

**Five Italian Sonnets
by Dionysios Solomos:
A Translation and Introduction**

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Scholars in Greece often refer to Dionysios Solomos (1798-1857) as the poet who inaugurated modern Greek literature. He is also known as the "national poet" of that country. The reason for this prestigious title is that in 1864 the first two stanzas of his long epico-lyric poem "Hymn to Liberty" were adopted as the National Anthem of Greece. In this poem, which he wrote during the Greek War of Independence and completed in the spring of 1823, Solomos celebrates the struggles of the Greek people and their military victories against the Turks. With the publication of the "Hymn to Liberty," Solomos' name became synonymous with the birth of the modern Greek nation which emerged after the country's revolution against Turkish rule that lasted for four centuries after the Fall of Constantinople.

Like many other well known compositions of Solomos' mature period, such as the long lyric poem "Ode on the Death of Lord Byron" or the prose satire, "The Woman of Zakynthos," and the Byronic melodrama "Lambros," to mention only a few, the "Hymn to Liberty" was written in lively demotic Greek. This was a form of the Greek language which the poet learned orally from his mother, and which he mastered later in life. Yet, throughout his career, as many of his critics have observed, Solomos felt more comfortable in conceiving and articulating his ideas in Italian than in Greek.

Of the two volumes of poems Solomos published in his lifetime, most of them were written in Italian. These include the early verses he wrote as a child in Italy or after he returned to Zakynthos in 1818, as well as those he wrote in Kerkyra after he abandoned Greek as a language of poetic expression in 1854. Of the rest of the poems that have survived in complete or fragmentary condition, some contain a large amount of Italian with some French and Latin mixed with Greek, while others are Greek translations of

His preference for Italian as a means of articulating ideas and expressing them in poetic form is also evident in the poet's practice of drafting his poems in Italian prose before he converted them into Greek verse. Judging from a large number of early drafts or sketches that have survived, we can safely assume that even some of his best mature Greek poems written between 1824 and 1854, were composed in this manner. Solomos, as Peter Mackridge states:

was accustomed to seeing Greek not as an *absolute* language, existing in isolation from others, but as a *relative* language to be viewed constantly in the context and from the perspective of other languages. But the relativity of Modern Greek did not consist solely in its relation to foreign languages; demotic Greek had also to be seen in relation to and in contrast with other forms of Greek, chiefly, the classical language, the koine of the New Testament, and the 'purified' forms of the modern language.¹

As it has been stated earlier, Italian was Solomos' primary language of composition and poetic expression. One reason he felt more comfortable in using this language as a means of communication was perhaps the fact that since childhood the poet spent most of his time in an environment dominated by the Italian language and culture. While it is true that at the time of Solomos the majority of the people of the Ionian Islands continued to use their native Greek language as the only form of communication at home and in their daily activities, the official administrative language of the islands, including Solomos' native Zakynthos, was Italian. Formal education also concentrated on the teaching of the Italian language and culture. Moreover, children of wealthy families were often sent to Italy to complete their education. Solomos, too, like many boys his age and of similar social and economic background, (his father, we are told, came from an aristocratic family and held the Venetian title of Conte), was sent to Italy to receive his secondary and higher education.

In Italy, Solomos studied at various schools, in Venice, then in Cremona, and finally in Padua. In all those years he was always under the close supervision of Santo Rossi, an Italian priest whom his father had appointed as a guardian and tutor. At the schools he attended, Solomos studied under notable Italian instructors such as Pini and Scotti, and quickly became knowledgeable in Latin, Italian, and English literature. He admired Vergil and Byron, but his favorite poet was undoubtedly Dante whose works, espe-

¹Peter Mackridge, "Dionisio Salamon / Διονύσιος Σολωμός: Poetry as a Dialogue between Languages." *Dionysius* 1 (1988): 1-10.

cially his *Divine Comedy*, influenced Solomos' poetic creativity more than any other master of Italian literature.

In the year 1818, and after an absence of ten years in Italy, Solomos returned to Zakynthos where he continued to write poems in Italian, a practice he initiated in Italy. He also experimented with a few verses in Greek. Many of these poems were circulated among his friends and fellow poets. Very soon Solomos became a familiar figure at social receptions given by the nobility of the island. He was a frequent guest also at literary gatherings, especially at those organized by his friends Count Paolo Mercati, Pelacas, and Domenegine, all noblemen of Zakynthos.

A favorite pastime at these gatherings was for the participants to compose and recite extempore sonnets in Italian on a given subject. The host would choose a subject and give out a number of words which formed the ending of every line. He would then ask the participants to compose a poem in *rime obbligate* or obligatory rhyme. In these literary "games" Solomos proved himself a master and he often came out victorious.

The poet practiced this "game" also in the privacy of his home. In a letter to his second wife, Solomos' brother Dimitrios, states that many times in one night the poet would compose three or four sonnets while improvising on others on the same subject or in *sullo stesso argomento* and in *rima obbligata*. A number of poems of this genre have survived and published in various collections. The sonnets presented here belong to this group of poems. The common theme in all five sonnets is based on Dante's *Inferno*, the first Canto of the *Divine Comedy*. The first of the five poems describes the fall of Lucifer; the second bears the title *Dante's Inferno* which is also the subject for the rest of the three sonnets that follow.

Another characteristic element in these and other similar Italian poems of the early period is the religious feelings that the poet expresses in his verses. This was due not only to Dante's influence, as some critics have suggested, but also the result of his family upbringing. His mother, for whom the poet felt great love and compassion, was a God-fearing woman of humble origins. It was she who introduced him to the ways of the Church and instilled in him the love for God and the Greek Orthodox tradition. Credit, however, belongs also to the priest Santo Rossi, who exercised a tremendous influence on the life and education of the poet since early childhood.

The five poems presented here for the first time in English translation were chosen not for their extraordinary poetic merit nor as a proof of Solomos' poetic genius. The genuine lyricism for instance, which charac-

terizes the poet's mature works is absent here. The language in these poems may be rich, and the verses may flow easily, yet, they lack a true feeling that is often found in religious poetry. Moreover, the lines which describe the agony and horror of the damned in the caves of Hell are stereotyped in imagery and emotion. The reason for selecting these sonnets was primarily to give the opportunity to a wider audience who may not be familiar with Italian, to appreciate Solomos' early creativity.

Finally, in this small exercise an attempt was made to convey the spirit of the poems as accurately as the English language would allow. The responsibility of any errors and flaws that may still remain in rendering the poems into unrhymed English verse rests with the translator.*

LA CADUTA DI LUCIFERO
(Con rime obbligate)

Cadde il superbo, e ne ridea Natura,
Colà dove non mai tremola stella;
La faccia alza malnata e non più bella,
Chè gli è tolta del ciel la volta pura.

La faccia dell'Eterno gli si fura,
Chè così conveniva all'opra fella;
E questo il tristo Demone arrandella
Più assai che dell'Inferno la paura.

La Divina Pietà, che di zaffiro
Immortale è vestita, iva d'un' velo
Ricoperta i bei rai pensosa in giro;

E già dicendo, onde chiarir l'interno
Dolore che sentiva, a tutto il cielo:
«Ahi! si comincia a popolar a
l'Inferno!»

THE FALL OF LUCIFER

The arrogant one has fallen, and Nature
rejoiced.
He has fallen where no star ever shines.
He lifts his ugly face that's no longer
beautiful
because the purity of Heaven has been
taken away.

His evil works caused the Almighty
to turn His face away from him,
and the wretched Demon laments this
more than the fear of Hell.

Divine Mercy, wearing her immortal
sapphire, moved about pensively
covering her divine light with a veil.

She laments as she reveals
the deep pain felt in broad Heaven:
"Alas!, the population of Hell has
begun."

L' "INFERNO" DI DANTE
(Con rime obbligate)

Spesso sorgon color dalla profonda
Valle bramando le strade superne,
Ma il grand'incendio delle vampe eterne
Rimugghiando li involve e giù li gronda.

Fa rimbombare allor la schiera immonda
L'eco spietata delle chiostre inferne,
Che più desia lasciar quelle caverne
E il vol spingere in su, più si sprofonda.

La giustizia di Dio vibra spavento
Colla spada infocata, e alle latebre
Brandeggiandola orror, porta tormento.

Va cercando il mal seme orror di grotte
A rimpattarsi fra le sue tenebre:
Ma lo sdegno di Dio raggia ogni notte.

DANTE'S INFERNO

They often rise from the deep valley
hoping to find the road to Heaven
but the roaring conflagration of the eter-
nal flames
shoves them back and gulps them down.

The wailings of the wicked host
reverberate in the walls of Hell.
The more they try to leave those caves
and climb up, the deeper they fall.

Divine Justice, brandishing
a sword of fire, spreads fear
and brings horror and torment.

The evil seed in horror searches
for a place to hide in the darkness of the
caves.
But the wrath of God never rests at night.

SULLO STESSO ARGOMENTO
(Con rime obbligate)

Immagino una via più assai profonda
Dalle strade terrene alle superne,
E sempre illuminata dall'eterne
Saette dello sdegno che giù gronda.

Piove perpetua fiamma orrida e
immonda,
Che ognor rosseggiar fa quelle inferne
Maladette dal cielo alte caverne
E animata or va in alto or si sprofonda.

Ve'lo sdegno di Dio, pien di spavento
Che soffiando feroce alle laterbe,
Va crescendo l'orror di quel tormento.

Dentro di quelle sanguinate grotte
Non v'ha silenzio, e sempre le tenebre
Popolate di grida ha quella notte.

ON THE SAME SUBJECT

I vision a road more profound
than the one leading from earth to
Heaven,
one that's always lit by wrath's
eternal arrows shot downward.

An eternal fire horrible and vile,
pours down dying red the heaven-cursed
high vaults of Hell.
At times it flares up, then sinks low.

I see God's terrible wrath
that blows ferociously in the darkness,
increasing the horror of that torment.

There's no silence in those blood-stained
caverns
but only everlasting darkness
that's drowned by the cries of the night.

SULLO SESSO ARGOMENTO
(Con rime obbligate)

Acceso il mio pensiero si profonda
Arditamente pelle vie superne
A interrogar se dureranno eterne
Le atroci pene che l'Inferno gronda.

E tosto s'apre al mio pensier l'immonda
Vista tremenda delle strade inferne
E le immense rimiro ignee caverne
Ove il mal seme umano si sprofonda,

Pieno di disperato alto spavento.
Spesso del foco usciva dalle latebre,
Sfogando in grida l'eterno tormento.

E una voce sorgea da quelle grotte,
Che accresceva l'orror delle tenebre
«Sarà eterna per voi l'eterna notte».

ON THE SAME SUBJECT

My thoughts are on fire
and boldly tread on heavenly paths
wondering if these endless and atrocious
tortures that Hell inflicts will last for
ever.

And immediately the horrible image
of Hell's roads appear in my mind.
I see the fire-spewing caves
where man's evil seed was cast

consumed with desperate and great fear.
Into darkness the fires escape
releasing the cries of eternal torment.

And out of the caves a voice came
and magnified the horror that darkness
left.
"Eternal for you the night will be!"

SULLO STESSO ARGOMENTO

(Con rime obbligate)

Nell'orride laggiù volte profonde,
 Che le giuste creâr mani superne,
 La vampa atroce delle fiamme eterne,
 Che a Sodoma piovea, perpetua gronda.

Odi là bestemmiar la gente immonda,
 Odi i gridi iterar le volte inferne,
 Or va in alto, or si caccia alle caverne,
 Ora in giro si cerchia, or si sprofonda.

Odi grido, odi pianti, odi spavento
 Sorger dallo squallor delle latebre
 Ministre eterne d'eterno tormento.

Usciano i maladetti dalle grotte
 E avean coperto il viso di tenebre
 E scritto in fronte a fuoco: «Eterna
 notte».

ON THE SAME SUBJECT

Deep down in the horrible vaults
 built by God's righteous hand,
 the cruel flames of the eternal fire
 that consumed Sodom, burn for ever.

Hear the curses of the wicked race,
 hear the cries that echo in the vaults of
 Hell.
 At times they rise high, then vanish into
 the caves,
 they spin around, then sink below.

Hear the wailing, hear the cries, hear the
 terror
 coming from the gloom of darkness,
 eternal ministers of everlasting torment.

Out of the caves the damned appear
 darkness covers their face
 and on their forehead: "Everlasting
 night"
 was etched with fire.

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