

N. S. KALTCHAS zu Leipzig

THE
AMERICAN HELLENIC WORLD

Volume V

Number 7

July
1929

ATHENS LETTER

By N. S. KALTCHAS

The concentration of the vast majority of the Greek people within the boundaries of free Greece, following the tragic exodus from Thrace and Asia Minor in the fall of 1922, is already exerting a perceptible influence on the cultural and intellectual life of the country. The domestic arts and crafts of the Greeks of Ionia, Thrace and the Pontus, transplanted by the refugees on the soil of Greece proper, are fast becoming the property of the nation. Modern Greek literature is being enriched, particularly in the field of poetry and the short story, by the contributions of writers from Constantinople, Smyrna and the Dodecanese, who have taken refuge in Athens. A less direct but much more significant consequence of the emigration is the powerful impetus it has given to Greek scholarship. The realization that certain regions around the Mediterranean basin, though Greek for over two thousand years, have not only been placed beyond the grasp of Greece politically by recent developments, but have been also de-Hellenized through the expulsion of their Greek population, has prompted Greek scholars to make an effort to preserve the record of their civilization. Thus, for example, the Thracian League, representing the Thracian refugees, is financing an ably edited quarterly review, "Thrakika," which is devoted exclusively to the history, folklore and culture of Greek Thrace. Professor M. Michaelides has published a valuable collection of the folksongs of his native island Carpathos, depicting the simplicity and beauty of the life of Greek Dodecanese, now under Italian occupation. Similar work is being carried on in the provinces recently annexed to Greece (Epirus, Macedonia, Crete), accompanied by a general quickening of interest in medieval (Byzantine and post-Byzantine) and modern Hellenism.

It is a truism that the fruits of such researches are the raw materials out of which a truly national literature and art are created. In the case of Greece they will supplement the great work of Professor N. Politis, whose monumental "Studies in the Life of the Modern Greeks," contributed powerfully to the emancipation of Greek literature from western European, and particularly French, influences.

* * *

Symptomatic of this interest in Neo-Hellenic origins was the production (for the first time in

Athens) of "Abraham's Sacrifice," a play of unknown authorship but clearly traceable to the Cretan school of the seventeenth century, of which the long poem "Erotocritos" is the best known example. Though very much akin to a medieval "miracle play" in subject-matter, based as it is on the familiar Biblical story, "Abraham's Sacrifice" is remarkably modern in psychological insight and the general treatment of its characters. It was enthusiastically acclaimed by the critics and, more encouraging still, it proved a considerable box office attraction.

* * *

Intimate glimpses of Costes Palamas the student, the thinker and the man, are to be found in his "Marginalia," the most interesting part of two volumes of prose works recently published. These notes give the reader an idea of the tremendous scope of the intellectual interests of this quiet man who is not only the greatest living poet of modern Greece but also an erudite and penetrating literary critic and a not inconsiderable creative prose-writer. Some passages are surprisingly self-revealing: "No man has loved life more and yet enjoyed love less than I. No man has felt a stronger longing for interminable walks and far-flung excursions, for journeys to distant lands, for the open skies; yet no man has moved and traveled less." (He has never been outside of Greece, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he was induced last year to travel as far as Salonica in order to attend a celebration in his honor.)

This paucity of immediate experience explains the essentially derivative and intellectualist character of the bulk of Palamas's poetry. Such works as "Life Immovable," "A Hundred Voices" and the "Twelve Words of the Gypsy," which is his masterpiece, deal less with emotions than with philosophical ideas carried on the wings of a powerful imagination. On the other hand, he is also capable of translating personal experience into a simple and poignant lyricism. This is true especially of his earlier work, "Songs of My Country," "The Eyes of My Soul," and, particularly, of the elegiac poem "The Grave," in which he vents his grief over the death of a beloved child. It is interesting to note that this same simplicity and directness characterize also his latest work, "Verses Mild and Harsh," of which a de luxe edition was recently published



MENOS PHILINTAS
A Distinguished Linguist



ANGELOS SIKELIANOS



ΦΩΤΟΣ ΓΙΟΦΥΛΛΗΣ
(Fotos Yiofyllis)
FOTOS YIOFYLLIS

in Chicago under the auspices of distinguished American scholars.

* * *

The short story is undoubtedly the most indigenous genre of modern Greek literature. Pans diamantis, Karkavitsas, Xenopoulos and Voutiras to mention only the foremost masters, are not indebted to foreign influences either for their subject-matter or for their technique. Their work depicts the distinctive types and the colorful mores of Athenian and provincial life, which is now being rapidly standardized out of existence by the Western invasion. The emergence of a new worker in this field with distinctly cosmopolitan tendencies is, therefore, a startling novelty. Mr. Thrassos Kastanakis, an expatriate Greek living in Paris, made a place for himself in modern Greek literature with his first volume, "Contessina Felicita, the Dancer, and Other Stories," which appeared towards the close of last year. These stories belong to the post-war literature of disenchantment and moral nihilism. Their characters, one and all, are abnormal: decadents, psychopaths and perverts. Yet they arouse not merely the curiosity but also the sympathy of the reader, because the author can make them live. Displaying a macabre inventiveness strongly reminiscent of Poe, he tells his story grippingly, clothing delicate nuances of thought and a mordant irony in a rich and supple language. He can be more profound and suggestive than Paul Morand, though obviously under his influence.

In view of the success of "Contessina Felicita," Mr. Kastanakis's next book, "The Paris of Night and of Love," which is announced for early publication, is awaited with keen interest.

* * *

In a series of articles published in the literary monthly "Protoporia—Vanguard," Mr. Philintas,

one of the more extreme advocates of the demotic (popular) language, proposes that Greece take a lesson of Mustapha Kemal's book and introduce the Latin alphabet. His main argument is that it is impossible to adopt a simplified phonetic spelling for modern Greek as long as the Greek script is retained, since "it evokes word-images of ancient Greek." The suggestion, as was to be expected, raised a storm of disapproval. Even Mr. J. N. Psichari, the eminent philologist who initiated the demotikist movement in 1888 and has been ever since its most radical leader, is withholding his benediction from such an extreme measure. He points out that the Arabic alphabet was abolished because, owing to its lack of letters corresponding to vowel values, it made Turkish very difficult to read and write. The Greek alphabet, however, presents no such difficulty. Moreover, he pertinently asks, if the Latin script is adopted, how will the priceless heritage of ancient, medieval and modern Greek literature be made accessible to future Greeks? "Shall we transcribe into Latin the works of Homer, Plato, Sophocles and Palamas?"

This purely academic discussion has served to show that the supersession of the Greek alphabet by the Latin is most unlikely. The consensus of informed opinion is that such a "reform" would only bedevil the perennial "language question" at a time when it has lost much of its former acuteness and is gradually evolving toward a compromise solution.

* * *

M. André Maurois recently paid a flying visit to Greece in order to consult Greek scholars and study the topography of Missolonghi and its environs in connection with a "Life of Byron" which he is now engaged in writing. Within less than a week he not only attended to the serious business that