legs. While she is walking, all things around her shine with the same light. Treading through the fields Liberty is compared to the tower that is rising (stanza 96). Her voice is strong and so persuasive and imperative that everyone must hear it and be encouraged to fight.

Solomos' *Hymn to Liberty* became famous that time and was translated into most foreign languages. It has to be also stressed that its unique and very lyric voice inspired those people abroad that wanted to fight for liberating of Greece and as a consequence gave a new spur for Philhellenism³¹. Besides the main aims of the poet such as encouraging the fighters of the war and attaining the pan-European promotion of the sacred cause, Solomos wanted to show something else³². With his *Hymn to Liberty* he aspired to prove the capacity of the embattled nation to develop a literary language³³, which he achieved successfully.

His *Hymn to Liberty* as well as later poems such as: an ode *On the death of Lord Byron*, *Lambros*, *The Cretan* and one of the most famous – *Free*

³¹/ L. Politis, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

³²/ K. Tiktopoulou, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

³³/ *Ibidem*.

besieged dealing with the second great siege of Missolonghi from 1825 to 1826 – fully confirm his mastering of the demotic language used for poetical purpose. In his career Solomos succeeded not only in refining the spoken demotic Greek language and making it written but formulated a modern Greek poetic language in general. Nowadays Dionysios Solomos is considered the first significant Greek poet of modern times and the founder of Modern Greek letters. Undoubtedly one can say that Liberty appearing in his *Hymn to Liberty* in a guise of the ancient goddess and helping the fighters of liberation, at the same time has become liberty of Modern Greek literature and changed the literary language forever. Solomos who died in 1857 turned out to be much in advance of his time and his message was yet incomprehensible for most Greeks. Many years had to pass before Modern Greek poetry could make a proper use of his words.

Bibliography

- Baud-Bovy S., 1946, *Poésie de la Grèce Moderne*, Lausanne.
- Hesseling D. C., 1924, *Histoire de la littérature Grecque Moderne*, Paris.
- Kapsomenos E.G., 1998, *Ο Σολωμός και η Ελληνική Πολιτισμική Παράδοση*, Αθήνα.
- Lavagnini B., 1955, *Storia della Letteratura Neoellenica*, Milano.
- Mackridge P., 1985, *The Modern Greek Language*, Oxford.
- Mackridge P., 1989, *Dionysios Solomos*. Studies In Modern Greek, Bristol.
- Politis L., 1973, *A History Of Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford.
- Ristelhueber R., 1950, *Histoire Des Peuples Balkaniques. Les Grandes Etudes Historiques*, Paris.
- Tiktopoulou K., 2001, *Dionysios Solomos*, In: Greece. Books And Writers, Athens, pp. 94–98.
- Tsirimokou E., 2001, *Light And Shade; With A Smile And A Tear*, In: Greece. Books And Writers, Athens, pp. 59–67.
- Tomadakis B. T., 1957, *Ο Διονύσιος Σολωμός Και Η Ελληνική Επανάσταση*, Αθήνα.
- Trypanis C. A., 1951, *Medieval And Modern Greek Poetry. An Anthology*, Oxford.
- Vitti M., 1994, *Ιστορία Της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας*, Αθήνα.

Streszczenie

Głównym celem artykułu jest ukazanie, w jaki sposób w Grecji na początku XIX w., w trudnych latach walki o niepodległość, pojmowana była idea wolności. Jako przykład analizie poddana została *Oda do Wolności* narodowego wieszczka greckiego Dionizjosa Solomosa (1798–1857), której pierwsze dwie strofy zostały uznane w 1864 za narodowy hymn Grecji. Analiza kolejnych części utworu, ujawnia szereg asocjacji pomiędzy personifikowaną Wolnością (*Eleuthería*) a samą Grecją. Opowieść o losach Wolności, która po wielu stuleciach przebywania w uśpieniu budzi się z grobu i, niczym zwycięska bogini, rusza przez kraj, pobudzając wszystkich do walki, staje się równocześnie próbą syntezy najnowszej historii Grecji, od czasu zdobycia Konstantynopola przez Turków w 1453 r. do pierwszych sukcesów militarnych Greków, w latach dwudziestych XIX w.