

## **A controversial poet.**

### **The 100 years anniversary of Engonopoulos birth affirms his place among the important Greek artists of the post-war times.**

Ismini Patta (2007).

1965, Scala Oropou, Attiki. Engonopoulos is writing the notes in the end of the second edition of his poems “Don’t speak to the driver” and the “The piano of silence”. The reminiscence of the harsh critics and humiliations that the early editions (before the Second World War) of his poems received is so strong that he still expresses extensively a great bitterness, after almost 25 years. He also recalls the injustices with which some of his bosses treated him to the point to claim: “It seems that in our country, this time, still the appreciation to someone is expressed through his persecution.”

So, despite the (first)recognition by the Ministry of Education that offered him in 1958 “The First Poetry Award”, Engonopoulos, 7 years after the prize, was still feeling the necessity to defend himself for having attend surrealism and for the language he was using.

As for the latter, let us recall the long debate about what should be the written Greek language. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> till mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, scholars and literary circles were arguing on the archaic forms of the language, the influence of multiple dialects and

the mixed form of the oral speech. The overcoming of this so called 'the Language Question' is largely due to the Cavafy and Papadiamandis legacy, the surrealists' contributions and their posthumous success, the expansion of new publishing houses and literary periodicals in Greece since mid 1970s, as well as the broadening horizons of the universities.

Engonopoulos supported the breaking down language barriers and the accessing to the full extent of the Greek language: "I have to say, very simply, that this is the language I speak. The legitimate language, for us, is the Greek language. All these fanatical opinions about 'mixed', 'katharevousa', 'demotic' are absolutely meaningless." Despite the problems set by the language he used, some of his poems have been translated later (towards his elderly years) in English, French, Italian, Spanish ; other have been set in music by composers like Hadjidakis, Mamaguakis, Kounadis.

On the other hand, he was literally a surrealist painter. Specifically, he considered himself primarily as a painter. He had eminent teachers as Parthenis and Kondoglou ; among those whom he admired was Giorgio de Kiriko whose figures echoed in those of Engonopoulos.

Concerning Surrealism, he safeguarded himself (1965): "I didn't adhere to Surrealism; I had it inside me." It is said that the painting-background influenced his writing, especially in the vertical way, he developed his verses. We have seen other surrealist poets writing one-word or one-syllabical verse, but not to that extent though. For instance, in the French anthology of Surrealists poems: 'La poesie surrealiste' by Jean-Louis Bedouin (1964), it can be seen that surrealists loved to experiment with

visual effects in poetry. Among them, Pablo Picasso's texts look like long series of continuous, juxtaposed words without any punctuation mark between them -like in ancient stone epigraphs. However such experiments, which contributed in the confusion of the sense within the verses, are not partly responsible for the distances the public took from poetry ?

Yet, in the literary review 'I read', 1996, Nanos Valaoritis -another modernist poet-wrote about Engonopoulos : "Critics had been mostly preoccupied with the irrational aspect of his poems...They had put forth mainly his rhetoric, the unconnected elements, the apparently arbitrary metaphors and symbolical figures...the desire to impress..."

But hostility towards his literary work declined after the poem "Bolivar" he wrote during German occupation (second-world-war).

Firstly, "Bolivar<sup>1</sup>, a Greek poem" had a large appeal because it refers to liberty. Through the pretext of a Latin American hero, Engonopoulos was making allusion to the most desired liberation of the Greeks from the Nazis.

Next, "one gets the impression that Engonopoulos is seeking (in this poem) to restore the form of the ancient Greek hymn" comments Eakovos Vourtsis (1994). "Solemn and arrogant style, long periods, magisterial vocabulary are combined with the hymn's frame: Praise for the beginning, next come Bolivar's birth and achievements, to be continued with an invocation. He also uses the lyrical choral following the

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<sup>1</sup> Bolivar Simon (1783-1830): South America military man, who liberated Venezuela from the Spanish dominance.

proper forme, i.e. alternating a strophe with an anti-strophe and then a refrain with the equivalent change of the rhythm.”

“Bolivar” has been so largely commented -and accepted- that the Goulandri Institution published a book in 1994, containing specialists’ commentaries on this poem only (after poet’s death).

Moreover, the Greek character of Engonopoulos writings has been widely discussed. In Engonopoulos times, this matter was already a major theme for the Greek intelligentsia. One reason was that “Surrealism threatened the intellectuals’ efforts to restore a Greek character in their literary production” as D. Tziovas put it in 1982. By the way, reportedly, another eminent Greek surrealist N. Kalas mentioned that A. Breton – the head of the French Surrealism- was against every ancient-greek element for the following reason: Breton accounted ancient-greek culture for generating Reason; instead, surrealism was against “Reason” and logic as constructions.

A. Breton put forth the emancipating aspect of Surrealism: “Everything makes us believe that there is a state of mind, where life and death, reality and unreality, the past and the future ...converge without any contradiction.” says in ‘The Second manifest of Surrealism.”

Nevertheless, Engonopoulos used symbols from the whole Greek civilization into both his paintings and poems. Additionally, there are studies as well as a thesis specialised in “The Greek influences in Engonopoulos literary work” (by M. Anthis.)

The latter treats also the psychoanalytical aspects of the Greek mythology in Engonopoulos texts.

After Bolivar (post second –world- war period), Engonopoulos returned to his previous style but quite often in a tempered way. Occasionally, he used rhythm and rime, as in ‘The letter’ (from the collection ‘The valley with the roses’) and sometimes his poems became more ecumenical and philosophical (for example ‘To Grigorios Patsikian’ in the same collection).

Additionally, the public became more familiar with contemporary modernist artistic movements. In 1979, he received the national prize in poetry for a second time.

Born in 1907, Athens, Engonopoulos -after a short period (1919-1927) as a pupil in a Paris school - studied the Fine Arts in the Greek university. He had been working in various posts before he returned to the same university as a professor. He participated in many painting expositions in Greece and abroad. He had been affiliated with A. Empirikos, the Greek principal of surrealism, and many other personalities. The main collections of his poems are: ‘Don’t speak to the driver’, ‘The piano of silence’, ‘Bolivar, a Greek poem’, ‘The valley of roses’, ‘Seven poems’, ‘The birds come back’, ‘Elefsis’ and ‘En Anthiro Greek speech’.

But, it would be injustice towards Engonopoulos if we forget to mention the book illustrations he made, the translations of foreign poets, the costumes and the sceneries he designed for the theatre.

He also wrote about style in the spring of 1939 issue of 'La Mode Grecque': "Style should follow international trends but must keep its ethnic character" he said.

He died in 1985. Finally, today, he is been recognised as an introducer to surrealism - both for his poetry and painting- as well as one of the most important artists of the 1930s generation. For 2007, the National (Greek) Book Centre celebrates the anniversary of the 100 years after Engonopoulos birth. It has prepared a publication of an album and a large campaign for the poet under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture : there will be a show in Athens Palace (Megaron) of Music, exhibitions in the capital and in province, conferences, concerts and displays in the public means of transportation as well as in the Athens airport. The Mars 21, the day dedicated to Poetry, is officially dedicated to Engonopoulos and Kazantzakis. For more details visit: [www.ekebi.gr](http://www.ekebi.gr). and [www.engonopoulos.gr](http://www.engonopoulos.gr).

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