

THE TWELVE WORDS OF THE GYPSY. By *Kostas Palamas*. Translated with an introduction by *Frederic Will*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964. xxi, 205 pp. \$4.50.

THE KING'S FLUTE. By *Kostas Palamas*. Translated with an introduction by *Frederic Will*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967. xxxviii, 226 pp. \$4.95.

"Kostas Palamas is today Europe's greatest poet," remarked Romain Rolland in 1930, the year the French author nominated Palamas for the Nobel Prize. Two years later Marcel Brion described *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* as the most original and the most powerful creation in contemporary Greek poetry. French critics were among the first to appreciate the contributions of modern Greek literature, and therefore they could not have overlooked Palamas (1859–1943), who for nearly half a century exercised a "literary dictatorship" over his generation, a dictatorship unequaled in the history of national literatures. His Greek contemporaries called him the teacher, the student of Greece, the theologian, the philosopher, the mystic, the hesychast, the artist of the word, the destroyer and the builder, the rebel, and so forth. Yet in Europe his audience was rather selective and in the United States he remained relatively unknown despite translation of some of his works as early as 1919. The translation of *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* and *The King's Flute* by Frederic Will, an American classicist, is in a way the first serious introduction of this significant literary figure to American readers, and congratulations are in order.

The Twelve Words of the Gypsy is by far the better known and more controversial of the two, even though Palamas considered it the propylaea through which one enters *The King's Flute*. They were first published in 1907 and 1910 respectively, at a time when Greece was in the midst of a national debate. Politically this debate centered on the *Megale* (Great) *Idea*, the creation of a greater and glorious Greece, which meant rejuvenation as well as expansion of the geographic boundaries of the young Greek state. Culturally the debate centered on the language controversy between the purists clinging to archaic forms of expression and the demoticists emphasizing the contemporary spoken language—a controversy which frequently was as political as it was linguistic. Palamas, who from 1897 until his retirement in 1928 held the post of secretary general of the University of Athens, was in the midst of all these heated debates. He started out as a purist but soon switched and gradually played the most crucial role in establishing the demotic as the literary language of twentieth-century Greece. He was among the first to accept with pride the term *malliaros* (hairy), as the demoticists were called in derision by the opposition. Similarly, the *Megale Idea* was sacred to him, and he experienced personal frustration and humiliation with every military defeat at the turn of the century as the Greek state tried to expand at the expense of its Slavic neighbors. Both works under review must be considered against this background, for they are landmarks in both the cultural and political history of modern Greece. The historical context is also imperative for an appreciation of the various interpretations of these poems, which ever since their appearance have been the subject of endless literary debates and commentaries by political ideologues as well as literary critics. This is especially true of *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* because of its highly symbolic nature. For both of these poems can be and indeed have been interpreted on a personal as well as a national level.

The Twelve Words of the Gypsy is set in the environs of Constantinople around the time of the "fall." The hero, an uncompromising revolutionary and insatiably curious gypsy—the personification of freedom of thought and unrestrained action—successively (during the first eight words) rejects or finds unsatisfying work, religion, learning, motherland, hope, everything. But then, in the ninth word he discovers a violin, a symbol of art which enables him to perceive harmony in the midst of a life full of meaningless confusion, and to embark upon his creative ascent, which corresponds to the descent of the first eight words. On a personal level then, the poem is "the story of the salvation of the soul through art," as Dhēmaras, the greatest of modern Greek critics puts it, or as the symbol of free thought, as others maintain. On the other hand, the poem is full of images symbolizing both the depressing decadence and the anticipated national resurrection of modern Greece.

Palamas started the poem on the morrow of the national disaster resulting from the 1897 Greco-Turkish war over the Island of Crete, and would have finished it earlier had it not been interrupted by his young son's death—a sorrow which greatly taxed the poet's thought and talent. When he resumed work on the poem, he wanted to try to expose the petty preoccupations of the modern Greek state which were leading it to a disaster reminiscent of the fate of Byzantium. He therefore urged that the dead past, whether classical or Byzantine, be abandoned and efforts be concentrated instead on solving Greece's contemporary political and social problems. Thus the work also emerges as a social commentary, which, among other things, explains the attraction it has had for Marxist intellectuals ever since.

The concern with and confidence in national revival is more explicit in *The King's Flute* (also divided into twelve words), in which the poet chooses to tell of the achievement of the Byzantine Emperor Basil the Bulgar Slayer (968–1025), who, after having slain the Bulgars and established Byzantine authority over the Balkan peninsula, undertook a pilgrimage which brought him before the Athenian Acropolis and specifically before the Parthenon, which, still intact, had been transformed into a Christian temple of the Virgin Mary, the protectress of his empire. Because of this excursion into Byzantine history, *The King's Flute* attracted the attention of eminent Byzantinists such as Charles Diehl and Gustave Schlumberger (earlier, Palamas had studied carefully and had been considerably influenced by Schlumberger's celebrated *L'Épopée Byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle: Basil II, le tueur des Bulgares*). Diehl provided a most illuminating introduction to the 1934 French translation by Eugène Clément about the historical origins and interpretation of the poem. According to Diehl *The King's Flute* is an admirable description of the whole of Byzantine life and simultaneously a manifesto of optimism about contemporary Hellenism. Interestingly enough, Mr. Will chanced upon *The King's Flute* while doing research in the medieval cultural history of the Parthenon.

In view of the great number of interpretations, one should not argue with Will's attempts to provide interpretive guidelines for the two poems in his brief introductions. But the reader would have greatly benefited from a more substantial commentary on Palamas's historical milieu as well as on the extent of the "Palamic debate," which is still with us.

The task of translating poetry is generally a most difficult one, but to translate Palamas's poetry, written in the demotic Greek with its subtlety of expression and striking imagery, is nearly impossible. Mr. Will should be congratulated, for despite his extensive elimination of Greek adjectives in order to appeal to the

Anglo-Saxon ear, he managed to preserve the musicality of Palamas to a remarkable degree. But there is more to good poetry, even in translation, than mere musicality. Unfortunately the English version abounds in inaccuracies and mistranslations (there is an extensive list in Costas Proussis's review of *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* in the *Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, Winter 1966–67), impairing the text seriously. And one is forced to ask if in poetry, at least, the translator should not have a native knowledge of the language of the original text. Frankly, while comparing the original texts with the translations, this reviewer wondered if the so-called neohellenists whom Will thanks warmly in his introductions for having rendered him invaluable assistance did in fact read the manuscripts or parts of the manuscripts that they were supposed to before returning them to him.

Still, Palamas has been brought afresh to the attention of the English reading public, and despite the shortcomings of the present editions, one hopes that they will stimulate students of Balkan history to study seriously modern Greek literature and seek in it, besides literary joys, historical insights about neohellenism and especially about the *Megalē Idea* and its impact on the intellectual history of modern Greece as well as on Greco-Slavic relations in the last hundred years.

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THE RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY OF JANIS RAINIS, LATVIAN POET.

By *Arvids Ziedonis, Jr.* Waverly, Iowa: Latvju Grāmata, 1969. 344 pp. \$6.80.

BALTIC LITERATURE: A SURVEY OF FINNISH, ESTONIAN, LATVIAN, AND LITHUANIAN LITERATURES. By *Aleksis Rubulis*.

Notre Dame and London: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1970. xv, 215 pp. \$8.50.

Jānis Rainis, whose real name was Jānis Pliekšāns (1865–1929), is one of the outstanding—if not the most outstanding—of Latvian writers. Professor Ziedonis's book is the only comprehensive study of Rainis in English and the only one which deals with the writer's religious philosophy. Thus it deserves special attention.

Rainis did not belong to any organized religion, but he was very concerned with ethical issues, and his literary heroes are the torchbearers of his ethical ideas. Ziedonis convincingly presents Rainis's views by analyzing the poet's dramatic works: *Uguns un Nakts* (*Fire and Nights*, 1905), *Zelta Zirgs* (*The Golden Horse*, 1910), *Indulis un Ārija* (*Indulis and Arija*, 1911), and *Jāzepts un Viņa Brāļi* (*Joseph and His Brothers*, 1919). Rainis's spiritualism is reflected also in his poetry—especially in the volume *Gals un Sākums* (*The Beginning and the End*, 1913) and in his diary. Because Rainis was a poet, he did not develop a strict philosophical system, but without evaluating his individualistic religious-philosophical thought, it is impossible to understand his symbolist works. Rainis looked upon religion not as dogma but as an expression of life and living itself.

Ziedonis supports his investigations by careful study of the complete works of Rainis, *Raksti* (*Works*) (Västerås, Sweden, 1952–64, 17 vols.), and by drawing on the research of other authors who have studied Rainis. Such painstaking scholarship has yielded especially rich results in part 2. Ziedonis's own quotations from Rainis, translated into English, are of considerable value. The book also has an extensive index and bibliography.