Dionysios Solomos and the English Romantics

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Solomos was born in 1798, the year when Wordsworth and Coleridge published their first edition of *Lyrical Ballads, with a Few Poems* — the small book which was destined to become a “manifesto of romanticism”, after its 1802 (third) edition with its celebrated “Preface”.

During my talk today I shall limit myself to basic observations about similarities and analogies between Solomos’s poetry and poetics, on the one hand, and the main English romantic poets, on the other. These, certainly, are William Wordsworth (1770-1850), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), George Gordon Noel - Lord Byron (1788-1824), Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822), and John Keats (1795-1821).

Solomos’s poetic relations with Byron and Shelley were, in part, a result of his knowledge of Hellenocentric or philhellenic poems by the two poets, who were close friends and fervent admirers of ancient Greek culture. Byron and Shelley also happened to dwell in the north of Italy from 1816 through 1822 (Shelley) and through 1823 (Byron). Dionysios Solomos, from 1808 through 1818, lived and studied in Cremora and Pavia, that is, in the same northern part of Italy.

We know that during that decade the youthful Dionysios Solomos came to know — among other literary texts — some poetic works by Byron; whereas we may readily assume that he also heard of Shelley and read some of his poems, especially when he realized that Shelley was the famous Byron’s compeer and companion in 1816-17, and the composer of Hellenocentric poems as well.

It is not unlikely at all that Solomos, later on and while in Zante, received, from a friendly person still in Italy, a copy of Shelley’s dramatic *Hellas* (1822), before he started writing his own contribution to the rebirth of Greece, his celebrated “Hymn to Liberty” (1823). Consequently, the

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general impact, even direct influence, of Byron and Shelley on young Solomos is almost a fact, and it belongs to the kind normally called ‘cultural influence’, or ‘history of ideas’, of a given period.

On the contrary, there is no evidence—not even suspicion—that the Greek poet had the slightest knowledge of the poetry and poetics of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats. Naturally, long after 1823, especially after he settled in Corfu (1828), Solomos had many contacts with the British establishment in the Ionian capital; and it is quite probable that some British acquaintance spoke to him about those three poets, perhaps he even read him from their books. All these, however, are but speculation—reasonable and well-founded hypotheses, not facts, though, since we do not have any written evidence. Conversely, Solomos’s similarities or analogies with some salient characteristics of these three compeers belong to the category of aesthetic or idiosyncratic practices and beliefs—what the German sage Goethe called ‘eclectic affinities’. Since many other thinkers and writers of the times in Germany shared comparable views—as George Veloudis has amply shown—these features constitute inherent currents in Romanticism, and are to be found in the output of literary contemporaries who, otherwise, greatly differed as persons and as integrated artistic creators.1

I shall begin my comparative survey with the English poets whose specific texts Solomos definitely knew well, even from translations, if we accept the position that the Greek bard knew no English, or knew very little.

Solomos himself in passages of his “Hymn to Liberty”, and the Notes he appended to it and to its companion poem, as it were, “On the Death of Lord Byron - Lyrical Poem” (1824), indicates lines from “The Isles of Greece” (Don Juan, Canto III) by Byron that offered him imagery for his own quatrains. For instance, Byron’s image –

And further on a group of Grecian girls,
The first and tallest her white kerchief waving,
Were strung together like a row of pearls
Link'd hand in hand and dancing.²

—is skillfully reproduced by Solomos in stanza 83 of his “Hymn”:

Young maidens yonder, holding
Their lily hands, are dancing
At the shadow. And I beholding
Them enjoy their coy prancing.³

Another comparison from Byron’s narrative poem “The Siege of Corinth” (1815) offered imagery for another description by Solomos in stanza 51 of his “Hymn” –

As the mowed-down stalks of grain
Fallen are piled up in fields,
So most every spot those slain
Had covered like human shields.⁴

—which may well echo Byron’s passage:

Like the mower’s grass at the close of day
When his work is done on the levell’d plain
Such was the fall of the foremost slain.

(xxiii, 736-8)⁵

Since the above details as well as others from the prose essay The Dialogue (1824) of Solomos have been widely discussed by Greek and foreign Neohellenists, no further elaboration is warranted here. What, however, needs correction, because of superficial comments by all Solomists on Lambros, is the endlessly repeated questionable assertion of Tommaso Semmola—who had never studied English Literature— and had

⁴. Solomos, op. cit., p. 29.
⁵. Byron, op. cit., p. 392.
written, in 1858, that Solomos’s Lambros was a poem of Lord Byron’s kind: “poema... nel genere di quelli di Lord Byron”. This effortless opinion—in the minds of uniformed Greek and foreign critics, who knew Byron’s verse only through rumors and imitations—grew into an absolute certainty, and eventually was restated with a generous dose of Papal-like authority as, e.g., “Lambros is a Byronic melodrama”,6 and other such pronouncements. The truth that all these commentators ignored, including the British Byzantinologists Romilly Jenkins and Philip Sherrard, is that never a Byronic Hero in Byron’s poems violates his personal existential code of behaviour and beliefs to commit suicide out of guilt for having committed sins in the Christian sense, or having broken the rules and laws imposed by secular authorities which he scorns.

The uneven ‘good-and-bad’ warrior Lambros of Solomos’s melodramatic work, with his overwhelming feeling of guilt and troubled conscience, experiences the culmination of his suffering in a Christian Church during the holy days of Easter. He gets so miserable and wretched, as a consequence, that he commits suicide by drowning in the very lake where his daughter and circumstantial lover had killed herself earlier, and where Maria, his lover and wife-of-a-day, was to end her misery soon after him. This plot would have caused ironic comments by Byron because of its coincidences and exaggerations, and would have made him recall recent Italian, or ‘Gothic’, literary specimen vying with Lambros in such scenes of horror and utter catastrophe.

Since 1970 and 1972, when I twice explained this fundamental and crucial difference from Byronism—in a published essay and an English monograph on Solomos7—only the late Professor Louis Coutelle expressed a comparable opinion in 1986 when he said in a lecture—later on published in a book—that Lambros “... has nothing to do with Byron’s

manly poetry in spite of all that has been said, but is a rather baffling romantic construction along the lines of some contemporary Italian productions, even then not the best that Italy gave. These productions were, certainly, available to both poets, the Englishman and the Greek, who lived then in Italy and avidly absorbed its popular culture.

In 1980, the periodical *Eranistes* featured a long study, by philologist Emmanuel Franghiskos, in which it is meticulously and elaborately shown that Solomos's "Hymn to Liberty" had as its main—though not only—source Shelley's lyrical drama *Hellas*. The details of its basic plot, much of its imagery and political slogans, its Platonic philosophical idealism, many verbal expressions, its pro-America allusions, and its recent historical references, found their way into the spirited quatrains of the young Greek bard of freedom. For instance, the destruction of Turkish war vessels in both texts is depicted with equal flair and precision by both poets—and this cannot be a coincidence. Here is Solomos's stanza 131 (in my translation, always):

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Flames leap up, grow and spread
Then a thunder boom peals high;
The ocean round them turns red
As if blood were its dye.10
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And here is Shelley's passage in *Hellas* (505-8):

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Our noonday path over the sanguine foam
Was beaconed, —and the glare struck the sun pale
By our consuming transports; the fierce light
Made all the shadows of our sail blood red...11
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In another passage Shelley uses the following moving image of a dead mother still holding her live baby in her bosom:

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\begin{align*}
\text{And one sweet laugh most horrible to hear} \\
\text{As of a joyous infant waked and playing} \\
\text{With its dead mother's breast,} \ldots \ (825-7)
\end{align*}
\]

And here is how Solomos repeated this realistic scene in his quatrain 48, describing the ghosts of the slain:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Hades kept waiting. There emerging} \\
\text{Throngs of naked shadows pressed;} \\
\text{Old men, youths, and many a virgin,} \\
\text{Infants at their mother's breast. (my emphasis)}
\end{align*}
\]

Later on I published essays in international literary publications showing Solomos’s debt to Shelley’s *Hellas* plus their shared Platonism. In my 1990 publication of my rhyming translation of *Hellas*, with a scholarly introduction and many notes, I had briefly referred to Franghiskos’s conclusions, but no Neohellenist of note has ever commented on my information. A bulky 1994 Solomos selection by a veteran scholar does not even mention the name of Shelley anywhere. Many years earlier, through, the great poet Kostis Palamas and my Professor Nicholas Tomadakis had suspected –in their erudite prefaces to Solomos’s text—the Shelley and Solomos relation, without having been able to prove it beyond doubt since neither had an adequate knowledge of English or a direct access to Shelley’s *Hellas*.

In the afore-mentioned comparative studies of mine, I showed that the Platonic theory of ideas as well as Plato’s ethics and aesthetics—as they are echoed in the passages and ‘Thoughts’ appended by Solomos to his masterpiece *The Free Besieged*—are akin to analogous formulations of Platonism in Shelley’s *Hellas* and in his known essay “A Defence of Poetry” (1820). At the end of this idealistic treatise, Shelley calls major poets, “Unacknowledged legislators of the World” —that is, not recognized, ignored by the many. This definition reminds me of Solomos’s practice when he ‘legislated’ in his own austere way about

the ethics and politics of his fellow-Zantiots—and by extension, of all Greeks—in his patriotic poems, his caustic satires, and ‘occasional’ compositions, wherein he eagerly sought the moral and cultural uplifting of his wretched compatriots. For instance, in the lyrical poem on Lord Byron’s death he indignantly orders the unpatriotic Greeks to stay away from his body which should be honoured only by the brave:13

First the Souliots must approach;  
But hence should keep away  
Traitors under reproach,  
Not for them what I’ll say. (stanza 3)

In the “Hymn” he warns his politically-fanatic compatriots to stop fighting one another and thus avoid the criticism of foreigners and a sure disappointment of all philhellenes (stanza 147):

Lest such thoughts come to the mind  
Of many a foreign Kingdom:  
“If they hate their own kind  
These men don’t deserve their freedom.

And at the very end of the same poem Solomos boldly challenges all leaders of Christian European realms to openly side with the Turks and help them annihilate the Christian Greeks, rather than hypocritically and through machinations of politics seek the destruction of the Greeks in order to maintain the ‘status quo’ of the reactionary Holy Alliance:

If this then is your decision,  
Here, before you stands the Cross!  
Crush it, Monarchs, to oblivion,  
Crush it, help to wreak our loss. (stanza 158)

In the touching lyric about the innocent girl who committed suicide because her honour had been callously slandered by insensitive busibodies, Solomos thundered like a Biblical prophetic figure. The seventh quatrain of “The Poisoned Girl” reads:

Hypocrites and masters of slander  
You pursue pure maids while they breathe;

Cruel world! When they die, you plunder
Their honor, their shy purity’s wreath.

And who can forget that fierce prose satire, “The Woman of Zakynthos”, where Solomos lashes at the unnamed, but known, stone-hearted and inhuman women of society who had not been moved by the sorry condition of destitute refugees from war-torn parts of Greece, the innocent victims of Turkish brutality? Indeed, the Poet acted as a moral teacher and judge of human malice. At this point we should also remember that, as a poet, Lord Byron was at his best as a satirist of the cant, hypocrisy, and folly of society —his country’s as well as of many other ‘civilised’ nations of the old world.

Moving on to the English poets whose work was not known to Solomos, I shall first refer to the case of achieving synaesthesia in poetry —a very important skill in aesthetic terms— wherein the mastery of Solomos matches that of John Keats.

A good sample from Keats is stanza 1 of his famous “Ode to a Nightingale”:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.14

In the above ten lines Keats involves several of our primary senses and their produced sensations, thus achieving an excellent example of synaesthesia. There is pain, agony, numbness, intoxication; and, of course, our hearing registers the melody of the nightingale’s chirping. When it comes to eyesight the images it receives are outstanding: we see

the green wooded background, the pretty bird, the exotic Dryad; we imagine a personified Lethe, and feel the pleasant summer warmth and smell its natural fragrance. The combined effect leaves the Poet—and us—spell-bound, innert, in a state of felicitous trance. Let us now turn to Solomos and see how he succeeds in obtaining comparable effects in his mature poetry. The celebrated fragment “Temptation”, of The Free Besieged, is a telling example (in my translation):\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{quote}
Eros and April linked hand in hand began to dance with joy, 
And Nature found her greatest and her sweetest hour: 
Out of swelling shadows enfolding dew and scent came 
A most exquisite melody, languorous, soft, and faint. 
Water clear and sweet, full of charm and of magic 
Flows and pours itself into a fragrant abyss, 
Taking the perfume with it, leaving coolness behind, 
Showing to the sun all the wealth of its sources. 
It runs here and there and sings like a nightingale. 
But over the water of the lake, that is still and white 
Still wherever you look at it, all-white to the bottom. 
With a little, unknown shadow a butterfly plays, 
That amid fragrance had slept inside a wild lily. 
My seer, light-of-shadow, tell us what you saw tonight: 
“A night full of miracles, a most enchanted night! 
There was no breeze stirring on earth, nor on sky or ocean, 
Not even as much as makes a bee brushing a tiny blossom. 
Around something motionless that glows in the lake 
The round face of the moon merges in close embrace, 
And a fair maiden comes forth dressed in its silver light. 
\end{quote}

In the above masterpiece, verbs denote four of our five senses (eyesight, hearing, smelling, and feeling or sensing coolness and warmth). At the same time we are made to see at least thirteen different images: the personified Cupid (Eros) dancing with April, the shadowy trees and luxurious vegetation, the gurgling clear water flowing, the sun shining and warming, the butterfly and the lily, the nightingale singing, the placid lake, the figure of the exotic “light-of-shadow”, the glow reflected

\textsuperscript{15} Solomos, op. cit., p. 140.
on the surface of the water, and the attractive maiden washed in the moonlight. The collective effect of Solomos’s syneasthesia here easily matches that of Keats’s half-as-long passage, or Paul Verlaine’s quatrains in his enchanting “Claire de lune” —the lyric that inspired melodious music by Claude Debussy. In all these examples the reader is conditioned to become involved in the situation of the poem, to lose himself and emerge in a world of phantasy and exotic magic.

When it comes to Solomos’s affinity with Coleridge, Romilly Jenkins\(^\text{16}\) –long before becoming “Sir” Romilly— repeated, in his 1940 monograph on Solomos, observations by British-trained Petros Vlastos and Professor Simos Menardos, reminding us that both poets had become addicted persons –Solomos to wine, Coleridge to laudanum— that both had ambitious compositions involving the sea and related experiences: “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, of the Englishman, “The Cretan” of the Greek; and both featured, in major poems, alluring female figures of an obvious allegorical or symbolic function and a rather enigmatic identity, like the heroines in “Christabel”, “Kubla Khan”, “The Cretan”, or The Free Besieged.

In his attempt to rationalise and explain the philosophical substratum of the above profound compositions by both Poets, Jenkins oversimplified the issue with the paternalistic utterance that Solomos was guided, or rather misguided, by “half-baked metaphysics”, which he had formulated through his amateurish readings of German theories on aesthetics and poetics. We do know now, however —thanks to recent scholarship by S. Alexiou and G. Veloudis— that, on the contrary, Solomos had adequately understood the theories of Schlegel, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, plus the poets Schiller and Goethe, and had applied them effectively in the works and projects of his mature period, like The Free Besieged and the just-begun “Carmen Seculare”. In them the profundity and quality of thought are quite impressive.

Also, in Coleridge’s theoretical texts —the two volumes of Biographia Literaria (1817), and his other essays and lectures— we perceive a

\(^{16}\) Jenkins, op. cit., p. 147-148; repeated by Raizis in his Dionysios Solomos, op. cit., p. 130.
penetrating and analytical mind at work, illustrating his comments with telling examples from the literary tradition since Homer. Nothing in Coleridge’s positions or opinions can be judged “half-baked” or superficial. A culmination of Jenkins’s hasty practices is his violation of the poetic form of “The Cretan” in his melodious rendition into English: he turned the rhyming couplets of the Greek into twice as many quatrains looking and sounding —somehow— like Coleridge’s ‘sprung rhythm’ versification. Now, if he had also observed that Solomos was almost 60 when he died, while Coleridge was 62, he would have located another striking ‘similarity’ between them! The fact that both, Coleridge and Solomos, learnt much from German thinkers, surely accounts, in part, for the profundity and seriousness of their theoretical positions as romantic artists. On the negative side, we might observe that their shared obsession with artistic perfection and its inevitable consequence –unfinished grandiose projects– is mostly due to Germanic absolutism; on this Jenkins was right.

The last English poet to discuss in relation to Solomos is the oldest and most-long-lived, Wordsworth. Both, as a poet and as theoretician of romantic poetics, Wordsworth is astonishingly close to the cherished beliefs and applications of Solomos. In his 1802 “Preface” to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth advocates positions comparable to those of Solomos on the same issues in his essay The Dialogue, the ‘Thoughts’ appended to The Free Besieged and other poems, as well as in letters to friends. Naturally, lyrics by both Poets exemplify common practices.

In his “Preface” Wordsworth writes that poetry originates “form emotion recollected in tranquility”, that is, not the very moment the poet has become emotional on account of a pleasant or unpleasant occurrence. In a state of emotional turmoil the ensuing text would be melodramatic, passionate, of extreme views and tones —thus not balanced. A good poem must originate from the memory of the event that inspired it, not from the actual experience. A bit earlier in the same essay Wordsworth asserts that good poetry “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings”; whereas the right kind of language for poetry is “a selection of language really used by men”, like prose “really spoken
by men” –not an artificial and pompous ‘poetic diction’ like the Neo-classicists’ diction.

Dionysios Solomos, certainly, abhored the artificial and unnatural *Katharevousa* (purist idiom) and the equally cold and lifeless imitation of the ancient Attic language, the *attikizousa*. We also know that Wordsworth wrote poems about the anonymous inhabitants of the country; the unsophisticated rustic types, peasants, shepherds, country maids, innocent children, and in general not grandees, aristocrats, heroes, and royalty. In the quatrains of “We Are Seven” its heroine of thirteen cannot admit the fact of the death of two of her siblings, and insists “we are seven”, though two are buried in the village graveyard. In the “Lucy” poems we come to know and admire a simple country girl of unpretentious manners and deeds. In “She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways”, Lucy’s unexpected death makes the Poet conclude in sadness, “But she is her grave, and, oh, / The difference to me!” Such poems by Wordsworth make me think of well over half of the lyrics of Solomos’s early production which deal with similar human beings and their happy or sad lives. Several are elegiac in tone like “The Death of the Orphan Girl”, “To Mr. George de Rossi”, “The Two Siblings”, “The Poisoned Girl of Hades”, or “Eurykome” which reminds me of Lucy’s loss:


Recalling what Solomos had written to his friend, judge and poet George Tertsetis, on June 1st, 1833, we realise that his position is very close to the Englishman’s. Solomos writes about language:

... I am glad when the beginning is the Klephtic songs; but I would like, though, those using it, to use it in its essence and not its form. Do
you understand me? As for poetry, pay attention, dear George, because it is, of course, good for one to put his roots in these vestiges, but it isn’t good to stop there; one must rise vertically... The nation demands from us the treasure of our intellect, the personal intellect, invested nationally.18

Stressing to his fellow-poet the fact that the natural language of the people must rise toward a higher level, Solomos almost echoes Wordsworth’s view that the “naked and simple language” of simple folk must be “adapted to interest mankind permanently” —that is, to be adjusted to the sublimity of a theme, and be cleansed of grammatical or syntactical errors plus abused vocabulary.

When Solomos was a student in Italy, he asked his teacher and learned poet, Vincenzo Monti, about the exact meaning of a passage in The Iliad. The Italian responded that Solomos should “feel” (sentire) the meaning, not just comprehend it philologically. The young Greek, though, wanted to involve his intellect in the understanding of the poetic function, not just his artistic instinct with its inevitable subjectivity, which certainly, greatly reduces objectivity, verisimilitude, and realism in a described event. In other words, like Wordsworth, Solomos wanted his intellect to comprehend a sentiment first, and then calculate the appropriate degree of its expression in verse.

Even in most of the ‘Thoughts’ to The Free Besieged, directly or indirectly, the Zantiot Poet invokes the intervention of his intellect so that events and concepts may be properly sublimated, formulated, or effectively illustrated de profundis, and not in a casual or superficial manner. Thus, emotions, abstract terms (faith, Motherland, heroism, duty, liberty, bond etc.), eternal moral values, and experiences articulated by the many and simple Missolonghiots, must be dramatized by anonymous and representative men and women who activate and vibrate the poetic utterance after a long and profound creative mental process, resulting in poetic logos.

The human characters in *The Free Besieged* are not leaders, military or political or ecclesiastical, nor are they noticeably different from their other besieged companions. Like Wordsworth's folk heroes, they do not harangue their comrades, nor are they given to grandiose gestures of heroic actions and noble behavior. They simply do their duty and resist tangible and intangible temptations; they overcome fear and hope; they rise above love and bereavement; their motivating force is an absolute attachment to human dignity — that is their existential credo.

"A spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", as the wise Wordsworth had put it, composed Solomos's masterpiece, which was actually written when his sentiments were "recollected in tranquility", in the peace and calm after the lapse of ten years since the tragic events of 1826 which were eternalised in it. If William Wordsworth could study the 'Thoughts' of Solomos and the text to which they are attached and make it complete, he would have signed both as his own. The English Poet Laureate of many years would have acknowledged, with delight, the Greek National Bard of all times!