

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

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Speaker: Constanze Guthenke, Princeton University

Topic: “Looking for Foreign Friends: Solomos, Translation, and the German Influences”

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#### Summary of Presentation:

One of the main challenges for Greek writing in the modern period, as well as for Modern Greek literary criticism, has been how to navigate the question of influence. Most of the models that have been used in recent decades to deal with ideas of exchange and transference—the concept of the marginal or the minor, for instance, or the notion of belatedness—presuppose a relation of inequality. In her paper, Guthenke suggested that, particularly in the case of Romanticism, we might rephrase the theme of belatedness in terms of relationality, which was of central importance to Romantic thought and writing itself. More specifically, Guthenke proposed the model of friendship as a one that helps us think about Dionysios Solomos’s relation to European, and particularly German, Romanticism.

At home on the Ionian Islands, and in that sense not part of Greece (the nation state) proper until the 1860s, Solomos himself became translated into the figure of a national Greek poet throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He first published in Italian, and then during the years of the Greek struggle for independence turned to Greek as his literary language of choice. From early on, Solomos also took interest in the writings of European Romanticism, reading German by way of its Italian mediations. During the Kerkyra period, he was provided with excerpts, translated into Italian, from German prose, poetry and philosophy, readings which would lead to charges by later critics and literary historians that his affinity with German Romanticism and Idealism led to the abandonment of form and the increasing fragmentation and obscuration of his poetic line. These translations in particular seem to exemplify the layers of motion, transposition and limitation that are so crucial to the process of becoming part of Romanticism’s unsettling conceptual space.

The translations, as far as we know, were executed by Nikolaos Lountzis, who was supposed to render the material in what Solomos terms a “barbaric” way, as closely and literally as possible; the texts such as we have them are themselves highly fragmentary, oscillating between hybrid collage and anthology. There are 25 notebooks of these translations, out of a previous number of at least 64. The 25 remaining notebooks contain selective translations of Kant’s *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, and Schiller’s philosophical and

aesthetic essays (*Über das Erhabene* and *Über naive und sentimentalische Dichtung*), excerpts from Hegel's encyclopedic and historiographical writings, Novalis's *Hymnen an die Nacht*, *Gedichte*, *Geistliche Lieder*, the novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, and the fragmentary novel *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, together with a great number of his theoretical fragments. From the same period there are excerpts from Tieck's novel *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*. A large corpus of poetry ranges from poems by Klopstock and Bürger to a selection of Schiller's and Goethe's poems and ballads. In addition, there are also excerpts from Goethe's diaries, correspondences and aphorisms, including the *West-östlicher Divan*, and the *Zahme Xenien*.

The theme of friendship comes up again and again in these texts. Guthenke's talk used the particularly striking example of the translations from Novalis to trace the establishment of a conceptual network of friendship linking Kerkyra to Europe. In his translation, Lountzis relied on the German 1802 edition of Novalis's works, edited by Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck. The edition by Schlegel and Tieck, which includes a preface that offers a biographical sketch of Novalis's life, formulates its own framework of friendship as a mediator in the (figurative) translation of Romantic spirit; that framework is carried over into Lountzis's presentation of Novalis to Solomos by way of (literal) translation—a translation that, importantly, includes Schlegel and Tieck's preface, though without ever naming its authors.

It is uncertain how extensively Solomos read the translations prepared for him and with his creative impulse in mind (there is mostly underlining and some few notes, most likely in Solomos's hand, even though only in a few of the volumes). What is telling, though, is the way in which a virtual friendship, or the creation of a vicarious circle of Romantics, is attempted in these manuscript translations. It is also worth noting that the textual shape of Solomos's works such as we have them is the result of another act of self-proclaimed friendship: that of Iakovos Polyklas, who produced the first edition of Solomos's largely unpublished works in 1859.

Summary of Discussion:

A: (to attendee) I was also interested in the work that you had done, looking into who had done these translations.

Q: I wasn't actually writing about the translations per se, I depended a lot on the details—whether accurate or not—that Politis gives in his essays on Solomos. But it strikes me that Solomos is an interesting case precisely because of the inequality of friendship we see. When I wrote about German Romanticism and its transference into the Greek arena, and Solomos's request from Polyklas concerning the translation of German material, I was interested primarily in that relationship. First of all, there was a very natural inequality in the relationship because Polyklas had known Solomos from the time he was very young, three or four. I've always been struck by the kind of adulation for Solomos that is evident in all these writings—and when Solomos dies, that adulation transfers itself to Athens: then it's the Athenians who want to know more about Solomos, and are overwhelmed by

his reputation and the adulation shown for him in the Ionian islands. In a way, that leads them to expect *more* from the Solomos papers than is actually there, because of all the talk that had been coming in from the islands. But on the other hand, I think of Solomos as someone who, when he returns to Corfu and Zakynthos, is uncomfortable in the Greek language. There's this mythology of the man who goes around buying words, and that mythology puts him in the situation of a foreigner, someone who requires guidance, and seeks it—in the Romantic way—in children and farmers and purveyors of the folk tradition. That would seem to put him in the position of not being the strong one in the relationship. But then much later in life one this inequality changes again, and he is now in charge of this group and has its adulation. I'm just thinking out loud about the terms of inequality in his relationship to place and the people around him, which changes a great deal. Then of course there's the biting satire of the ruling elite, doctors and so on—and there his origins present an interesting contradiction, because he's the bastard son who is acknowledged at the last minute on his father's deathbed and becomes a count, only to be dispossessed later of some of his wealth.

A: And I was wondering, especially because of this imbalance, and because the image that's been bandied around is of this gaggle of adoring little helpers or acolytes surrounding him, whether that doesn't work on two levels. First of all, there's the work they're doing in bringing those great writers out there closer to Solomos at home, and secondly, in translation they're not just ferrying material from one language to another but also become part of a project themselves. That might in fact be one of the reasons to be translating this material, to take part in that way.

Q: And Polylas does justify his relationship with Solomos on the basis of his contribution to the translation.

Q: But I do think that inequality still has something to do with the Greek idea of belatedness, their own self-understanding as being behind, in a way, in terms of currents of thoughts coming from places like Germany.

A: Of course it's always an issue you have to be aware of. Here you are writing in Greek and there are other people out there writing about similar issues in a different language, and somehow you have to respond to that in one way or another. With Solomos, though, I find very little where he specifically comments on his writing in relation to anyone on the outside.

Q: But he's certainly conscious that he's creating a new tradition in a new language, and wants to set it up on par with the European tradition. I wonder how much he struggled with this sense of inferiority, if we could put it that way.

A: I don't know if I would. I really wanted to think about this in terms of relationality, as I said, instead of belatedness or inferiority. I was thinking about it in terms of how standing in relation to something else is articulated, in terms of what kind of imagery. Solomos, writing on the Greek or Ionian side, starts writing in the neoclassical Italian Romantic idiom. But if you take someone like Foscolo, one generation before, and look

at him from the point of view of Greek literary criticism, well, there's this sense that he's "one of ours" who unfortunately ended up in Italy, while if you look at him from the point of view of Italian literary criticism, he's an Italian just happened to be born on Zakynthos. But then you also have one camp of Italian literary critics that calls him Art Romantic, and another calls him Neoclassicist. And of course what makes up the Romantic in Italy is very different, neoclassicism is much more a part of what is self-described as romantic writing—and that would have had an impact of Greek writing of the time, too.

Q: The Italian-Greek relationship is slightly earlier than this, though. Another context, which is more germane to Solomos's later interest in German Romanticism, is that in Greece at that time, the 1830s and '40s, with one of the Soutsos brothers, we have a debate as to the relationship of Greece and Germany through the appearance of the Bavarians as an elite in Greece. When the new king arrives, there's the question of whether he's bringing something new with him, or whether he actually owes a debt to the Greeks. Does he, as a German, owe something to the classical Greeks which he is then trying to transfer to the modern Greeks? I understood that this was part of a much larger discussion, about whether we are debtors or whether we have lent something that is now coming back to us.

A: And this is language we find both inside and outside Greece, too. Around 1821, outside Greece, we have this idea circulating that there's a moral and cultural obligation to pay back our debts—but it's also coupled with the Christian argument that we need to support our fellow Christians, and also that we need to educate them as well. So you have these two tendencies outside Greece as well, and within Greece people are aware of that, it's appearing in the press.

Q: Can you clarify, were you saying that a major portion of the translations in these *tetradia* were coming from the diaries of Goethe?

A: I meant that the largest portion of the works of Goethe in the *tetradia* come from the diaries, but it's also quite a large portion of the *tetradia* themselves.

Q: Because a hundred years later we have Kafka, and these two different writers who are so completely different somehow both support your thesis about the effort of the writer for friendship. They see an affinity and go directly to the source—not the poetry but the diaries, the writer's testimonies. I would be interested to know whether you noticed any annotations in those parts.

A: There are many annotations in the manuscript, and the one text that seems most heavily read is the satirical poem "The Eternal Jew." In general underlinings are pretty sparse, and I would have to go back and check how many there were in the diaries. But I haven't found an answer to this, to get a sense of how much they were actually read or whether they were just gratefully received and put on a shelf. Some obviously have been read, others look pristine.

Q: Another thing to follow up on would be to see if anything from those readings has passed into his writings, because writers are in the habit of transferring material in that way.

Q: Is there any evidence of Solomos having been officially admitted into that broader space of Romanticism by other writers abroad? His “Hymnos” was translated quite soon after he wrote it, but was he recognized as a kind of kindred figure?

A: Not to my knowledge. He is certainly not corresponding with anyone out there. There is more correspondence and interchange with the Italian-speaking world. The “Hymnos” is translated, ends up in fliers in the general press and in pamphlets concerning the Greek War of Independence—and it ends up, among other things, in Fauriel’s collection of Greek folk songs. That’s a very different position to have him in than as one of the Romantics.

Q: It would have been interesting to have him conceptualized as a Romantic abroad before he was in Greece.

A: It would have been great, yes.

Q: The same thing happens with surrealism, too. Though French surrealism was important for the Greeks, it didn’t really go the other way. Greeks are still on the outside. I think in a sense literature does remain national in that way.

Q: I want to return to the last part of your title, about the German influences. Solomos is very diachronical—when I read him today he seems like a modern poet, like someone writing today. Because you saw the manuscripts, was it evident to you what kind of struggle he had or how strong was the influence he had from the German romantics? This myth about collecting words, he seems to be struggling to get out of the old mode of writing and trying to get into another, the Romantics, the *afelias* and Schiller and so on

A: The story that’s usually told is of German Romanticism sending him off line, but I find that a bit too much of an easy story. Especially given what we know about his readings and reading habits, I think he struggles with writing and language in many ways, and what he also reads in some of the German writings that are made available to him bear out some of the issues he’s concerned with anyway.

Q: And this is also an aesthetic issue, the poem as process, the fragment. He is the beginning of that in Greece, in connection with the German influences.

A: Yes, I just don’t buy into the story that it’s only when he starts reading Romantic poetry that these issues are translated into Greek writing.

Q: Can you comment on what language, what idiom Loutzos was translating into?

A: Loutzos was translating from German into a good quality written Italian with a lot of Venetian thrown in, Venetian turns of phrases, a kind of Venetian ring to it.

Q: When you begin the paper and bring in issue of friendship, it comes out of nowhere, and then you argue it through. How did you originally come by the idea of pursuing the issue of friendship in Solomos?

A: I think it came from thinking about what do you do with the question of influence in things that are considered European movements. Do you just start at the core and move outward? Is this an organic dissemination? What imagery do you as a critic choose to describe that process, and what kind of language is chosen by those who are in the middle of this to describe it? With Romanticism there is a description of what Romanticism beyond the individual is in terms of interpersonal relationships; friendship as both a theme of romantic writing and as a reservoir of imagery to describe romantic writing is very prevalent. Coming from that angle, and having wanted to look at those translations for a long time, it became obvious to me that a lot of texts in there have a lot to do with interpersonal communications. There was so much Novalis in these volumes. And why do you translate two long prefaces with it, not really signaling what they are, that talk specifically about editing a body of work as an act of friendship?

Q: Translation is an act of friendship, too, if you think about it. What else is it?

Q: It goes back to the issue of collaboration, too, like Wordsworth and Coleridge.

A: And it's in the texts that are picked out, too. There's the one project that Goethe and Schiller actually wrote together. Then there's "The Bell," and the text Goethe writes as an afterthought to it after Schiller's death. Going through what's in those volumes, you see the stuff about Hegelian synthesis and so on, but there's also all this other stuff and you don't notice how strong it is if you just read the list of what's available.

Q: Friendship is a part of it, but given the inequality of the relations between Greece or the Ionian islands and Germany, this act is also one of possession, if one considers what would probably have been the context of publication of the time, the difficulty of acquiring books and so on. An act of translation but also an act of possession, claiming it for a group of people, in this case initiated by a figure. As an exercise, we have to think about what this meant in the context of the means of production of the time, in the same way we think of poetry at that time in a different way. Coleridge would compose by walking, the steps would be his meter. Solomos would work with games of various sorts, communal games, people would get together and improvise poems. So there's plenty of work to be done in thinking about what a poem was at that time, but also what actually possessing a text was, what it meant to write it in your own hand, to have the papers, particularly on the Ionian islands in that time. It's a different order of experience.

A: And of course whatever the exact calculations are, however many translations there were—there 25 volumes still around, and may have been 50 or 60 of them—that is a lot of work, a lot of ink on a lot of paper. And if we think of the translator's own

contribution, making that amount of material and time and effort and affection translated onto the page available is a sizable contribution.

Q: And available to whom? Because as we know from Solomos, very little of this is published. But if you're circulating material in a certain way amongst your friends to whom you attach importance, this is a kind of publication, a registering of a literary work.

Q: That makes her point again, it's all the more Romantic.

Q: In passing, I want to bring up again the fact that he was at the periphery, both in Europe and in Greece; he was in no man's land in a way. It would be an interesting approach to go deeper how that affected his writing and his ideas.

A: The periphery towards the rest of Greece gets more pronounced as the 19<sup>th</sup> century goes on, post Solomos, when Athens begins to take over as a place where literature is made or where a stamp of approval is put on things. But there are also different centers, from 1821 to 1840, there's stuff that goes on in the Ionian islands, on Syros, on Chios. Athens becomes the capital but is a village at the time, Nafplio is the place where things are happening. It's only later that the Athenian way of writing and the centrality of Athens becomes established.

Q: By the time Solomos dies that has happened, though, because in the literature Polyklas publishes we understand that there's an imperative, Athens is clearly the center at that point.

Q: So now you know you know where the manuscripts are, and can go back.

A: They're in the Solomos Museum, in the main *plateia* on Zakynthos. They have a library which functions as a reading room. The manuscripts, the translations, are on display in the main museum. The manuscript in Athens is easily accessible and has been studied by many people. A team from Thessaloniki is trying to digitize the manuscripts, all of Solomos's manuscripts; it's an ongoing project and it's still fairly difficult to get a sense of what is where and what's in what shape.

Q: There's also material that was damaged or lost, since there was a lot damage to the materials on Zakynthos from the fires after the earthquake. But it's very clear that Solomos has this aura, this issue of the friendship around Solomos and his persona, beyond the manuscripts—which themselves are very auratic for Greek literature. This kind of figure, these relationships, have tremendous cache.

A: There isn't actually all that much documentation, though, on Solomos and his life and the relationships between these people. It's just taken for granted that this is the authoritative version.

Q: And that version kind of obscures our understanding of what the conditions were, what it was like to circulate literature, especially literature coming from Western

European centers, including material written in Greek. We have evidence of subscriptions to pamphlets, but not a lot of work being done on what we mean by a reading public and by exchanges and libraries. In Greece, even today, we still have the notion of personal libraries, with Manolis Savvidis, and you have to get access through these personas if you want to do research. Where did that begin, and how?

Q: One little side note, how do you explain the zero-degree friendship with Kalvos?

A: I don't have an answer to that, but it's a good question to be reminded of. Again, I'm not sure whether this is a question we come back to because it's so often been pointed out, and the evidence we have for that is largely from later writings on Solomos.

Q: But it's interesting how these two figures with their very idiosyncratic languages came out of this place, from the periphery. Perhaps that's why.