To Solomos through Browning:
A New Look at “The Cretan”

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Abstract

Solomos’s poem “The Cretan” is not only a work about Crete by a great poet of Cretan extraction: it is also one of the best, perhaps the best, poem in modern Greek literature. The present paper attempts to move on the discussion of this celebrated and much-discussed dramatic monologue through a comparison with Robert Browning’s “An Italian in England.” Not, of course, that there can be a question of influence either way, as later there would be by the English poet on Cavafy. It is rather that the affinities in period, episode, national character, dramatic personae, form, and metre are so striking that, keeping them in view, the distinct and at times bewildering originality of Solomos’s poem can be seen in higher relief through a comparison with a different kind of poem celebrating a national revolution. In setting out to do so, this paper seeks to step aside somewhat from perhaps restrictive notions of the Romantic that tend to govern readings of Solomos, and to read the poem’s relation to the idea of the Cretan more closely.

Solomos’s “The Cretan” is not only a work about Crete by a poet with Cretan antecedents: it is also one of the best poems, perhaps the best poem, in the modern Greek language. From that point of view, recurring to it requires no apology. This is especially the case in a volume honouring David Holton, who is such an authority on the Cretan tradition (Holton 1991a) from which Solomos’s poem springs, and not least on Erotokritos (Holton 1991b). But I do not propose to reopen the tricky question, just how Solomos’s poem relates to the Cretan tradition: rather, I shall read this much-discussed dramatic monologue—though it has been less discussed as a dramatic monologue—through and against Robert Browning’s near-contemporary poem “The Italian in England” (first published, and
probably written, in 1845).\(^1\) A few years ago, I threw out this pairing as one that merited further investigation (Ricks 2003a, 31), but perhaps no-one has noticed.

But what sort of comparison is most appropriate here? There can of course be no question of influence either way: contrast the perennially absorbing subject of Cavafy’s debt to Browning.\(^2\) It is rather that the affinities between the two poems in their historical setting, their plot, and their dramatis personae are so striking that, with these in view, the distinct and sometimes bewilderingly original nature of “The Cretan” can be seen in higher relief. What is most at stake is holding up for comparison two distinguished poems which celebrate a national revolution—in each case, a revolution which has fallen short of success—as seen through the eyes of one of its agents. In embarking on the discussion, this paper seeks to side-step the various more general discussions about the nature of Solomos’s Romanticism—that is, his romantic poetics—in favour of examining how certain textual devices bring out, specifically, the spirit of Romantic nationalism, both as a doctrine and as something by which a life can be lived.\(^3\)

I would be the first to admit that what follows is no more than a raid on a topic which others have patiently besieged over the years—but there are three fronts on which I intend to skirmish.\(^4\) They map against three prime features of the poem which, as Peter Mackridge (2014) has recently reminded us, are integral to its nature. First, “The Cretan” is Solomos’s sole poem spoken by another narrator, a fictional narrator. Secondly, it has an unusually specific and close relation to events of recent history, events with a national character. Thirdly, it presents in the Woman Clad in the

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\(^1\) The text of “The Cretan” is cited here from Solomos 2015, 2–8. Because of the complications of line-numbering, I cite the poem, by page number only, in the notes here, and not in the text. (Mackridge does not give line numbers, and numbers the sections separately in a way which might have been clearer if given only in the margins, with the text given in a unitary form). “The Italian in England” I cite from Browning 1991a, 32–8, by line numbers in the text. That edition provides a good conspectus of the historical background. A slightly different emphasis, perhaps more cautious about the historical referentiality of Browning’s poem, and with good annotations, may be found in Browning 1991b, 272–8. Hereafter “Woolford and Karlin.”

\(^2\) See, summarily, Ricks 2003b, 131–52.

\(^3\) On this slippery question, see recently Dimoula 2009, 201–10.

\(^4\) Key older bibliography is surveyed in the edition by that most proudly Cretan of scholars, Alexiou (in Solomos 1994); Mackridge (1999, 297–316) provides an update. An article which must be singled out as particularly illuminating, not least for its subtle comparative element, is Mackridge 1984–5, 187–208.
Moon a figure both of compelling force and of multiple (and hence disputed) associations. It is my aim here to employ Browning’s poem, an excellent one in its kind, as a foil with which to open up each of these three areas. Browning’s friendliest and frankest reader—Elizabeth Barrett Browning—wrote to the poet on reading a draft of this poem (Browning 1991a, 31–2): “A serene noble poem this is—an heroic repose in it—but nothing to imagine queries out of, with whatever goodwill.” Solomos’s poem, by contrast, may in the hands of certain critics seem to dissolve into little more than a congeries of such queries; and the aim of this paper is to call Browning in aid to help explain something of “The Cretan’s” complexity by breaking out of the thicket of earlier treatments of “The Cretan” seen in splendid isolation.

To begin with, however, the briefest of introductions to the publication history, form, and content of the two poems (hereafter, “TC” and “TIE”) is necessary, if only to justify the pairing in the first place; though, for this readership, summary of Solomos’s poem is scarcely required. And—for the most part—it would be out of place to dwell on the editorial challenges which the Greek poem still presents.5 Browning’s poem, though anything but facile, has a relative plainness which gives an angle from which to read Solomos’s more ambitious—and though essentially complete, never finished—poem.

Both TC and TIE are short narrative poems (134 and 162 lines respectively). Both are in rhyming couplets, in each case in a version of these (Greek “political verses” and English octosyllables) that can be associated with a popular idiom—though, as we shall see, this plays out very differently in the two cases.6 The plot of the two poems, at least in bald summary, is highly comparable: from a new home in exile, a revolutionist recalls the perils which marked his participation in an unsuccessful insurrec-

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5 Most glaringly, of course, in the half-lines (however great a Virgilian resonance their presence may possess). In what follows I do refer to a handful of lines which do not appear in Mackridge’s presentation of the text. Browning’s poem presents some interesting, and judicious revisions, up to 1863 (see the summary Browning 1991a, 32 and subsequent apparatus), beyond the title change, which Woolford and Karlin, 272, attribute to “a practice of removing overt ref[erence]s to national stereotypes.”

6 It is possible that the octosyllable might be a better vehicle for translation of TC than the heroic couplet (Roderick Beaton’s blank verse translation in Solomos 2015, 3–9, gives a good impression of the poem without using rhyme except at its start and close). But it would require great feats of recasting on the part of a translator and might fall into a debasement of Sir Walter Scott’s verse idiom in Marmion.
tion, with his escape from the occupying forces of Austria and the Ottomans respectively, and in particular dwells on his final parting (by separation or death) from a young woman he loved. Satisfyingly for our comparison, the events narrated occurred in the very same years: 1823–4.7

This said, the publication histories of the two poems markedly diverge. Solomos’s poem, written in his Corfu “living year” of 1833–4, was not published in his lifetime.8 In its first, posthumous, publication in his literary remains of 1859, Solomos’s first editor—a man of great acumen—despairingly subtitled TC “Fragment.”9 Not until a pioneering essay of 1975 by that most acute of critics, D. N. Maronitis, was a coherent reading of TC proposed, fleshing out Linos Politis’s conviction that this was a poem with a beginning, a middle, and an end.10 Nor was a radically improved edition of the poem, by Lili Papadopoulou-Ioannidou given us till 1978. And we had to wait till Stylianos Alexiou’s edition (Solomos 1994) for an annotated version of the poem comparable in any way to the kinds of richly annotated versions we have of Browning’s poem.11 That poem has a less complicated publication history, with just two twists. The first is that on its first publication (November 1845) TIE bore the title “Italy in England,” and the present title came with its republication in Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1849): this point bears on the reifying and feminizing of the homeland in Browning’s and Solomos’s poem alike.12 A further point, on which I shall not dwell, is that TIE has a pendant poem “The Englishman in Italy” (previously “England in Italy”) against which the poet wished it to be read (Browning 1991a, 32). This relationship is less complicated than that of the connection of TC with the other elements of his projected eight-part synthesis of 1833–4 proposed by Eleni Tsantsanoglou (1982). Let us then begin our discussion with, what in relation to TC, is a traditionally neglected or occluded point: its status as a dramatic monologue. TC is such a strange and challenging poem that it is hardly surprising that its very reception has been a complicated story, and it is not unfair to say that its beauties of expression were felt long before an integrated view of

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8 I borrow the term from Gittings 1954.
9 Solomos 1924 and still in Solomos 1979, 197.
10 Maronitis 1986, 13–35. Linos Politis is cited on page 17.
11 The paucity—indeed the virtual absence—of such editions for modern Greek poets remains disabbling. This may be another reason for which recourse to poets in other languages, especially where they have been so ably annotated as in the case of Browning, may prove valuable.
12 See in summary Browning 1991a, 32.
the poem gained ground. Sikelianos could imitate the style of TC in Μήτηρ Θεοῦ to beautiful effect, yet he never wrote a dramatic monologue himself (Solomos 1994, 224). And Coleridge’s celebrated Romantic formulation that “Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood” might be thought to have special application to TC. Let that, however, not dissuade us from taking TC seriously as a dramatic monologue.

In this vein, there has been surprisingly little discussion to date, despite the arresting fact that TC came to birth in the very same year as the dramatic monologue was born in English, delivered by Tennyson in the form of “St Simeon Stylites” (and then, with even greater influence, “Ulysses”). That first example I have recently discussed, in relation to Cavafy’s subtle riposte, “Simeon” (2016, 339–56). Yet there can be a tendency to think of the dramatic monologue as quintessentially an English and Victorian genre, and of the bilingual Cavafy as its sole (and consciously post-Victorian) exponent in Greek. Yet might not Solomos and the slightly younger Tennyson have been the Darwin and Wallace of a new discovery in poetry? The point was implicit in the first overt recognition that TC is indeed a dramatic monologue, back in 1974. It came from a scholar particularly well qualified to judge—G. P. Savvides (1994, 54–66), still a Global Positioning System for the understanding of modern Greek poetry—but this area has never yet been fully developed.

“Dramatic monologue,” of course, is an elastic term. It can be rendered so broad as to be more or less meaningless, or be narrowed down so far (as in a standard account of 1947 by Ida Beth Sessions) as to make it appear as a genre always aspiring to the condition of Browning’s “My Last Duchess;” and there is a danger of making the whole exercise sound like painting by numbers. For many years, the dramatic monologue in Greece could truly be described as “an overlooked form of literature,” so we are fortunate at last to possess a patient full-dress discussion of the genre in Greek, by Katerina Karatasou, albeit one which sidesteps TC itself in order to dwell on a very interesting and ambitious range of later poems.

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13 Coleridge 1895, 5. In a deadpan note, Maronitis 1986, 16 n.7, draws attention to earlier critics’ striking lack of specificity about the poem’s technique.
15 Sessions 1947. I leave on one side the question, on which assessments differ, whether Goethe’s “Ganymed” (1774) is to be considered a dramatic monologue in the same sense: see, for example, Reed 1997, 358.
16 Karatasou 2014, with copious bibliography. It is she who, in her critical summary (27–59) cites C.C. Curry’s 1927 monograph with the subtitle quoted above (page 35), and she of course acknowledges Savvides too (page 23 note 22 and es-
And it might be that Browning’s own umbrella term, “dramatic romance” would fit Solomos’s poem just as well. That said, there is a distinguished tradition of analysing the dramatic monologue, notably in Robert Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience*, that can be of service as we investigate this aspect of TC. In what follows I shall concentrate on two main areas which bring out differences of poetic sensibility and strategy, taking Browning’s poem first as being simpler (though by no means bland). The first is the status of the interlocutor; the second the implications this has for the narrative sequence.

To what degree, then, do we sense the presence of an interlocutor in each of the two poems? Though the answer will be a matter of degree, some such sense will determine how useful it is to speak of TC as a dramatic monologue at all. To recur to the poet who marks the end-point of the Heptanesian tradition of which Solomos is the highest point: Sikelianos’s “Anadyomene,” while voiced in the first person (and indeed in a female voice) is not a dramatic monologue, and Cymothoe and Glauce are addressed, yet present, we might say, iconographically rather than auditorily. An implicit interlocutor, though by definition not heard, must be one whose presence is captured on the very verge of speech.

To be sure, the implicit interlocutor in TIE is not one of Browning’s most complex. Nor, I would argue, is it intended that he be especially complex, any more than the adroit narrator is himself—and this relative lack of resistance that the poem makes to the reader may account for its relative critical neglect. But the glory of the dramatic monologue as a “double poem” is the demands it makes on the reader to be alert to the implicit interlocutor who occupies (by definition) an implicit physical proximity to the speaker. We are, then, not simply listening to one side of a

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18 This is harder to do, not least because of the divine nature of the implicit addressees, in the cases mentioned in Savvides 1994 and in n. 17 above. It is worth mentioning that in the Greek critical terminology (see Karatsou passim), the term αποδέκτης is far from ideal as a term for “interlocutor.”
19 It might be said, in this vein, that TIE has been of more interest to Browning scholars for its politics than its narrative technique. John Woolford and Daniel Karlin (Browning 1991b, 94–8) give a good brief account. (A couple of notes of dissent from it appear below.)
20 For the “double poem,” see Armstrong 1993.
telephone conversation but must, through stage directions which we are to assemble for ourselves, be attentive also to the posture of the interlocutor.

Take the abrupt opening of TIE:

That second time they hunted me
From hill to plain, from shore to sea,
And Austria, hounding far and wide
Her blood-hounds thro’ the country-side,
Breathed hot and instant on my trace–
I made six days a hiding-place
Of that dry green old aqueduct

There is the implication here that the speaker’s first escape from the hostile Austrians has been told earlier, perhaps even on a prior occasion, and that the speaker, accordingly, is at ease with his hearer. Not to mention that this hearer is himself a political liberal with some enthusiasm for the Italian national cause—and certainly not in Metternich’s pay, given the number of incendiary phrases that pepper the otherwise good-natured narrative. Yet the fact that the interlocutor is discernible only by a certain squint on the reader’s part is an unmistakable part of the poem’s effect: we are listening to a narrator fond of the sound of his own voice, whose bella figura is presented not entirely without irony, winning as it is, and who would be unlikely to let a more reserved English companion get a word in edgeways. That hearer may well have some part to play with the “business” brusquely mentioned in the poem’s last line (162). Yet we are left in the dark about whether this is an Italian grammar lesson such as the exiled carbonaro Andreas Kalvos had been giving in London two decades earlier, or such as Angelo Cerutti was imparting to Browning from 1829.\(^\text{21}\) Or might the two be working on a propaganda publication like the newspaper L’Ape Italiana ably brought to our notice in a recent study by Dimitris Arvanitakis (2010)?\(^\text{22}\) Or perhaps this is just a commercial concern in the Clerkenwell-Bloomsbury world of the Italian exiles and émigrés.

At any rate, fellow-feeling is in play, along with an implicit receptiveness of a speaker who wishes to learn something of the colour or feel of the Italy he may never yet have visited: “you know,/ With us in Lombardy…” (24–5).\(^\text{23}\) And, while TIE does not set out to show constant inter-

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\(^\text{21}\) For Browning’s teacher, from 1829, see Browning 1991a, 31.
\(^\text{22}\) With review by Ricks 2011, 194–6.
\(^\text{23}\) This aspect, that the interlocutor is having to take on trust the speaker’s construction of Italy, seems to me an important dimension of the poem. It renders problematic the view of Woolford and Karlin (Browning 1991b, 94), that the
action between the two men, the *mise-en-scène* is clear enough: a settled scene, at that, as (towards the poem’s end) an unredeemed Italy settles, not too resentfully, to her rest.\(^{24}\) The whole setting suggests a leisurely conversation over coffee or something stronger, a voluntary association between an Englishman and an Italian who has fallen on his feet, at least psychologically: is he still an exile, or has he settled more into the mode of an émigré rather than a refugee?

With all this goes a sense of social ease and broad parity of class and education, if not of material comfort. The narrator’s plan for escape from the Austrians had initially been to dupe the young woman whose attention he caught from his hide-out in an old aqueduct: he came up with a tall tale, “Which, when was told her, could not fail/Persuade a peasant of its truth” (52–3). In that light, the “dear noisy crew” of peasants he had heard (31) seem to be viewed with a certain affectionate condescension. But the narrator then has to eat his words, and does so with relish: for this peasant girl is more than she seems.

The pressure of an auditor is felt most intensely, if quietly, in TIE, in relation to the narrator’s romantic (and doubtless romanticized) memories of the girl who saved him. One function of the section-breaks in the otherwise rapid flow of the poem may precisely be to unveil those moments at which the interlocutor sighs with emotion—or raises a sceptical eyebrow, perhaps ready to tease the speaker about an old flame. “It was for Italy I feared”: “I never was in love” (46, 115—such statements come from, not an untrustworthy, but an, in the critical term, unreliable narrator).

In stark contrast, Solomos’s Cretan has fallen on evil days. If Browning’s Italian has business of whatever kind to busy himself about, the Cretan’s long days (and long, nightmare-ridden nights) are spent “begging for bread”—an element which, with great poignancy, we are furnished with only towards the poem’s end, and in the easily unnoticed middle of the episode with the Woman Clad in the Moon (TC, 6). The point establishes not just a social marker but also a key stage direction, one which indicates a more urgent and uncomfortable proximity of importunate speaker and uneasy interlocutor than anything in TIE. For the place the Cretan occupies is one, not of parity with his hearer, but of suppliance towards him: he ex-

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\(^{24}\) Here lies an important difference with TC. The Cretan neither has any news from Crete nor—given the horror of his bereavement—would he perhaps wish to receive any; while the Italian would get a clear sense even from the English newspapers (which from 1846 would be giving favourable coverage to Pio Nono) of how the condition of his Italy stands.
tends his hand for bread to “a passer-by” (TC, 6). Here, with great subtlety, διαβάτη creates a pun with “read” and so involves the reader himself in the story. (The more so, perhaps, if we read this part of TC as echoing Goethe’s Third “Harper’s Song” from Wilhelm Meister, where the beggar wonders why the one from whom he begs weeps.)

Mackridge rightly notes TC’s “exceptional psychological realism” here, fastening on something in the poem which may not immediately strike the reader, especially a reader bogged down in disputes about the identity of the heavenly Woman (Mackridge 2014). And we can take this a stage further by asking how such realism receives physical embodiment. The Cretan refugee puts forth his begging hand to a passer-by: that is poignant enough. More poignantly still, this embodied speaker is obsessed with the soul of his dead sweetheart, and yearns to be sundered from his earthly body to join her, one day, in heaven. But the fact that his sleepless nights are mentioned suggests a link with The Woman of Zakythos 3.3: “At first [the women refugees] were ashamed to go out, and they would wait until darkness to reach out their hands, for they were not accustomed to it.” (Solomos 2015, 64–5)

Here, then, is a speaker whose narrative is, initially, less a tale (as with “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” to which Mackridge (1984–5) rightly draws our attention) than a pitch, from a mutilé de guerre. This invites us to read back gestures into lines 7ff of the poem (TC, 2):

“Believe that what I say is purest truth”: hand on heart
“By the many wounds that ravaged my breast”: rags pulled open to show the wounds
“By the soul that grieved me by its passing from this world”: signs himself with the Cross.

And all these gestures are made by a body no longer in its prime. Even during the shipwreck of ten years before, the Cretan had drawn on “a strength I had not possessed even in my first youth” (TC, 6), and time has worked in him since. Likewise, Browning’s Italian, as the poem approaches its end, says of himself: “For fast /Do I grow old and out of strength.” (129). Unless we read this as simple inertia, the line tempers the

25 Cavafy was to make a similar gesture through the apostrophe: “διαβάτη,” in his poem “Tomb of Iases,” see Hirst 2007, 90.
26 Goethe, “An die Türen will ich schleichen.”
27 In the translation by Peter Colaclides and Michael Green.
28 Karatasou 2014, 130–1, notes this first example as one of many in the dramatic monologue tradition where the speaker asseverates a statement.
sense we might have that Browning’s poem is too blithe.\(^{29}\)

The foregoing discussion must suffice when it comes to the interplay of speaker and interlocutor. What of the narrative sequence? Here too, reference to TIE can offer a new angle on TC.

TC begins and ends with celebrated abruptness:

> I looked, and still far distant was the shore.  
> “Blest thunderbolt, give light, I pray, once more!”

And:

> And now at last the shore: I laid her head  
> upon the strand with joy, but she was dead.\(^{30}\)

The poem begins *in medias res* with a vengeance, but its beginning, as we go on, seems to reflect a disorder of mind rather than eloquence. It ends in the classic fashion familiar from Greek and European balladry (and given a stark modern example in Goethe’s “Erlkönig”). Likewise, as we have seen, the Italian begins his tale: “That second time they hunted me” and teases the reader with the thought that he will end with the following lines: “She followed down to the sea-shore; / I left and never saw her more” (110). A reader for whom this line coincided with a page break might indeed think Browning’s poem ended there. It does not, of course, and rather than being choked up at the poem’s actual end, the narrator chokes off his ebullient telling with the real last lines: “So much for idle wishing—how / It steals the time! To business now.” But the knowledge that Browning is willing to begin and end his poem so abruptly is itself enough to disabuse us of any residual fear that TC is acephalous.

There are, then similarities to the framing of the two narratives. Yet it would be reasonable to ask whether the extreme non-linearity of the Cretan’s narration (and above all the fast-forward to the Second Coming) can be usefully compared with TIE. Mackridge’s (1984–5) full analysis is of help here in distinguishing the time layers. And bearing that in mind helps us to uncover the time layers that ripple under the Italian’s fluid and—save for its derring-do—smooth narrative. We have the boyhood years (line 8);

\(^{29}\) Woolford and Karlin (Browning 1991b, 97–8) advance an interesting reading which brings the poem much closer to TC, perhaps rather too wistfully close: “Perhaps it is only in looking back, in the act of memory, that [the Italian] can express this desire and name it in the moment of its dissolution.”

\(^{30}\) TC, 8, translated by R. Beaton.
the young manhood of nationalist action (lines 1–110); and the sadder mat-
turity (implicitly, a good two decades after the events narrated) that yet re-
fuses to be wiser as the world knows wiser (lines 111–62). Similarly, with
the Cretan we hear of his first youth (before the outbreak of the rising); his
maturity as a fighter; and now of his decrepitude after a decade spent as a
beggar (TC, 6). But we also have a less visible but enticing parallel in the
closing sections of the respective poems.

The Italian, drawing to a close, expresses three wishes: to strangle
Chancellor Metternich with his own hands; to know that his childhood
friend Charles, who betrayed the cause, will have a slow death from a bro-
en heart; and to make one hour’s visit to the home of the girl, now a
grown woman, who saved his life. But he knows all of these to be “idle
wishing” (161), utopian. It is that very sense of the utopian that, in a very
different idiom, governs the magnificent—and again, threefold—negative
simile in which the Cretan seeks to describe the ethereal sound at sea: (i) a
girl singing (implicitly in Crete), (ii) a specifically “Cretan nightingale,”
and (iii) more specifically still, a shepherd’s pipe on Psiloreitis (Mount
Ida) (TC, 8). Here the unattainability of the lost homeland is invested with
a mystical force which goes beyond the Italian’s affectionate recalling of a
landscape and its people.31

Let us turn now to the nature of the historical events as narrated: up to
now the similarities and divergences in history and politics have not been
to the fore in the discussion. The events narrated in each poem—in each
case, an heroic but failed rising against imperial rule—come from the very
same year, as we have noted, and expose what was a pan-European revolu-
tionary climate. Yet there are four salient differences.

First in the length and nature of the time that has elapsed: twenty-two
years in the case of our Italian, just ten in the case of the Cretan. The Ital-
ian lives in hope of what would be the 1848 year of revolution—though
that too would not bring the fulfilment of the Risorgimento—yet one has
the sense that he can and will wait longer. The Cretan, in 1833, knows that

31 The point is reinforced if we reflect a little on subtle Homeric allusions here and
how they have darker tones than they do in Browning’s poem. With line 41, “A
wild bush grows and hides my crypt,” TIE echoes Odyssey, 5.127–9 and the court-
ly appearance before his saviour Nausicaa of an Odysseus obliged to hide his na-
kedness as he emerges from his hiding-place by holding a branch in front of him.
Contrast in the Cretan’s appeal to the goddess: “Goddess, let me but keep this ten-
der branch: / I hang from a steep cliff, and hold but this” (my translation). Here we
might discern a reworking of Nausicaa as the tender shoot of Odyssey, 5.163 and
the scene where Odysseus, in his last words to the princess, thanks her for saving
his life: Odyssey 8.468.
there is a Greek free state, but it embraces neither the place of his servitude to poverty today (implicitly, Solomos’s native Zante or his adoptive Corfu, both under British rule) nor of course his own homeland, Crete: and it is surely Crete, more than Greece as a whole, which is the “divine and bloodstained Fatherland” (TC, 8).\(^{32}\)

And, just as the political goal recedes in each poem, with the most fervent invocations of homeland swallowed up before the poem reaches its dénouement, so too each locale recedes from view in a spatial sense. For the Italian this is “That dear lost land / Over the sea the thousand miles,” (146–7), implying a greater distance and inaccessibility than is really the case, and bearing an “over-the-water” nostalgia. For the Cretan there is a lesser geographical distance, and this renders his exile the more painful. Among Greeks, he is not among friends, as Foscolo, Mazzini and others were when they came to London.

By the same token, we have objective differences in the events narrated. What the Austrians suppressed was but a small rising in Padua and the surrounding area, and they acted with almost condescending mildness, commuting the capital sentences imposed—by contrast, the Turkish reprisals were merciless. As a consequence, the Italian’s family remains intact, the Cretan’s extirpated root and branch: the one “scion” (κλωνάρι) left is the fiancée, who is not his blood relative (TC, 6).\(^{33}\) The Italian’s family is estranged (“My brothers live in Austria’s pay, / – Disowned me long ago, men say”) (133–4), and his return home would, if made, be that of a not-so-young Prodigal Son:

If I resolved to seek at length
My father's house again, how scared

\(^{32}\) Wisely, of course, Solomos did not try to give any Cretan dialect colouring to his poem (any more than Browning’s Italian is prone to Italianisms), though his debt to the versification and imagery of the Cretan Renaissance is clear. See Hadziyakoumis 1969.

\(^{33}\) A very interesting area for comparison between the two poems is that of divisions within the revolutionary party in each case. On the surface of TIE is the divergence in Italian views of the Risorgimento: glancingly in line 11, “How long it seems since Charles was lost!”; more elaborately in lines 130–42, which give a voice to quietists; and starkly in the description of Charles as “perjured traitor” in line 125. Two lines of TC which do not find their way into our editions, but are rightly drawn attention to by Alexiou (Solomos 1994, 217) treat of bloody divisions among the insurgent Cretans. Indeed, Alexiou attributes the Cretan’s flight from Crete precisely to this. Here is a sign that Solomos is just as aware as Makriyannis (or modern political scientists) that a war of liberation always partakes of the nature of a civil war.
They all would look, and unprepared! (131–3)

Yet there are worse things than being a family’s black sheep, and the old companions have fallen morally, perhaps, but have survived physically—while the Cretan seems to imagine an island now uninhabited, scorched by fire and drenched in blood. The Italians would rise again, and Metternich was extruded from office in 1848: Crete would have to wait till long after Solomos’s death for autonomy and then union with Greece.

The course of history, then, even as viewed from closer to the events, differed enough in the two cases to make a material difference to its telling. But so too when it comes to ideas of the nation. Mazzini felt that Browning’s poem expressed Italian national feeling so well that he read it out to fellow exiles.\(^{34}\) It is hard to imagine such a scenario for TC, even allowing for the fact that it was never published: Gerasimos Markoras’s *The Oath* would better fit the bill.\(^{35}\)

Browning’s speaker is a Lombard (25), but he has clear vision of a united Italy, even if the process of “making Italians,” in Massimo d’Azeglio’s famous quip, was (and is?) far from over.\(^{36}\) With the Cretan, things are less clear: is the Homeland Greece, of which Crete is but a synecdoche? That would be to render pale the speaker’s fervour for the Great Island and his alienation from where he now is. Contrast Swinburne’s poem of 1897, “For Greece and Crete,” where zeal for the union of Crete with Hellas, the birthplace of paganism (and of everything of value to the human race), is clear, and unaccompanied by any specifically Cretan colouring. Swinburne, coherent in his fashion, inveighs against the way in which, as he sees it, the Great Powers leaned towards the Porte: “Turk by Christian fenced and fostered, / Mecca backed by Nazareth.”\(^{37}\) If this might superficially seem to echo the mention of the foreign empires in *The Free Besieged* (draft 3, section 2), it is also far from anything in TC.\(^{38}\) But it is also a reminder of one last important aspect of TC which, once again, a comparison with TIE can illuminate: the religious element, to which I now turn.\(^{39}\)

\(^{34}\) Browning 1991a, 32.

\(^{35}\) Alexiou in Solomos 1994, 223.

\(^{36}\) A readable introduction to this process is Gilmour 2012.

\(^{37}\) Swinburne 1904, 370 with Roessel 2001, 111 on Swinburne’s earlier poem on the Arkadi holocaust. A jaded response in light verse to the same historical circumstances, disparaging of the Greek cause, can be found in A. D. Godley’s poems “Graeculus Esuriens” and “The Road to Renown,” (Godley 1899, 54-6).

\(^{38}\) Solomos 2015, 46.

\(^{39}\) Politis (2005) is a salutary reminder of the importance of this dimension.
The Cretans fought under the sign of the Cross: the Risorgimento was a wider movement with a wider range of adherents, and its quarrel (in the north of the country) was with his coreligionists the Austrians and not (to take the Cretan’s own word) the Hagarene. But we can see that Browning’s Italian is a son of the Church, not least in his folk-religious fondness for the Madonna:

But when I saw that woman’s face,
Its calm simplicity of grace,
Our Italy’s own attitude
In which she walked thus far, and stood,
Planting each naked foot so firm,
To crush the snake and spare the worm. (57–62)

That said, efforts to read a wider Christian symbolism into the poem seem to me out of place. When the heroine passes a secret message through a confessional in the Duomo (lines 79–83), it is more likely, and more neat, for this to be to an insurgent making use of a quiet and discreet space than for it to be a priest who supports the cause. Likewise, the girl in TIE is a subtle mixture of Biblical and liturgical recollections: Eve, the Virgin Mary (the new Eve), perhaps Rahab, and, with the dreamed-of assignation at the end of the poem, the woman taken in adultery: “And while her spindle made a trench / Fantastically in the dust.” All this seems to reflect a knowingness in our narrator, who balances his abiding feelings for the long-lost girl who is the incarnation of Italy with layers of irony, not least at his own expense. In the end, his tale seems to be one of adventure rather than, as in TC, peril, and the sea journey taken after line 110 is of no interest for the speaker.

Solomos’s “Woman Clad in the Moon,” in stark contrast, though clearly not simpler, represents a different weaving together of some of comparable motifs. Stylianos Alexiou is too literal-minded in seeking to ward off recollections of the Panagia as blasphemous—and Solomos has taken care to clothe the woman, not with the sun (Apocalypse 12:1) but the

40 Solomos 2015, 6.
41 See the view reported in Browning 1991b, 275, n. on line 76. Further to this, it is likely (so Jack et al. in Browning 1991a, 35), that Browning uses Tenebrae as a synonym for Vespers (perhaps attracted by the link it makes with “crypt” in line 41).
42 My view here runs counter to that of Woolford and Karlin (Browning 1991b 276, n. on lines 83–4).
43 Compare Gen. 3:15 (so in Browning 1991b, 275n); Josh. 2; John 8:1–11. (There the doodling in the dust is by Jesus himself.)
moon. But while we would be unwise to invest Solomos’s poem with, say, the eroticized Mariology of Joyce’s Portrait, chapter 3, the reference to the “posture of a cypress” (κυπαρισσένιο ανάστημα) might legitimately lead us to think of Ecclesiasticus 24:17: “quasi cupressus in monte Sion.”

As Ioannes Perysinakis suggested in 1986, the blend of associations in the Woman plays a significant role here. The verse, “So strong as this are Love and Death alone,” in particular, is best understood as an allusion to the Canticle of Canticles 8.6: “fortis est ut mors dilectio.” Scripture seems to take possession of the Cretan’s words.

But we need to remind ourselves that the Cretan is in search of a recollection behind a recollection, words—even the most beautiful words—failing him as he seeks it. The contrast with Browning’s Italian, a man businesslike even in his romancing, a man lacking in prelapsarian longings, is clear. He sits better, we may say, with Mazzini than he ever would with Makriyannis (Holton 1984–5, 133–60).

Browning’s poem sets out to capture a whole epoch through one voice—and its hearer. Solomos’s ambitions were larger and perhaps unachievable, at least in the sense of producing a poem that was both perfect and polished. One way of taking the discussion forward has been mine in this paper: to bring out some of the further reaches of Solomos’s great poem by holding it up against a near-contemporary poem startlingly similar in theme, also highly resourceful in its allusiveness, comparably committed to a cause, and indeed excellent in its kind. I think there is still unfinished business when it comes to taking TC seriously as a dramatic monologue—the founding example in the modern Greek language. Even when we are dealing with a poem of national feeling—perhaps especially then—we could do worse than to frame our readings comparatively.

References


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44 Solomos 1994, 211.
45 Joyce 2000, 88; TC, 4.
46 I cite in Latin, unlike Perysinakis, as I suspect that version was more familiar to Solomos.
To Solomos through Browning: A New Look at “The Cretan”


