

Dositej Obradović and the Greek Enlightenment*

Abstract: In this communication an attempt is made to broaden the basis of received knowledge concerning Dositej Obradović's affinities with the culture of the Greek Enlightenment by suggesting working hypotheses concerning a much expanded range of possible contacts and relationships with major personalities and sources of Greek Enlightenment literature, hitherto unnoticed by research on his life and thought. The denser texture of Dositej's encounters with Greek Enlightenment culture could also be seen to illustrate the transcultural and transnational basis of the Enlightenment movement in Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: Dositej Obradović, Serbian Enlightenment, Greek Enlightenment

Dositej Obradović is a towering figure in the Serbian intellectual tradition, one of the foremost founding fathers of the Serbian nation state, but his significance as a presence in Balkan and European history is not limited to his place in a particular national culture. As an heir to the cultural traditions of Balkan Orthodoxy and as one of the initiators of the Enlightenment movement in Southeastern Europe the "humble monk Dositej" belongs to other cultural contexts as well and his witness transcends in its significance his role as an emblematic icon in the particular national tradition to which he belongs.

In this brief communication I wish to illustrate the broader significance of Obradović's historical presence through a discussion of his relation to the Greek cultural tradition and to Greek Enlightenment culture more specifically.

Dimitrije Obradović approached Greek culture through the conventional path that formed one of the shared elements in pre-modern Balkan culture, the path of Orthodox monasticism. For centuries monasticism supplied a path of social, educational and geographical mobility for Balkan youths in the context of the broader Orthodox society of Southeastern Europe. The young Dimitrije opted for this path in order to satisfy his craving for learning, as he informs us in his autobiography. His choice led him into the orbit of Orthodox monasticism and inevitably brought him directly in touch with Greek culture. He pursued his craving for education with great persistence and determination. From an early age he felt he should learn

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Greek and Latin in order to satisfy his yearning for education.¹ The craving for learning was further stimulated by an insatiable curiosity about the broader world beyond his home village and region and his original monastery of Hopovo. All these motivations, about which we are pretty well informed by his autobiography, converged into the lifelong travels, migrations and changes in place of residence that make up Dositej's biography. He thus became an itinerant monk of the kind so common in traditional Balkan Orthodox culture but in his case the incessant travels and movements in a geographical space that covered practically the entire European continent on a radius that extended from London to St. Petersburg, did not reproduce traditional patterns of behaviour and activity like collecting alms, carrying holy relics or selling engravings of places of pilgrimage, but on the contrary functioned as a mechanism of change and questioning transforming Dositej's personality and mentality.²

It was this process of inner transformation that brought Dositej into the orbit of Greek culture. The original attempted encounter with Greek culture turned out to be abortive. This was Dositej's attempt to enrol in the Athonite Academy and to study under its scholarch Evgenios Voulgaris.³ This would have been a decisive initiation into Greek Enlightenment culture not only through Voulgaris' teaching of modern philosophy but also by virtue of the encounter of his students at the Athonite Academy, Iosipos Moisiodax, Christodoulos Pamblekis, Gabriel Kallonas, all of whom later on produced work of similar inspiration as the work of Dositej. As I will suggest in this communication this encounter did not take place on Athos but in the Greek diaspora in Central Europe later on.

By the time Dositej reached Athos in 1765 the experiment with the Enlightenment on the Holy Mountain had failed, Voulgaris had fled and his students were dispersed.⁴ Dositej visited the Athonite monasteries, primarily the great Serbian foundation of Chilandar and certainly the neighbouring Vatopedi. Perhaps he climbed on the hill overlooking Vatopedi to

¹ *The Life and Adventures of Dimitrije Obradović*, transl. by George Rapall Noyes (Berkeley: California University Press, 1953), 161–164.

² On this change and its significance for broader Balkan culture see P. M. Kitromilides, *The Enlightenment as Social Criticism. Iosipos Moisiodax and Greek Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 38–39. See also Carol Roggel, "The Wandering Monk and the Balkan National Awakening", *Études Balkaniques* I (1976), 114–127.

³ *Life and Adventures*, 232.

⁴ On this see P. M. Kitromilides, "Athos and the Enlightenment", *An Orthodox Commonwealth. Symbolic Legacies and Cultural Encounters in Southeastern Europe* (Aldershot: Ashgate/Variorum, 2007).

visit the deserted buildings of the Athonite Academy. It would have been interesting to know his thoughts on this occasion...

His thirst for knowledge directed his plans for education elsewhere. From the information he must have collected on Athos two choices appeared open to him: Patmos and Smyrna. Patmos, however, the foremost centre of higher learning in the Greek world in the second quarter of the 18th century, was in decline. On the contrary Smyrna had been endowed with a new educational institution in 1733, the Evangelical School, which under the teacher Ierotheos Dendrinos from Ithaca, had acquired a noteworthy reputation. Dositej went to Smyrna and studied under Dendrinos until 1768. In his autobiography he left a glowing account of the school and its teacher, "Greece's new Socrates" as he calls him⁵. What makes this testimony particularly interesting, indeed unique, is the sharp contrast in which it stands with the relevant testimonies of two other leading Enlightenment figures, Iosipos Moisiodax and Adamantios Korais, both of whom had studied under Dendrinos and left very negative accounts of his teaching and personality.⁶ Dositej appears much more positive in his judgement of his Greek teacher, and this had probably to do with a more generous nature that appreciated with gratitude what Greek culture had to offer to the other Orthodox of the Balkans who sought the fruits of education in Greek schools.

From Smyrna Dositej moved on in 1768, travelled to the Western Balkans, stopping at Hormovo in Albania where he founded a school and eventually crossed over to Corfu, still under Venetian rule. In Corfu he studied for thirteen months under a well known teacher of the period, Andreas Petritsopoulos, perfecting his knowledge of classical Greek literature.⁷ He soon moved on, ending up in 1771 in Vienna, where he tutored pupils in Greek. Certainly among his pupils must have been the sons of the important Greek Orthodox community in Vienna. Thus began Dositej's close involvement with the Greek and more broadly the Balkan diaspora in Central Europe, which I wish to suggest, became one of the primary channels of his integration into the culture of the Enlightenment. In 1780 he is recorded in Trieste, where there was an important Serbian community. Dositej did not settle in Trieste but moved on to Venice in early 1781 and then to Livorno, where he embarked for Chios. There he taught Italian in the local school for a period, moving on to Constantinople in 1782 and

⁵ *Life and Adventures*, 235–246.

⁶ Kitromilides, *The Enlightenment as Social Criticism*, 23–26.

⁷ *Life and Adventures*, 253–255. On Petritsopoulos note the appraisal by L. Vrokinis, *Βιογραφικά σχέδια των έν τούτς γράμμασι [...] διαλαμπάντων Κερκυραίων* (Corfu 1877), reprinted in *Κερκυραϊκά Χρονικά XVI* (1972), 291.

then to Jassy in Moldavia, where he became a tutor to the children of the princely Ghica family for a year (from the spring 1782 to the spring 1783). In connection with this latest occupation I wish to suggest that it possibly points to an important encounter Dositej must have had in the immediately preceding period: it is quite probable that in 1779–1780 Dositej had met Iosipos Moisioudax who was on his way to Venice and Vienna to publish his major works, including his important pedagogical treatise.⁸ Moisioudax had been closely associated with the reforming Prince Gregory Ghica earlier on in his career and it is possible that he recommended Dositej as a tutor for the offspring of his former employer.⁹ There is a second hint of a possible intellectual affinity between Dositej and Moisioudax. Moisioudax was very keen on educational and language reform as it is evident both from his critique of Dendrinou's pedagogical methods and especially from his impressive pedagogical treatise which draws on the educational ideas of John Locke.¹⁰ It is possible that Dositej had read this work, published in 1779, and was inspired by it in composing his own manifesto for educational change, the *Pismo Haralampiju*, shortly after the publication of Moisioudax's work. It is, I suggest, an important research need to compare Obradović's early works with the works of Moisioudax, not only his *Pedagogy*, but also his prolegomena to his Greek translation of Muratori's *Moral Philosophy* in order to identify such possible affinities on the basis of textual evidence.

The possible meeting with Moisioudax was not Dositej's only encounter with important representatives of the Greek Enlightenment. In the 1780s, both before and after his trip to Russia in 1787, Dositej published his first books at the printing press of Joseph Breitkopf in Leipzig: in 1783 his autobiography, in the following year his *Counsels of common sense*. After his return from Russia again in Leipzig he published his famous collection of *Fables*, a book inspired by Lessing's similar work, adapting into Serbian fables from Aesop, Lessing and Lafontaine. Breitkopf had been the printer of many of the greatest works of the Greek Enlightenment and the benches of his printing workshop had seen since the 1760s the leading minds of the Greek Enlightenment bending over the proofs of their books. It is possible that in the late 1780s, when he was publishing his *Fables* in Leipzig Dositej met Christodoulos Pamblekis, who was living and teaching there. Thus al-

⁸ Kitromilides *The Enlightenment as Social Criticism*, 98–100.

⁹ Ibid. 85–86. See also *Life and Adventures*, 281. He mentions that he taught French to the nephews of the Archbishop of Moldavia, Gavriil Kallimachis, but he does not record his employment by the Gika family.

¹⁰ See P. M. Kitromilides, "John Locke and the Greek Intellectual Tradition", in *Locke's Philosophy. Content and Context*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers (Oxford University Press, 1994), 225.

though his original wish to study at the Athonite Academy was frustrated, it is probable that Dositej met in his travels and contacts with the Greek diaspora two of its most important alumni who furthermore were without doubt the sharpest critical minds in that group. Pamblekis was the most outspoken religious critic in the Greek Enlightenment and it is not to be excluded that Dositej's well known critical views on religion were to some extent influenced by discussions of shared interests with him.

In 1789 Dositej settled in Vienna where he stayed for the next twelve years until 1802. In the Hapsburg capital he lived through the influences and hopes excited by the French Revolution among all the peoples of Europe. In the 1790s Vienna became the theatre of the revolutionary plans of Rhigas Velestinlis, the Greek Jacobin who became the emblematic figure of Balkan radicalism.¹¹ In the Balkan intellectual circles and especially the printing establishments of Vienna it is quite possible that Dositej met Rhigas either in 1790 during Rhigas' first visit or more likely during his more extended stay in 1796–1797 when he was preparing his revolutionary works. Dositej's interest in Marmontel and his translation of *La Bergère des Alpes* may be considered a point of intellectual contact with Rhigas, whose book *Ithikos Tripous* includes a Greek version of this moral story. The political turn of Dositej's interests, which eventually led him back to Serbia and motivated his participation in Karageorge's revolt, and his arguments for a common front of all Serbian-speaking people, regardless of religious differences, against despotism suggests a clear affinity, I think, with Rhigas' ideas.

There are two further possible points of contact of Dositej Obradović with Greek Enlightenment culture and I would like to conclude by briefly mentioning these two further hypotheses, which should be evaluated and tested on the basis of textual comparisons. Following his settlement in Vienna and the close ties he developed with Greek culture Dositej in all likelihood came across the work of Dimitrios Darvaris, an important intellectual personality in the Orthodox community in the imperial capital.¹² Darvaris had published in Vienna in 1791 a *Manual to good character* (Χειραγωγία εις την καλοκαγαθίαν, reprinted in 1802),¹³ a work whose content must have appealed to Dositej, considering his earlier interest in Antonios

¹¹ See P. M. Kitromilides, "An Enlightenment Perspective on Balkan Cultural Pluralism. The Republican Vision of Rhigas Velestinlis", *History of Political Thought* XXIV (2003), 465–479.

¹² See Vaso Seirinidou, *Έλληνες στη Βιέννη* (Athens: Erodotos, 2011), 318–320, 325–326, 330 and 333–334.

¹³ See Anna Tabaki, *Περί Νεοελληνικού Διαφωτισμού* (Athens: Ergo Publishers, 2004), 139–165.

Vyzantios' *Chrestoetheia*, which he had translated in 1770 from a manuscript copy. Vyzantios' work in fact had circulated in manuscript for decades and had been a major model for this genre of moral writing in Greek culture. Dimitrios Darvaris had published a Serbian version in Vienna in 1786.¹⁴ These developments may be associated with Dositej's decision to leave his own translation unpublished in his own life time, perhaps judging it redundant and feeling that the critical need to cultivate civility and propriety as a means of improving society could be served by these other sources, especially Darvaris' Serbian translation of Vyzantios' work. This connection of Dositej with Greek culture could possibly explain why his *Chrestoetheia* remained unpublished until 1826.

Finally just before returning to Serbia Dositej published at the Greek printing house of Panos Theodosiou in Venice in 1803 a Serbian adaptation of Francesco Soave's *Moral philosophy*. Soave was a very popular author among Greek scholars at the time and several of his works had appeared in Greek adaptations and translations in the early nineteenth century. Dositej's work belonged to the same intellectual climate and it would be interesting to collate his edition with the contemporary Greek version of Soave's work by Gregorios Constantas, also published in Venice the following year.¹⁵ Such a comparison would reveal the shared intellectual basis upon which the Enlightenment in its Balkan incarnations was constructed.

The hints and hypotheses that make up this communication have been aimed at expanding our awareness of Dositej's ties and interactions with the culture of the Greek Enlightenment in order to illustrate the truly transnational and transcultural basis of the process of transfer and reception of ideas by means of which European culture as a whole was transforming itself, shaping new identities and elaborating the values of modernity. Dositej Obradović was an important figure in this process, developing through his writings and his cultural activities into one of its most important representatives in Southeastern Europe.¹⁶ Understanding his ideas and his life's work can provide important insights into the broader movement

¹⁴ See for details Emile Legrand, *Bibliographie Hellénique XVIIe siècle*, ed. Hubert Pernot (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1918), vol. II, 332–334 and 450.

¹⁵ *Στοιχεία της Λογικής, Μεταφυσικής και Ηθικής υπό Φραγκίσκου Σοανίου*, transl. by Gregorios Constantas, vols. I–IV (Venice 1804).

¹⁶ For a detailed examination of the philosophical basis of his Enlightenment project see N. M. J. Ćurčić, *The Ethics of Reason in the Philosophical System of Dositej Obradović* (London 1976), and for a recent appraisal of his contribution to the initiation of the modernization of Serbian culture Slobodan G. Markovich, "Dositej Obradovich: The man who introduced modernity to the Serbs", *The South Slav Journal* 30:3–4 (2011), 5–27.

of cultural change that shaped the European Enlightenment and through it European modernity.

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