

THE YEAR 1825 saw the publication at Mesolongi of the second edition of the *Hymn*, with the Italian prose translation by Gaetano Grassetti facing the original text: Ὕμνος εἰς τὴν Ἐλευθερίαν, ἔγραψε Διονύσιος Σολωμός Ζακύνθιος, Τὸν Μάιον Μῆνα 1823./*Inno alla Libertà* Dionisio Solomos da Zacinto scrisse Il Mese di Maggio 1823. Volgarizzato in Prosa Italiana da G. Grassetti, Prof. Di Lettere Italiane e Latine in Zante, Edizione III. In Mesolongi. Printed by D. Mestheneos, 1825.<sup>1</sup>

Gaetano Grassetti (1778-1836) was born in Rome, studied medicine, and read widely in the classical literature of Rome and Greece. For a time he taught physics at the College of Ravenna while practising successfully as a doctor. Then, for political reasons, he was forced to seek refuge in Patra, where he again worked as a physician before finally settling in the Ionian Islands, which made a powerful appeal to his imagination and which he referred to as “sirens of sea-green and joyous aspect”. He remarried here, taking as his second bride a native of Zacynthos, Adelaida Karvela. It was here, in Zacynthos, that he became closely attached to Dionysios Solomos.

When the Ionian Academy was founded in Corfu he was appointed to the Chair of Italian and Latin. He taught here for eleven years, up until his death. Chiotis informs us that his teaching was conducted “in everyday Greek”.

We have to consider this edition of the *Hymn* as a whole: the text in combination with its translation, the preface by Grassetti, his notes. It must be seen as an attempt to make known to both Greeks and foreigners the views of the poet—views which coincided with the convictions of Grassetti—on language, poetry and translation, to remove misunderstandings and to supply the proper answers to critics.

1. The inscription on the cover: Edizione III [3rd edition] caused some perplexity among students of Solomos, since the information supplied by Polyta, namely that the first edition of the *Hymn* was published in Mesolongi in 1824—that is to say, before the French edition—is regarded as inaccurate.

The edition omits stanza 21 completely, although the number 21 is retained and a row of dots speak eloquently for the absent words. Stanzas 26 and 27 are omitted only from the translation. Stanza 21, with its reference to the English rule of the Ionian Islands, which welcome the Revolution, *For all that they are each bound/In carefully wrought chains/And each has written on his forehead/The words: False liberty*, would certainly not have pleased the English. And stanzas 26 and 27, describing Austria “feeding her wings and talons on the entrails of the Italian” would have fallen victim to censorship in those regions of Italy under Austrian rule.

No one doubts that Solomos will have supervised the translation, with which he was entirely satisfied, and which he extolled as a model to be emulated (see the note in this volume on the French edition, pp. 79-83). Let us not forget his anxious concern to find the perfect form of expression, and the rigorous standards he set for the layout and printing of his work: “I entreat you: watch over the printers with such vigilance that they not change so much as the position of one comma”, he wrote in 1824 to Andreas Louriotis, on the subject of the edition of the *Hymn* then being planned in London. It would likewise be curious if he had not been given a preview of the translator’s preface, and in reading this we are entitled to feel that what we are hearing is, to some extent at least, also the voice of the poet.

In this fascinating preface Grasseti declares that he will not concern himself with the “originality and poetic virtues” of the work, believing on the one hand that the task would be beyond his powers and on the other that these qualities (the originality and poetic virtues) will be self-evident to scholars and experienced readers. What he will refer to instead is something which, he believes, they will not be capable of appreciating themselves: the reason for the admiration and delight of those who speak the language now that, for the first time, a work of poetry of exemplary quality has confounded the disdainful opinion of the popular idiom conceived by all those who had denounced it as a wretched and ragged tongue (*il volgare [...] misero e cencioso*) incapable of elevation to the noble level of the cultivated language (*civile idioma*), fit only for quarrels on street corners and tavern brawls.

It is significant, although surprising, that Grasseti should declare at the outset that his reason for undertaking the translation was to reveal to his fellow-countrymen the potential of a language “cara al popolo presente di Grecia”, a potential realized by very few writers and foolishly scorned by many. What is surprising in this is that

the first thing one would expect to hear in such circumstances is that the translator's wish was to make his fellow-countrymen aware of the struggle for freedom of a people enslaved. It is also surprising because, obviously enough, one does not gain awareness of a language through a translated work. Grassetti explains, however, that he hopes to succeed in his objective by remaining faithful to the text, adhering closely to the original words (*alla stretta interpretazione della parola*). His intention, then, is to rehabilitate the maligned language, to demonstrate that it is a worthy vehicle for the expression of the most sublime concepts. How much we are reminded by all this of the *Dialogue*!

The translation of the text does indeed adhere closely to the original, perhaps excessively so. No attempt can be seen to render, even in prose, the alliteration of the original or some sense of the rhythm of its language. This is most apparent where the language of the original becomes more exalted (in stanza 95 for example) or attempts to imitate movement through its rhythm (e.g. stanza 96). But, as we said, the intention of the translator was to provide an accurate rendering of the original.

The poet's own notes are also all carefully translated. In the last of these, as we are aware, he makes a passionate reply to his critics and invokes the classical writers to vindicate his own verse technique. The French translator had omitted this note, deeming it of interest only to the Greek reading public. Grassetti, however, translates it, wishing to demonstrate the stature of the poet and the existence of an established modern Greek form of versification. Moreover, he announces in the preface to the edition his own theory of Greek grammar and metre.

Most of the translator's notes are corrections, emending the French translation of Stanislas Julien. They offer us additional material through which we can trace the manner in which Grassetti approaches the text, as well as his own theory of poetics, and which permits us to conjecture what must have been the requirements set by Solomos for his would-be translators.

For example: in his criticism of the change of title—from *Hymn* to *Dithyramb*—he calls for a return to the rigid distinction of poetic genres (*genere di poesia*) maintained in classical times. We see the same classical spirit in note (b), where the French translation is faulted for failing to “render that ‘bello sentezioso (fine phrase) alla

Pindarica". Solomos himself also refers to Pindar. The association with the ancient poet does not appear to be a matter of mere chance.<sup>2</sup>

The observations made by Grassetti fall into three categories: factual, aesthetic and philological. In pointing out errors or infelicities of expression he also indicates the three main sources of the poet's oeuvre. The Bible: he asks why the biblical expressions encountered in the original should be lost, (note c.); the ancient writers: the poet describes the maidens as lily-fingered, rather than *plus blanches que les lis* (whiter than lilies), composing the word *κρινοδάκτυλος* in imitation of the Homeric *ροδοδάκτυλος* (note q.); and finally, the language of the people: in the expression *Σαν να ρυάζετο θηριό*, as if a wild beast were roaring, the comparison of ocean and beast is taken from the popular language of the Greeks, who he has heard say "the ocean is like a wild beast" (note k.).

It is the task of the translator to seek out the poetic sub-text in order to preserve it in the language of his translation. He must solve problems of style as well as problems of substance.

There would be no sense in our listing every one of the subtle observations or solutions devised by Grassetti himself. What is important is that this Italian, a passionate admirer of the popular language and an ardent lover of poetry, possessed a virtue which is all too rare: the moral quality required of the translator—respect for the original text.

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2. From both these comments by Grassetti, and from observations in his preface, Louis Coutelle draws additional evidence of Solomos' own classical spirit. See Louis Coutelle, *Formation poétique de Solomos* (1815-1833). Athens: Ermis 1977, especially pp. 292-293.