

SYMEON VOLCHKOV AND CYPRUS

by

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Socrates is in prison, the moment when he will drink the hemlock is approaching. With him is Simmias, who is amazed by the equanimity with which the philosopher faces imminent death. Socrates assures his disciple that he feels



the same as in daily life, looking on whatever befalls him as good fortune, not disaster. I include below what Plato wrote to Phaedon about the pre-death feeling of swans, roughly translated from the ancient:

“When swans sense that their death is approaching, they sing even more beautifully than before, rejoicing that they are about to go to their maker, whom they serve. Whereas men, because of their own fear of death, slander the swans by saying that the swans sing in sorrow, lamenting death. They do not take into account the fact that no bird sings when hungry or cold or in pain, not the nightingale, the swallow, or the hoopoe, which they say sing lamentations when they mourn.”

This is the thought that went through my mind when reading the book “Albatross” by Symeon Volchkov, which his daughter, Mrs Larissa Bargilly, had the kindness to give me at the conference in honour of the poet Kyriakos Charalambides, at the Open University of Cyprus in January of last year. And in linking these poems with the tradition of the swans, I will say that it originated with his collection “Cry of the Spirit”, published in 1993, written when the poet was already at an advanced age. It was, indeed, a graceful lamentation, the song of a swan (the Muses demand that their poets be swans), who had no presentiment about the end of his own life, but mourned bitterly the loss of his beloved wife, in an incurable, elegiac tone which radiated a moving lyricism. Symeon Volchkov sings the life that is lost, life against death, as he himself stands at the edge of his own existence. His mourning is bittersweet, expressing joy in vernal, radiant life and sorrow at its loss; his poems transmit worship of the nature of his beloved country, Russia, and passion for his second home, Cyprus, linking with exceptional harmony the sources of his love and his life, the magical, starry sky of Ukraine with the brilliant sun of Cyprus.

The same scenery springs to life in the colours and designs not of the written word but in the pictorial work of Volchkov, well-known as a painter in Cyprus. In his paintings the colours of the Russian spring merge with the azure sky and sea of Cyprus with surprising alternations and combinations, since austere Russian lines and chiaroscuro are often carried over into his paintings with Cypriots themes, or, in his illustrations and painterly forms, elements which are uncharacteristic of the Cypriot landscape. I can observe this combination in paintings such as “Kantara Castle in Moonlight” which he underlines with his verses:

*Wistfully, I gaze upon the world,
There, where heaven's bright diamonds glow...*

or in his painting “Bastion Monastery of Stavrovouni” where, on the edge of black rocks, the Monastery is depicted luminously orthodox and resurrected, with Cypriot colouring and, according to Volchkov's verses, the road curves...

*And leads us up to an abbey on high.
A monastery on magic nests of clouds
Floats above the world, close to the sky.*

The poem rendered in his daughter's soulful [Greek] translation.

In my opinion, Symeon Volchkov loved the beauty of his two countries passionately. The uncompromising beauty of the North and the joyous beauty of the South, the vehemence and the passion. They are indissolubly united within him and inseparable one from the other, so that each transmits organically its qualities to the other. This remarkable harmony of word and image, North and South, only the sensitivity of a northerner like Volchkov, enchanted by the Mediterranean South, could feel and express poetically, only the romantic constitution of a painter who is at the same time a poet, who was suckled at the Russian breast, then fell in love with the Cypriot embrace.

Volchkov's poetry has a double origin: two great loves, two feminine sources. The meaning of homeland, Russian in origin, and the presence of woman, his wife, who died suddenly, a short while before they settled on Cypriot earth, close to their daughter. And indeed they are indissolubly related with bonds of family blood, since their daughter Lara had lived on the island since 1970, when she married the internationally recognised architect who had been awarded repeatedly at international architectural biennales. Thus Symeon Volchkov acquired a second country, the island of Cyprus, which he loved so much; he rooted himself in her colours and praised her with brush and pen, with his palette and his verse. These countries held his beginning and his end, the most sacred

moments of human life and death. The way in which one love is reflected in the face of the other is described in his poem "Olives", written in Cyprus, evaluating at the same time his earthly course:

*Olives, olives, incomparable olives,
As far as the eye can see,
But what I seek are Russian willows
Weeping, perhaps for me.*

*I seek the house with roof of straw,
Rooted in earth and low,
From whence I followed a murky path
To an unknown fate of woe.*

The culmination, however, and the source of his entire work was the death of his adored wife, the purpose, I might say, of his songs, the swan-song of loss and mourning, but also the foreteller of his own demise. As I related above, poets are by poetic tradition swans, which is why I began my talk in their name, with the similarity between the Platonic passage and the life and work of Symeon Volchkov.

I began, clearly influenced by the sensitive soul of the poet, by the orthodox illumination which his work reflects, and by his Russo-Greek heart. I demonstrated the conversation between the painter and the poet, and allowed his Cypriot sources to show discreetly. In the second Cypriot sonnet he writes about his journey from Russia to another country:

*My longed-for dream awakes and strides
Across the ocean's wide expanse,
O'er the waves my swift craft glides,
And leads me on to unknown lands.*

Despite the uncertainty of change, his spiritual elation is evident, the sensation of magic which the other country, sweet Cyprus, holds for him, and he closes with these lines:

*O, rejoice in this moment, my soul,
While the flame still burns within!*

I will attempt to describe the emotions of the poet - others are better qualified to evaluate the painter - through the fourteen lines of the Cypriot sonnets, primarily, evaluating at the same time other poems of the collection, in the lovingly-delivered translation by his daughter, Mrs Lara Bargilly, compositions

which have their Cypriot value, written on the island, towards the end of his long, permanent residence. These sonnets, written in the period 1988-1992, comprise an unofficial autobiography by Volchkov and present the island in multiple ways, either explicitly, revealed in verses, or implicitly, when the emotions which ignited their inspiration arise from events which have an immediate connection with him and his people. These are passions and afflictions in the poet's soul, which he preserved with sanctity and delivered with solemnity "as sings the sacred Muse of the soul," to use his own words. These are the critical events of 1988 -1989 in Russia, the personal uncertainties and existential anxieties that shake him - the earth of the homeland he is leaving sorrowfully behind; but also the revelation/discovery of the Cypriot Paradise:

*All here is in bloom, and sweetly fragrant,
Paradise sings in the very stones.
Yet flight cannot sooth the pain I feel,
with heart and soul I mourn for my Home.*

*Wistfully I gaze upon the world,
There, where heaven's bright diamonds glow,*

*And the sacred Muse sings sorrowfully
Of life's false treasures here below.*

*Conversing with the blazing sky
I am compelled the cosmos to enfold
And from a far-off sapphire star
Mindfully I radiate signals to a friend.*

*Until the source of life has dried
I will believe in friendship and my sacred faith.*

In Cyprus his nostalgic memories re-ignite and transform the verses into impassioned poetry. Grateful to God for his life until then, he remembers the past, but is not passively imprisoned in it, rather empowered by the youthful memories.

In the timings and settings of his poems we can discern the direction of his footsteps on his nature-loving paths: Nicosia, Larnaca, Ayia Napa. And his paintings bear witness to other paths through other parts of the island, which torment him spiritually, reminding him of Ukraine: Kantara Castle, old Ammochostos, Machairas Monastery, Stavrovouni, Kyrenia, Troodos, Pafos:

*Rosy mystery of the Dawn,
The sun's fiery disc will soon arise.
Already the fishermen's swift craft
On peaceful waters glide.*

Lover of nature's beauty, he sings her praises in a variety of voices in his Cypriot poems, he feels her erotic charge, and addresses it to feminine beauty with adoration:

*And the joy is greater and more complete,
When in the silence of the night,
A kiss from the adored woman,
Turns all your pain to delight.*

*Whosoever sanctifies what he loves
Has my word that he will lead a happy life.*

The last two lines of the majority of Volchkov's sonnets deserve attention. As desire, pronouncements and positions, they include his wisdom, his experience, his love of life and of human beings.

"Stavrovouni", the 8th Cypriot sonnet, adds depth if one reads it while observing his painting of the same name, it is an example of his few descriptive poems. However, the description becomes spiritual, so that the three last lines may come as a message from the orthodox poet:

*The road winds sharply around the curves
And leads us up to an abbey on high,
A monastery on magic nests of clouds
Floats above the world, close to the sky.*

*High on the rock, on the impassable road,
In violation of all earthly law,
Crouched among thorns on the precipice,
The sight fills pilgrims' hearts with awe.*

The sonnet entitled "Violet Cliffs" gives us a picture of the sea of Cyprus during a raging storm. Two paintings by Volchkov illustrate a similar storm at sea: "Paphos Castle" and, even more, "Cliffs and the Wave". The Russian nature-lover alternates with the Cypriot. Volchkov considers the violet colour through the eye of the northerner, matched with the savage sea. The man of the Mediterranean South delights in his violet evenings, in the hours when nature is peaceful. Contrast and strong counterpoints mingle within him, delivering the

Cypriot seascape with natural Russian tones. One may observe the same union in his verses, the influence of two cultures:

*When waves at sea in tempests break,
Violet cliffs appear suddenly
And rise through pearly mists like ghosts,
Guarding their secrets silently.*

His wife's death was the impetus to write some of his best poems, not only from his Cypriots sonnets, but also in the complete collection “Cry of the Soul”. And to remind us of Petrarch, father of the sonnet (Volchkov in his verses revives the amazing, almost forgotten, poetic form that is the sonnet), his immortal muse, his Lara, the umbilical cord which links him with Cyprus. In these poems, reverently hidden, is Cypriot finesse and the scent of the island as inhaled by the poet, living with her:

*I do not dissemble, and the heart never lies
You made me happy all through my life,
And my debt remains unpaid as I fly
In my thoughts to find you, my precious one!*

These poems, from the 10th sonnet onwards, are mainly elegiac, memorial hymns, laments. Volchkov had the misfortune to lose those closest to him, and his sensitivity was deeply wounded. But the loss of his wife was unbearable. For that reason he returns again and again, unhealed, to grief, and transmits it in his song:

*Even for us all was not as we dreamed
Parting too often deprived us of joy.
But my love for you was a wellspring,
My precious one, you are never forgotten.*

These sonnets, comprising almost half of his Cypriot poems, Cyprus owes to Katerina Alexeyevna Volchkova, a Greek child from the Black Sea Pontus, who became the faithful wife of the artist and his adored Muse. Nevertheless, the meeting of the poet with the greatness of the Cypriot soul, Cypriot nature, Cypriot life, was certainly thanks to their daughter who had married in Cyprus. It is she who assigned him his love for Cyprus. An important role, of course, was played by the traditional hospitality of Cypriots who embraced him with love both as a man and as an artist.

Symeon Volchkov is a shining example of a foreigner who comes from far-off places to the island and takes root, is baptised in its traditions, lives its culture,

acquires the peculiarities of its soul, is inspired by its beauty and dedicates himself to it.

I will close with only two verses from the great poem "Memories of Cyprus" in the translation by the poet George Moleskis. It is indicative of the manner in which he enclosed in it the history and the pain of his second homeland:

*In the burning heat of midday, I, a pilgrim,
have been walking, since dawn, among the ruins
Of Famagusta's churches and buildings,
Captivated by the art of these miracles.*

*With searching eye, I trace the remnants
Of Venetian walls, from ages past,
My thoughts sink deep into the scars
Of bitter years gone by and lost.*

Cyprus is to be congratulated for embracing an important artist of the north as one of her own, one who left his traces in the art of Cyprus, in his paintings as with his poems.

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