MODERN GREEK HISTORICAL NOVELS*

I should like to explain at the start why, in addressing the members of a historical Institute I have proposed to speak on historical novels. Works of scholarly research on the one hand, and of literary imagination on the other, do not, of cource, coincide. There are, however, some common points which lead me to believe that a paper on this topic may be of interest to the historians. A good historical novel should be based on the facts provided by the historical research. A historical novel which does not follow the facts, hardly deserves its name. All good novelists, even if they add, omit or change details, yet follow the general lines established by the historians.

A second point is that a strictly scholarly work very rarely succeeds in recreating the intellectual and psychological climate of the period with which it deals. The abundant supply of facts, names and dates on the Persian wars could not possibly replace the *Persians* of Aeschylus, however well treated by the most competent historian. In addition to it, a historical work is always subject to the limitations of the accessible sources and to the progress of the historical technique. A work of art, when it is a great one, is beyond the limits of time.

I should like to add something else. History is not always a thing of the past. In some cases, history is, or at least should be, a part of the present and of the future. There are historical periods which contain extremely important lessons for the present and for the future. Works of art could influence a large number of people, larger than the number of people to whom the work of a historian appeals. A scholar who is interested in promoting the culture of his nation should, I think, be happy to see history taken over by artists and given again to his people with the means and the forms of the artistic imagination.

On the basis of these general remarks I propose to present an outline of modern Greek novelwriting as a way to the understanding of our approach to our history.I shall mention briefly only those novels which I believe are the most interesting of all and I shall try to state the basic ideas which have guided their authors.

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Two periods are the most important in the history of modern Greek historical novels. The first one starts a few years after the Greek war of Independence, in 1821, and reaches its peak at the end of the century. The second started with the end of World War II. In most of the historical novels which were written in both those periods, the main subject was the life of the Greeks under Ottoman rule. Very few deal with Byzantine times and even fewer with the classical epoch. Recently a new topic has been added, the Asia Minor disaster in 1922, some authors writing on the life of the Greeks in Anatolia, just before or during the Greek expedition to Asia Minor, and others describing the life of the refugees in the islands, in Macedonia and in the rest of Greece. As, however, this addition is not entirely new, since its centre is again the clash between the Greeks and the Turks, we may as well characterize the modern Greek historical novels as dealing mostly with the relations between the Greeks and the Turks, from the Fall of Constantinople until the end of the Asia Minor expedition in 1922.

The first historical novel, published already in 1835, in the island of Malta by an unknown author, under the title "Τὸ παλληκάριον" [The brave Young Man], describes the life of a young man who joined the war of Independence, encountered with the most important fighters and participated in most of the battles. The purpose of the author was to stress the moral virtues of this young man and to oppose to them the cruelties of the war. The novel is more of a moralistic treatise than a historical novel, the aim of the author being to praise the honesty and the religious feelings of his hero rather than describe his patriotism.

The second novel, written by Srephanos Xenos, a wealthy merchant who was born in Smyrna and spent most of his time in London, was published in 1852 under the title: "Ἡ Ἡρωῖς τῆς Ἑλληνικῆς Ἐπαναστάσεως" [The Heroine of the Greek Revolution]. It deals with the period from 1821 to 1828 and covers most of the main events of the Revolution. The central figure of the book is a young girl from Arcadia who takes part in several battles of the War of Independence, is captured by the Turks and after being sold in the slave market of Constantinople dies in a remote monastery in Russia. The author in the prologue of his work states that his purpose is the description of the events of the Greek Revolution rather than the composition of a pure novel. In order to fulfill his task he went through public archives and private papers in London and collected a large amount of material and data still very useful to the historians.

Ten years later, the same author published another novel under the title: "Ὁ διάβολος ἐν Τουρκίᾳ" [The Devil in Turkey], in which he describes

the Imperial Ottoman Court in the first part of the nineteenth century, in the time-span between 1820 and 1830, during the Greek War of Independence. The novel is very long, with extremely complicated plot, in which fiction and historical facts, realistic descriptions and miraculous events are interwoven with masterly art. The author does not refer to the Greek revolution, but from the picture he gives of the imperial Ottoman court is evident that the regime could not and should not survive any longer. In spite of the progressive ideals of the Sultan Mahomed, of his intellectual advisers and of the Greeks in his entourage, the administration of the empire remains in the hands of a corrupt class, which gradually destroys the morale of the people.

The clash of opposite forces in the Ottoman Empire a few years before and after the Greek Revolution is the subject of one more historical novel, written by Constantinos Ramfos and published in 1867 in three volumes, under the title: "Χαλὲτ 'Αφέντη" [Halet Efendi]. Sultan Mahomet is pictured also here, as in the novel of Stefanos Xenos, as a kind, calm and progressive monarch; the dark powers, however, of the administration are again here in force and ruin all the attempts at a sound solution of the empire's problems.

The Greek author is evidently trying to understand the Ottoman policies in view of the rising nationalism on the Balkans and of the growing impact of Western civilisation. The Ottoman regime is torn by internal frictions and unable to follow the path of justice towards the national groups in its orbit. The Sultan and the simple people of Turkey are described with sympathy in contrast to the bureaucrats and landowners of the empire.

The topic of opposite forces fighting each other for the control in the empire became the subject of one more novel by the same author, Constantinos Ramfos, which was published in 1862 under the title :" Αἱ τελευταῖαι ἡμέραι τοῦ 'Αλῆ Πασᾶ" [The Last Days of Ali Pasha]. The time-span is the two crucial months, December 1821 and January 1822, and the main subject the suppression of Ali Pasha's revolt in Jannina and his death in his fortress. The author is fascinated by the boldness of Ali Pasha and by the activities of the Greeks around him. He does not fail to mention the perfidy and cruelty of the Albanian chieftain. He sees him, however, as a new power which, jointly with others, tends to overthrow the corrupt Ottoman rule on the empire. The Greek assistance to the plans of Ali Pasha is given in only a few pages, because the purpose of the author was to show that in the empire itself the seeds of destruction were already grown.

As is well known, Ali Pasha had gradually attracted around him a number of Greeks, who were fighting until that time in the mountains of Epirus against the Ottoman forces. Some of them assisted him in the administration of his Pashalik and remained faithful to him until his death. Others left him

when they realized that he was fighting the Porte for his own benefit, not for the liberation of the enslaved nationalities. Still others refused to join him and fought his forces all over the mountains of Epirus. One of those bandits was the famous Kleft Katsandonis, whose life is the subject of the third historical novel "Ὁ Κατσαντώνης" [Katsantonis], written by Constantinos Ramfos and published in 1862. The author gives a splendid description of the mountains of Epirus and of the life of the Klefts, faithfully following the Kleftic folksongs, which rank among the best products of Modern Greek folkpoetry. The legendary figure of Katsandonis is presented by the author in vivid colours and his courage and military genious are praised as much as his high respect for education. His martyrdom is described with moving words. Katzantonis personifies the ideal Greek Kleft; he is brave, unselfish, pious, honest and eager for freedom and education.

The Kleft as the ideal representation of the fighting spirit of the Greeks against the Ottoman domination became the topic of one more novel, published in 1879 by the eminent prosawriter from the island of Skiathos, Alexandros Papadiamandis. The time setting is the middle of the eighteenth century, the place a remote village in Akarnania, and the plot, the abduction of the fiancée of the brave Kleft, Christo Milionis, by a wealthy Turk bey. The story is simple, gives, however, the occasion to the author to describe at length the life of the Klefts, their mentality, their morals and their fighting spirit against the Turks. When everything else was lost under the pressure of the Ottoman Rule, the Klefts not only kept the fire of the resistance burning, but also protected the Greeks in the cities and in the mountains from total annihilation and extermination.

There is one more historical novel which refers to the War of Independence and which differs from the others in that, although really a novel, it is, however, written in the form of memoirs. The author, Demetrios Vikelas, a well known Greek intellectual who spent most of his life in London, included in his novel, "Λουκῆς Λάρας", [Loukis Laras] published in 1879, much from his own personal experience. The subject of the book is the adventures of a boy who left with his family the city of Smyrna, after the war of Independence broke out, and who suffered painful hardships as a refugee, first in Chios and then in various other islands of the Aegean Sea under the constant threat of the Turkish persecution. He is not a warrior. He is a simple, modest young man, an everyday boy, but one who deserves freedom, peace and security and who has nevertheless to pass through bitter experiences jointly with all the other Greeks striving to regain their freedom. The novel was a best seller when it was first published, mainly because it presented another aspect of the spirit of the Greek resistance against the Ottoman rule, the spirit of calm, steady

and unwaving decision to survive in spite of all the difficulties. From this point of view the peaceful man of Vikelas was another manifestation of the same spirit which guided the Klefts.

After this brief survey of the historical novels written during the nineteenth century we may outline their main characteristics as follows. As far as their composition is concerned they are under the influence of Walter Scott and later of the Dumas father and son with the European tradition of novelwriting at that time, of the typical characteristics of their working methods, complicated plots, immense variety of characters, continuous change of the local setting , and moralizing comments.

As far as their general ideas is concerned they express the ideology of the War of Independence, with the tendency to present the Greek revolution not only as a national revolt for liberation, but also as a war for democracy, for individual freedom and, of course, fŏr Christianity against enemies who are presented as barbarian infidels.

The authors are eager to portray the Greek heroes as examples of bravery and integrity and to stress the moral decay of their enemy. Strong also is the tendency to insert in the narrative long historical details which can easily be explained by the lack of history text books at that time and by the methods employed by the European novelists of the nineteenth century.

All these novels are by now nearly forgotten mainly because of their language, old-fashioned conservative Greek, no longer used in the literature of our times. As probably some of you know the language of modern Greece is still a point of controversy, a large number of people insisting that we must keep as close as possible to its classical or even medieval form and others trying to codify and use only the language which is actually spoken. The problem as far as the literary works is concerned has already been solved for the popular language and so the oldfashioned language of the novels we have just discussed, makes them appear somehow out of date.

In spite, however, of their shortcomings in composition and language these novels were avidly read throughout the nineteenth century because they expressed the feelings and the ideals of the Greeks living inside and outside of what was, at that time, the small newly liberated Greek State. In the foreground of the novels were the Greek fighters for freedom and in the background the two ideals of the Greeks either liberated already or expecting soon to be, the ideals of the humanistic tradition and of Greek Orthodox Faith embodied in the symbols of Athens and Constantinople — Athens as the birth-place of decency, of freedom and of equality of all human beings, and Constantinople as the centre of the Ecumenical Orthodox Church. The Greeks

of the nineteenth century were trying to get all the Greek territories liberated and the people guided by the traditional ideals of Classical Greece and of Byzantium. The novels we have just discussed were the expression of these feelings and of these ideals and it was for this reason that they were so popular throughout the nineteenth century.

From the end of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II, almost all the Greek novelists were concerned either with subjects taken from the life of the cities, mainly Athens, or with novels of a folklore character. From this point of view the art of writing novels as, in general, the literary life in Greece was in line with the literary tendencies in France as well as in England. The World War II opened a new era, which has completely transformed the course of poetry and of prose-writing in Greece.

The brave resistance against the danger resulting first from the attack and then from the occupation, recalled, more powerfully than ever, the sufferings, the dangers and the heroic deeds during the Ottoman occupation and the war of Independence in Greece. The bitter experience from the occupation led the intellectuals of Greece to the revival and to the re-evaluation of the experiences from the time when the Turks had occupied their homeland.

Two are now the most important writers of historical novels, both well known and highly respected in Greece. Thanassis Petsalis, born in 1904 in Athens and Pandelis Prevelakis, born in 1909 in the island of Crete.

Thanassis Petsalis has written three novels so far, the "Μαυρόλυκοι" [Mavrolyki], published in 1947-48, "Ἡ Καμπάνα τῆς Ἁγίας Τριάδας" [The Bell of Saint Trinity] published in 1949 and "Ἑλληνικὸς Ὄρθρος" [the Greek Dawn], published in 1962, all dealing with Greece under Ottoman rule. The first narrates the history of the family Mavrolyki from 1565 to 1799, the second the history of the village Perachori from 1385 to 1828 and the third, the life of the statesman John Colletis from his birth in 1774 to his death in 1847. The author is extremely well informed in modern Greek history. He is familiar with almost all the printed sources, he went through a careful study of public and private archives and he is also closely acquainted with the geography of the Balkans and the landscape of Greece.

In his first novel, the *Mavrolyki*, he follows the members of the family Mavrolyki through almost all the important places and events with which the Greeks were connected during the 350 years of the narration, starting with the most cruel persecutions of the Greeks by the Turks in the middle of the sixteenth century, until the martyrdom of Rigas Fereos in Belgrade. Members of the family Mavrolyki move all over the Balkan peninsula as merchants, as teachers, as priests, as fighters, in the Ottoman empire and beyond

its borders in the cities of Eastern and Western Europe, where the Greek communities were active at that time. Most of them share or experience as key persons or as victims the great historical or intellectual events in the Balkans.

The author describes at lenght the devsirmé and the jannitsars, the activities, the problems and the sufferings in the Ecumenical Patriarchate, the spread of Western ideas among and through the Greeks all over the Balkans, the contribution of the Fanariotes to the culture of Rumania, the impact on all the enslaved Balkan national groups of the life and death of Rigas Fereos, the spread of the resistance movement of the Klefts in the mountains and the gradual growth of educational centers all over Greece. Among his best pages is the chapter dedicated to Kosmas the Etolos, the legendary figure of the monk from Mount Athos who, for many years, kept travelling all over the mountains of Greece, awakening the memory of the humanistic tradition of the Greeks and establishing schools everywhere he went.

The author has achieved to produce an overall picture of the Greeks under Turkish domination, without however sacrificing fiction to history. The references to history are interwoven with the description of the lives of the Mavrolyki family and in spite of the historical data, his book remains a novel that rightly deserves the recognition granted to it by the Academy of Athens, as one of the best historical novels in modern Greece.

The novel *The Bell of Saint Trinity*, is a sort of a counterpart to the Mavrolyki. The broad background of the Mavrolyki has been replaced in this novel by a small mountainous village which throughout its history of 500 years hears only a distant echo of the great events, which had started with the fall of Constantinople and the destruction of the Byzantine Empire and had ended with the overthrow of King Otto and the establishment of constitutional monarchy in Greece. The village had suffered many times by raids and was burned down from time to time by the Albanians and the Turks. Several times it was depopulated and deserted. In spite, however, of all these calamities time and again it was brought back to life thanks to the devotion of its people. The author does not refer to any particular village. The village of Perachori is a typical Greek village, similar to all the others all over Greece and its people are all the village people in Greece during the period described by the author.

The last of Petsali's novels, *Greek Dawn*, published in 1963 is the most mature of what he has produced so far. The time-span of the 73 years, from 1774 to 1847, permits him to be more detailed in the presentation of persons and events. And as he has as the centre of his novel only one person, he is able to penetrate inside his character and follow closely its development. His hero is John Colletis, a boy from a remote and desolate village in

the mountains of Pindos, who winds up as Greek ambassador to France and Prime Minister of Greece, one of the most active and most intelligent Greek Prime Ministers of the nineteenth century. Colletis goes to school first in Jannina and later in Pisa and Padova, takes part in the Philiki Eteria and in the War of Independence and, with the other Greek politicians, in the settlement of the problems created with the new independant state of Greece.

Almost all the persons and the events described in this novel are strictly historical. Genuine are also the facts which the author gives about the life of his hero, except, of course, the dialogues.

He is very fond of his hero. He is quite fascinated by the man, who, born in misery, fought hard in order to survive in the poverty and desolation of his native village, attended avidly the primitive school of his home town, later fought his way through school in Jannina, was granted a scolarship by a benevolent Greek merchant for studies in Pisa and Padova, became one of the chief physicians in the harem of Ali Pasha, decently represented his country in France and took upon his shoulders the burden of forming decent administration in liberated Greece, without however neglecting the rest of the Greeks in Thessaly, in Epirus, in Macedonia and in Asia Minor who were still in servitude. The author intended to narrate the story of an important modern Greek personality from his humble origins during the Ottoman rule, as far as his evelation to the leading role of the Prime Minister in the newborn state. The colourful life of John Colletis was an excellent opportunity for him to touch upon a series of highly characteristic topics concerning the Greeks in servitude, in the War for Independence and in the painful struggle for a free democratic society. The life of the Greeks in the mountainous villages of Epirus, in the cities of Jannina, of Constantinople and later of Athens, in the Italian centers of education as well as the problems of the newly created state with a large part of Greek territory still in servitude and under the influences of the Western European Powers and the equally strong impact of the two branches of the Greek tradition, the Classical and the Byzantine, all those items constitute the background against which the personality of John Colletis is gradually developed and formed. The hero of the book, according to the intention of the author, is meant to be the personification or rather the embodiment of the life and the ideals of the Greeks in the crucial transitional period from Ottoman rule to Independence.

The same task, i. e. the biography of a highly representative Greek, during and after the war for freedom, has been performed in another way by Pantelis Prevelakis, the second of the two writers of historical novels in Greece of our times, in his book "Ὁ Κρητικός" [The Cretan], in which he narrates

the story of the early years of the great Greek statesman, Eleftherios Venizelos. Prevelakis, born in the island of Crete in 1909, belongs to the front rank intellectuals of our times. He has publiched seventeen books so far, two of which are connected with the subject of my lecture this evening. One of them is called "Τὸ Χρονικὸ μιᾶς πολιτείας" [The Chronicle of a City]. and the other "The Cretan." Actually, the first is not a historical novel. It is a more or less nostalgic return of the author to his home town, the city of Rethemnos, in the island of Crete, just as he used to know it in his childhood a few years before it was liberated. The author describes the life of the Greeks and the Turks in Rethemnos in a very charming way. Beyond that, however, a careful reader could easily understand that the purpose of the author is to present and explain the basic differences between the mind of the Greeks and the mind of the Turks, the differences between Hellenism and the Orient. The Turks were not simply invaders and oppressors. They were quite different from and quite alien to the Greek civilization as it was gradually formed in its long history on the shores of the Mediterranean and in the outskirts of South-Eastern Europe. From this point of view this small and charmingly written book is an excellent description of the deeply rooted differences between the Greeks and the Turks out of which came the war of Independence.

In spite of the Ottoman rule, the Greeks in the island of Crete continued their life in the old and solid traditional ways. Contrary to what was usually thought and written, the Ottoman rule was not only a period of slavery and misery. The Greeks, in order to survive as a national entity, further developed their innermost talents. The post-byzantine life, as it was gradually formed all over the Greek territories — the folk art and the folk poetry, the community institutions and the desire for education proved that this people deserved their freedom and their independence.

Without saying so in theoretical terms, the author in his own way answers all those who tried to explain the Greek War of Independence in terms of the French Revolution or from other similar movements in other parts of Europe. The book brings out that the Greek war of Independence went deeper than that and originated in those Classical and Byzantine ideals, which were kept alive from generation to generation in the hearts of the people.

The three volumes of "The Cretan" by the same author, narrate the history of the island of Crete as a story that covers the years between 1866 and 1910, when Eleftherios Venizelos was nursed and educated, grew to manhood and to active adult life.

The author made it his aim, to describe the physical, racial and social

environment of Venizelos up to the time when he undertook the government of the free kingdom of Greece thus becoming master over the destiny of his nation. Another aim the author set himself was to narrate the "parallel life" of a fighter, a man of the people, self-educated, exactly contemporary with Venizelos. The author tacitly suggests that the simple, unsophisticated warrior, deeply rooted in his native soil and the prodigious politician are offsprings of the same historic country and express the same spirit as they bring into consciousness, though at different levels, the history and the destiny of Greece.

In the first volume, whose sub-title is "Τὸ Δέντρο" [The Tree], is presented a child of Crete. He lives in perfect union with nature, receives lessons from an elementary but self-contained folk-and Christian culture, grows and is moulded into Man. This man is further educated by the struggles he endures for freedom, by the war he fights with his brothers against the Turkish oppression. An indigenous humanism of the people on the one hand, and a perilous, heroic life on the other, prove to be wonderful training grounds, where the enslaved Cretan gains consciousness of his individuality and of his inner freedom.

The second volume with the sub-title "Ἡ Πρώτη Λευτεριὰ" [The First Freedom], has as its main theme the 1895-98 revolution against Turkish rule. The people as a whole prove the values of their century old history in that, enslaved as they are, they preserve and develop further their own unique forms of life, which differentiate them from the oppressor and convince them of their own racial superiority and national destiny. When they rise, they draw strength both from their hatred for the oppressor and from the consciousness of their inner freedom. The struggle which the Cretans undertake is indeed a struggle of "The Besieged but Free".

The lightening of the war illuminates the conscience of the brave, who conquer step by step the concept of Freedom and the concept of Fatherland. Before them stands as a reward the liberation of the soil that bore them.

But beyond this first freedom, this physical freedom as it were, the fighters, through the initiative of Eleftherios Venizelos, their co-fighter and leader, acquire the visions of a free Nation and an ideal State.

In the third volume, with "Ἡ Πολιτεία" [The State] as its sub-title, the author tells the story of how the Cretans strive, as free individuals now, to understand the meaning of the freedom they have achieved, and to define its limits. In this light the clash known as the revolt of Therisos (1905) takes on the meaning of true tragedy : free and titanic wills come into conflict with one another, a conflict even entailing destruction. The racial law, which held the Cretans together for as long as they were fighting a liberation war against the

foreing oppressor, now releases the solitary and tragic freedom of the individual, who searches his own conscience to know what should be done. The protagonists known from the two first volumes of the novel, Manasis the Monk, Prince Gheorghios and Eleftherios Venizelos personify a theocratic, a monarchic and democratic State respectively, and contend with each other for primacy. The attitudes of the latter two drive the citizens to an armed conflict, while the theocratic and apocalyptic faith of Manasis, the prophet of the people, is opposed by Konstandis, the fourth protagonist of the tragedy. The antithesis between the Orientalism and Hellenism, Theocracy and Logos, Oespotism and Democracy is realized through the conflicts of the main characters and the social groups that surround them. On the other hand even after peace is established these conflicts bring about such problems as revenge, amnesty for criminals and social readjustment of the fighters. The personality of Eleftherios Venizelos presides over these problems. He leads the people in any given direction: fighting, speaking publicly, handing our political testaments, having visions of a liberated conntry, while he prepares for his wider career in Greece. The last chapter of the book describes the moving manifestations of an archaic and heroic people who see their chosen leader off to his national mission, summoned by the revolution at Goudi (1909) and, soon after, by the free vote of the Greeks.

From what has been already said, it is evident that the plan of Prevelakis in this novel is to follow his hero first through his education by the nature and by the tradition in his home town, second through his participation in the wars for freedom in the island of Crete, and third in the struggle for the formation of an ideal society and state in Greece. The author is not, of course, merely writing history. While remaining faithful to historical events, known to him both from his own family tradition and from systematic study over many years, he goes beyond these to present a picture of a people moulded over the centuries by an inseparable compound of nature and history. In few other writers of our times could one find a comparable portrait of a people.

His main hero growns and develops in the natural setting of his island, according to the norms of a popular culture whose roots go back to Crete's early history and to the teaching of Christ, and he reaches maturity with the struggle for liberation from the conqueror. Similar factors have formed other inhabitants of the island. The main hero is distinguished from his compatriots because, through this struggle for the liberation of his land, he gradually becomes aware both of the meaning of his country and of the meaning of freedom as a moral force for the individual and for society is a whole. It is for this reason that the freedom of his country will only be truly achieved

when the hero of the novel will realize higher cultural forms beyond the humanism of their native tradition, But in this struggle for an ideal state not only political ideals but also characters are involved. Thus finally this epic tale, in which a whole host of places, people and events are described, ends in tragedy, in the isolation of the individual who seeks to learn from his own conscience the way in which he must act.

I should like to close my paper by stressing the importance of a comparative study of the historical novels written in the Balkans. I do hope that sooner or later someone will try to bring together, to study and to compare all the novels which are written in this part of the world and which have as their main subject the life of the peoples in the Balkans during and after the Othoman rule. A close study of this subject will be certainly rewarding.*

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