

Ketevan Tsintsadze (Tbilisi)

ON NAMING THE WORK OF ONE GROUP OF GREEK POETS OF THE 1920S

The early 20th century is a period of chaotic change of events, civil confrontation, and dictatorships in Greek history. The country had not yet emerged from the depression brought about by the shameful defeat in the Cretan uprising at the end of the 19th century – in 1897, when first the Balkan war and then World War I fell upon it. However, it was the Asia Minor disaster that became a major tragedy for the Greek world of that period. It produced a big wave of refugees, who became a heavy load for the country, which was already in a complicated economic situation.

It is no surprise that such a situation led to moral wavering, devaluation of values, and the loss of trust in ideals. All that had an impact on the country's cultural life. The literature and particularly the poetry of this period are marked with pessimistic sentiments. The young poets, who appeared in the literary arena in the second decade of the 20th century, regard themselves as defeated and humiliated people and protesting against monotonous routine in their works.

It is possible to point to one group of pessimistically-minded poets (Romos Filyras – 1888-1942; Napoleon Lapathiotis – 1893-1944; Fotos Giomyllis – 1887-1981; Kostas Ouranis – 1890 -1953; Leuteris Alexiou – 1890-1964; Kleon V. Paraschos – 1894-1964; Ilias Raftopoulos – 1893 -1923; Kostas Karyotakis – 1896-1928; Kostis Velmyras – 1898-1960; Giorgos Stauroopoulos – 1898-1969; N. Hager-Boufidis – 1899-1950; Tellos Agras – 1899-1944; Mitsos Papanikolaou – 1900-1943; Kesar Emmanouil – 1902-1970; Maria Polydouri – 1902-1930; Teukros Anthias – 1903-1968 and Nikos Kavvadias – 1910-1975), whose poetic work was quite bold and absolutely different from the poetry of previous periods. They sought new literary paths to better express their internal realm, established interesting novel-

ties while seeking, and defined ways for further development of Greek poetry in general.

Despite such importance of their work, it can be said that these poets have not yet been studied in a systemic manner. Interested readers can easily see by taking a glance at scientific literature that researchers have failed to find for the work of the poets of the 1920s one concrete name, which would be acceptable for everyone. Every researcher has his own view and gives his own name to their work and the group of poets itself.

Some of the literary critics of that time named the poets as Karyotakists and the trend as Karyotakism¹ after one of its most important representatives. They are also most often referred to as *poets of interwar period*.² Other terms to describe them are as follows: *late symbolism*,³ *symbolists of later generation*,⁴ *decadent poets*,⁵ *denying poets*,⁶ *cursed poets*,⁷ *neosymbolism*,⁸ and *neoromanticism*.⁹ The difference of views is due, among others, to the fact that the pessimist poets of the 1920s did not produce any treatise to formalise their work.

Before considering individual terms mentioned above, we deem it appropriate to briefly overview the main processes in the cultural life of Greece at the start of the 20th century.

It has already been noted that the period we are considering was very unsteady from the social and political viewpoints. At the same time, significant changes were taking place in the country's cultural life. Writers, who appeared in the literary arena back at the end of the 19th century, undertook to revive the Greek literature and make it part of European processes.

One of the most important representatives of this generation, Kostis Palamas became the central figure of the cultural life in Greece and his

¹ For the term see Καραντώνης Α., Η επίδραση του Καρυωτάκη στους νέους, Τα Νέα Γράμματα, 9, 1935, 478-486.

² See e.g.: Μιρασγέση Μ. Δ., Νεοελληνική Λογοτεχνία, Αθήνα 1982, 351.

³ See e.g.: Beaton R., Εισαγωγή Στην Νεότερη Ελληνική Λογοτεχνία, Αθήνα 1996, 199-200.

⁴ See e.g.: Kamushadze M., Literary Movements on the Verge of the XIX-XX Centuries in the Greek Literature, Tbilisi 1998, 70 (in Georgian).

⁵ See e.g.: Μιρασγέση Μ. Δ., Νεοελληνική Λογοτεχνία, Αθήνα 1982, 353.

⁶ See Ελλάδα, Ιστορία και Πολιτισμός, 9, Αθήνα 1980, 64-67.

⁷ See e.g.: Vittì M., Ιστορία της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας, Εκδόσεις Οδυσσεύς, 353-366.

⁸ See Η Ελληνική Ποίηση, Ανθολογία-Γραμματολογία, Αθήνα 1990, τ. 3, 40-48.

⁹ See Η Ελληνική Ποίηση, Ανθολογία-Γραμματολογία, Αθήνα 1990, τ. 3, 40-48.

opinion determined others' work from the very day the first collection of his poems and the first critical essay on them were published. Palamas believed that the country, which obtained independence a short time ago and which had to think about future, needed writers, who would create optimistic sentiments among the public and offer it an ideal hero.

Palamas's contemporaries followed his call. They placed literature at the service of the creation of ideals and, precisely when this process reached its peak, a group of young poets emerged and sharply confronted this spirit of the older generation, introducing an absolutely converse sentiments into poetry.

An essay published by Napoleon Lapathiotis in one of the leading literary journals became a kind of manifesto for the poets. Lapathiotis urged his young colleagues to combat their older colleagues' everyday routine. He thought that older poets' belief that art can have an impact on the public was nonsense and the only meaning of life was remembering the past: 'Nothing but the past exists for me. I have no present, and future is unclear. The only thing, which I own and hear and which is my present and future at the same time, is the past. Nothing exists precisely and forever for the exception of what has happened.'¹⁰ There is no doubt that such a statement sounded like the cracking of thunder in the society used to optimistic literature thanks to Palamas.

When Karyotakis published one of his collections entitled *Elegies and Satires*, V. Rotas was one of those, who criticised him. Rotas published a sharply critical essay in the *Rizospastis* newspaper. He attacked the pessimistic sentiments in most of these poems and accused Karyotakis of destroying ideals. Karyotakis also responded with a letter, in which he wrote: 'The only realistic word is pessimistic. I would like to ask Mr Rotas some more questions. For example: Does he really believe that his optimism is more appropriate to present-day life than my optimism?'¹¹

It is not our aim now to overview in detail the confrontation between the young poets and the older generation, which exceeded the younger generation in number and the standing they enjoyed among the public of that time. Suffice it to mention that it is no surprise that against the background of this confrontation, the works of the pessimist poets remained in the shadows, were not duly assessed, and caused difference of views.

¹⁰ Ναπολέων Λαπαθιώτης, Τα Ποιήματα, Εισαγωγή, σχόλια, παρουσίαση - Άρη Δικταίου, Αθήνα 1964, LII.

¹¹ Καρυωτάκης Κ. Γ., Άπαντα τα ευρισκόμενα, τ. 1, Αθήνα 1966, 220.

We have already mentioned all terms used in the Greek literary critics to describe the works of the poets of the 1920s. We believe that it is not worth to focus our attention on terms like *poets of interwar period* and *denying poets*, as they describe the group of poets only chronologically and characterize their works in general terms. They resemble rather a result of literary critics doing their duty than drawing conclusions on the basis of a literary analysis. Based on such an approach, it would also be possible to dub surrealist poets as *poets of interwar period*, because they too worked in the period during World War I and World War II. In addition, representatives of all schools and trends, be it Kavafis, Empeirikos, Karyotakis, or Chatzopoulos, could be united under the name of *denying poets*, as elements of denial can be encountered in the works of all of them.

Decadent poets is quite a general name as well. The verge of the 19th and 20th centuries was the time of substantial changes in almost all spheres of human life in the whole of Europe and the rest of the world. These changes affected the sphere of human creation, which we call artistic culture. In that period, culture became international in nature and managed to integrate effectively all ethnic and regional spiritual values, becoming more multiform as a result. However, the public proved not to be ready to explain in a rational and scientific manner the political and economic changes, which were under way, new social relations, and the new image of the world.

The main characteristic feature of the cultural processes in that period is a kind of confusion and the fear of the abruptly changing world. This period is marked with torrents of pessimistic sentiments. Unlike the cultural trends of the start of the 19th century, which did not differ much from each other at the levels of ideas and styles, the trends that emerged at the start of the 20th century were quite varied and their approach to reality was absolutely different from each other. However, all of them bore a common mark widespread in that era: the sentiment of hopelessness and the desire to flee reality. Despite differences in methods and styles, researchers believe that they have common ideas, which have been dubbed Decadence on the basis of their common features.

Decadence united many trends of various stylistic origins and ideological contents such as Symbolism, Futurism, Dadaism, Imagism, Acmeism, Impressionism, and so forth. If we take into account the diversity, we can say that Greek literature does not know Decadence in the form

known by the rest of Europe,¹² which means that it is possible to speak about individual decadent features with different creative workers, but we believe that it would be an exaggeration to speak about Decadence as a full-fledged trend.

One more very interesting name was used in Greek literature for the unity of the poets of the 1920s – *cursed poets*. Greek literary critics borrowed the term from Paul Verlaine. In his articles published in 1883-1884, Verlaine united under this name French symbolist poets Tristan Corbière, Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and himself, whom he referred to with his pen name of Pauvre Lilian.¹³ The author believed that these poets were linked to each other with similar fates and aspirations. All of them felt themselves isolated from the public and they themselves did not have a particular desire to find their own place in the extremely pragmatic environment of that time.

As regards the Greek poets' closeness to the *cursed poets* and the use of the name to refer to them, the French symbolist poets with this name were a source of inspiration for the Greek poets. Even if this had not been so, and had the term not existed at that time, it could have been invented for Karyotakis and his generation on the basis of their lifestyle and works. However, we do not think it is appropriate to use for the poets of the 1920s the term, which was invented for specific French poets and which reflects a psychological state of these poets, rather than a certain literary style.

It is a generally accepted rule that a certain system is necessary in studying any issue. It would be appropriate to have one specific term for the works of the poets of the 1920s. Researchers in the history of literature say that every literary trend is conditioned by historic and social situations and is shaped to resolve specific problems, which societies face. Correspondingly, trends acquire various overtones depending on situations locally and serve national interests. At the same time, a specific national literature can give an impetus to other national literatures. However, these impulses may not be limited in time and find a response some time later,

¹² Γεωργιάδου Α., Η ποιητική περιπέτεια, Μια περιδιάβαση στη νεοελληνική ποίηση μέσα από τους κυριότερους ιστορικούς σταθμούς και τα λογοτεχνικά ρεύματα, Μεταίχμιο 2005, 210.

¹³ Βερλεν Π., Οι Καταραμένοι Ποιητές (Ρέμπο – Κορμπιέ – Μαλλαρμέ), παρουσίαση Ρ. Πιερού, επίμετρο – μετάφραση – σχόλια Αλ. Ζήρας, Λιγόκερως, Αθήνα 1982.

when appropriate social and cultural conditions for these impulses are prepared in the specific country.¹⁴

If we take a look at the path of the development of Greek literature taking all that into account, we will be able to see that as a result of isolation, the Greek culture deviated from the path of its natural development. It took Greek literature almost the entire 19th century to become an organic part of European processes and fill the gap at the expense of artificially accepting certain trends. The Enlightenment era ended in a failure in Greece, because the country had omitted the Renaissance. Instead of becoming a reaction to the Greek Enlightenment, Romanticism turned into an imitation of its French original, repeating the mistakes of the Enlightenment. Parnassist ideas shaped to fit Greek reality and quite removed from its French original, failed to resist the temptation of symbolism and found themselves in an impasse. Having passed through all that, Greek literature was ready morally to organically develop the literary impulses obtained from the time of the creation of a New Greek state till the early 20th century in conditions of favourable historic and social factors, a new literary trend was shaped on the basis of a mixture of these impulses. We believe that Neoromanticism and Neosymbolism are the best name to denote the trend. Greek researcher Kostas Stergiopoulos¹⁵ has already used this term for the Greek poets of the 20th century. However, Stergiopoulos did not substantiate the term and did not produce any systemic study of this group.

The first component of this synthetic term is quite multifunctional. Some researchers believe that it is identical or synonymic of Decadence.¹⁶ However, many do not share this opinion, because "Neoromanticism has acquired various meaning in various countries. Therefore, it can hardly be described as a unified and general trend".¹⁷ Hence, it is difficult to produce a precise and unequivocal definition of this term.

This time, we will concentrate on the definition of Neoromanticism, according to which the trend is often identified as a manifestation of later Romanticism: "Neoromanticism is an artistic trend of the verge of the 19th and 20th centuries, a later period of development of Romanticism, which is

¹⁴ Неупокоева И. Г., К вопросу о методах изучения всемирной литературы, контекст-1975, Москва 1977, 171-172.

¹⁵ Η Ελληνική Ποίηση, Ανθολογία-Γραμματολογία, Αθήνα, 1990, τ. 3, 40-48.

¹⁶ Венгеров С. А., Этапы 'неоромантического' движения, Русская литература XX века, Т. 1, Под ред. С. А. Венгерова, Москва 1914.

¹⁷ Encyclopedic Dictionary of Art, ed. by N. Macharashvili, Tbilisi 2004 (in Georgian).

characterized with transition from minor forms of creation (characteristic of Romanticism) to major large-scale forms, philosophic combinations of romantic problems, negation of everyday life and reality, and return to mystical and magic".¹⁸

In our opinion, the Romanticism in Greece of the 1920s was later Romanticism, although it is clear to everyone that at the time, when a century had passed since the emergence of Romanticism and when Greek literature had familiarized itself with other trends and absorbed some elements from them too, it was impossible to speak about pure Romanticism, particularly as every trend has specific forms of expression and time limits. From this viewpoint, it would be strange to maintain that the poets of the early 20th century were pure Romanticists. In order to avoid terminological misunderstanding, we describe the poetry of this period as Neoromanticism. We believe that, thanks to its originality, the heritage of Neoromanticism in Greek literature is much more valuable than that of Romanticism, whose artistic values are questioned by many researchers nowadays.¹⁹

Romanticism spread in Greece back in the first half of the 19th century. However, given the situation in Greece of that time, it was to some extent forced and artificial, being a rough imitation of French Romanticism. In the newly-liberated country, writers should not have had any grounds for melancholy, reveries of the past, and the feeling of being lonely, which are characteristic of Romanticism.

As regards Karyotakis and his contemporaries, historic reality was different in their time. This generation tasted bitter failure and their Romanticism is not indeed devoid of foundations. An invented idyllic realm is the only refuge from morbid reality:

*Our body and memories ache.
Even things have rejected us, and poetry
Is our refuge.*

Karyotakis wrote in his poem *We are something ...* He spoke about the destruction of ideals of contemporary life and destroyed dreams in his *Don Quixotes*:

*They leaped off horses unable to breathe,
They rejected old chimeras with tears in their eyes.*

Creative subjectivism specific of Romanticists and full freedom in searching for forms of expression are characteristic of Karyotakis and his mates. Only boundless emotion is an absolute for them, while they regard

¹⁸ Encyclopedic Dictionary of Art, ed. by N. Macharashvili, Tbilisi 2004 (in Georgian).

¹⁹ Δημαράς Κ. Θ., Νεοελληνικός Ρομαντισμός, Αθήνα 1994.

everyday forms of life, which are defined in advance, as a result of people's narrow-mindedness scattered in the boundlessness of universe. Like in the works of Romanticists, we often encounter in their works words like *dusk, grave, melancholy* . . .

It is noteworthy that pessimism in the form encountered in the creation of young poets of the 1920s was not characteristic of Romanticism. This seems to be rather the influence of Symbolists. And indeed, authors known in Greek literature as symbolists, particularly Chatzopoulos had a major influence on their poetry.

It is also noteworthy that Karyotakis and other poets representing his generation were particularly attentive in familiarizing themselves with the creation of French symbolists and often published translations of their poems in their magazines, because they believed that poems by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and others corresponded most to their internal realm and spiritual state. *Thirst, love, hope... Pain and then death – always the same comedy:* these are Laforgue's words used as the epigraph to Kostas Ouranis's first collection of works – *Spleen*. It is also interesting that the author chose the title of one of Baudelaire's poems as the title for this collection. Incidentally, Karyotakis also took an interest in this poem and even translated it.

*I am like a king of a darkness-filled kingdom,
who is rich but capable of nothing, young but aged from this day...*

This is how Baudelaire starts his poem and it is probably this sentiment that took possession of Ouranis and Karyotakis, because they were so inspired by this poem.

It is due to this influence that various researchers referred to these poets as symbolists. However, since the poetic function of the words they used differed from that in the language of Symbolists, and since symbolism was not so characteristic for the language of pessimists, who said what they wanted without making it obscure, they cannot be regarded as Symbolists in the full sense of this word. Probably in order to avoid vagueness, some researchers described them as representatives of later Symbolists. The term 'neosymbolism' also appeared in Greek literature, which, in our opinion, is most appropriate in this case.

In conclusion, we would like to note once more that on the basis of the similarity of the pessimist poets of the 20th century with Romanticists and Symbolists and taking into account the chronological factor, we deem it appropriate to introduce name of the *School of Neoromanticism and Neosymbolism* to denote them.