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## EMMANOUIL ROIDIS’ STORIES ABOUT ANIMALS

The main [thing] that differs them [animals] from us is that they take on from men only those [things] that are good and they avoid imitating those that are useless, harmful or ridiculous. Never was there among them an argument on New Year visits nor on smoking, nor on taxing of tobacco nor on any other subject; they do not play cards, they do not drink anything but water or milk when they are small; they do not maintain armies, they are ignorant of such notions as fatherland or property and because of it they do not file lawsuits nor wage wars, but only fight a duel over the things that interest them immediately and personally, for example over a right to pasture on a green meadow or over a favour of some beautiful female of their kind, lady cat, bitch, lioness, mare or cow elephant. And their family relations are reduced by them to the necessary and not troublesome. Therefore they have a mother and a father, but no uncles nor cousins, nor grandfathers, nor grandchildren and most of all no fathers-in-law or mothers-in-law.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HIS IS HOW Emmanouil Roidis, a controversial 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek prose writer, begins one of his animal stories, the one about a hen. Even from this small paragraph one can guess the features of Roidis’ style – an acute irony and a tendency to question established opinions. And these were not characteristics that made Roidis popular and loved by his contemporaries. Only now his works are being rediscovered and reinterpreted and slowly a new image emerges – of a thoroughly modern writer living in rather conservative times.

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<sup>1</sup> E. Roidis, *Απάντα (Complete Works)*, ed. A. Angelou, Athens 1978, vol. 5, p. 218. This and all the next fragments were translated by the author.

Roidis was born on the Cycladic island of Syros in 1836 to a rich family of traders and diplomats. From the age of six until thirteen he lived in Genoa, where his father was appointed a director of a major trading house and then served as an honorary consul of Greece. On return to his home island Roidis attended a Greek-American school run by Catholic monks and after graduation was sent abroad to Egypt and Romania in order to practise the profession of a trader.<sup>2</sup> He however hated this occupation and was entertaining himself in secret with literature, not only as a reader, but also as a translator. In 1860, on a short visit to Athens he published – at his own expense – the translation of François-René de Chateaubriand *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*. The work, published in four volumes, though not accepted too warmly by Athenian *élite*,<sup>3</sup> was enough to convince Roidis that it was his destiny to become a writer.

In 1864 he came back to Greece from his enforced exile and he settled definitely in Athens. Soon he began the research for his *opus magnum*, a historical novel about an alleged female pope. The book, *Πάπισσα Ιωάννα* (*Pope Joan*) was published in 1866 and immediately caused an uproar. Roidis was attacked by the advocates of the Orthodox Church, the book itself was prohibited<sup>4</sup> and Roidis was labelled a leading heretical writer.<sup>5</sup> Of course, such infamy led to an increased demand and *Pope Joan* was translated into many languages, no less than sixteen.<sup>6</sup> Thus it became one of the most popular Modern Greek novels worldwide (and moreover one of the few 19<sup>th</sup> century Modern Greek texts translated to a foreign language). On the other hand its success turned Roidis into “one-book-wonder”: after his death in 1904, most of his other works fell into oblivion.

Now that the scandal surrounding *Pope Joan* faded away, an unprejudiced reader can reach for other Roidis’ texts in his *Complete Works* (first published in 1919 and most recently in five volumes in 1978 by Alkis Angelou) and discover what a versatile

<sup>2</sup> Cf. D. Bezas, *Εμμανουήλ Ροΐδης*, in: N. Vagenas (ed.), *Η παλαιότερη πεζογραφία μας. Από τις αρχές της ως τον πρώτο παγκόσμιο πόλεμο* (*Our Older Prose. From the Beginnings to the World War 1*), vol. 5 (1830-188), Athens 1996, pp. 8-10.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. A. Georganta, *Εμμανουήλ Ροΐδης. Η πορεία προς την Πάπισσα Ιωάννα* (*Emmanouil Roidis. Course towards Pope Joan*), Athens 1993, pp. 154-160.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Strasburger, *Słownik pisarzy nowogreckich*, Warszawa 1996, pp. 117-118.

<sup>5</sup> The opinion persists until today. It is no accident that Roidis is the patron of an anti-establishment blog roidis.blogspot.com (retrieved July 1, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> This figure is based on the list of translations of Modern Greek literature into other languages, drawn up by Greek national Book Center (EKEBI) and published on their website www.ekebi.gr (access July 7, 2010). Among them, are four English translations, the most recent one from 1954 (by Lawrence Durrell) and a Polish translation published in 1961.

writer Roidis had been.<sup>7</sup> Though *Pope Joan* was to be his only novel, he wrote many short stories, especially towards the end of his life. Many of those were set in Syros and comprised delightful descriptions of everyday life there and of its inhabitants. Roidis paid special attention to social change and Europeanization of local customs and had the ambition to acquaint the Greeks with the advances of Western thought. Many of his articles and essays were published by Athenian literary newspapers and during years 1875-1876 he was also himself the editor of a political and satirical periodical “*Ἀσμοδαίος*.” He was renowned for his uncompromising views which he could express using his characteristic ruthless and flawless style of writing. The main themes of his polemics were the appalling state of Greek *belles-lettres* (for many years, armed with his sharp pen, he waged war against Angelos Vlachos, advocating a new look at the overly-romantic Greek poetry) and the equally miserable state of Greek politics and public services. He was also active in the never-ending Greek language question and while writing in an artificial variety of Modern Greek – *katharevousa* – he was an ardent defender of the naturally developed, folk language called *demotic*.<sup>8</sup> Among his texts one can find essays on modern science and on history, on foreign writers and thinkers as well as some ambitious translations from French and English.<sup>9</sup>

However, the otherwise harsh and misanthropic Roidis had a soft-spot: the animals. He is reported to have been a great lover of cats. Nikos Dimou, a Modern Greek essayist and cat-lover, points out that while Roidis never married, he was usually accompanied by a feline and his last cat survived him by just few days.<sup>10</sup> This affection for animals is visible in his written work. Over the years Roidis wrote five short stories, the protagonists of which are domestic animals.<sup>11</sup>

The first one – and the most frequently anthologized – was written in 1893: *Ἱστορία ενός σκύλου* (*A Story of a Dog*). It is set in Syros among Italian immigrants who settled

<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. Dimitroulis, *Εμμανουήλ Ροΐδης. Ἡ τέχνη του ὕφους και της πολεμικής* (*Emmanouil Roidis. The Art of Style and Polemics*), Athens 2005, pp. 195-215 and P. Moullas, *Για το ἦθος και το ὕφος του Ροΐδη* (*About the Character and Style of Roidis*), “*Διαβάζω*” 96 (1984), pp. 17-20.

<sup>8</sup> “This so called *katharevousa* I use not because of my will but because of necessity, for I came back late to Greece from foreign lands and I learned the language from the books as if it was a dead language, being deprived [of the contact] with the people that could teach me the very demotic language,” D. Kalokyris, *Ὁ Δημήτρης Καλοκύρης διαβάξει Εμμανουήλ Ροΐδη*, Athens 2005, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ηρώ Τσαρνά, *Ὅψεις του μεταφραστικού έργου του Εμμανουήλ Δ. Ροΐδη* (*Aspects of Translational Work by Emmanouil D. Roidis*), speech given at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Conference of European Society of Greek Studies, in Bucaresti in June 2006, its text is published on the Internet at the site of the society [www.eens-congress.eu](http://www.eens-congress.eu) (access July 1, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. N. Dimou, *Ὁ ευφρής και οι ξύπνιοι* (*The Smart and the Quick-witted*), “*Επίκαιρα*”, 1979 [text published on Dimou’s webpage [www.ndimou.gr](http://www.ndimou.gr) (access July 1, 2010)].

<sup>11</sup> They are collected in a small anthology *Ἱστορίες με ζῶα* (*Stories with Animals*), Athens 1996.

there in the aftermath of failed revolution in 1848. One of them, Giambatista, a former sergeant of Garibaldi, along with his adolescent son Carlo and a dog Pluto (a French water dog) made up a group of acrobats. As the dog was gathering donations, father and son were performing stunts. While Italians were skilled and successful in their profession, it was the dog that drew the most attention to their little troupe. It was convincing and irresistible:

It was unforgettable when, marching on his rear feet and holding a small tray between his teeth, to the end of a show [Pluto] went in rounds among the ranks of spectators humbly lying before everyone and then fixing on them the begging look of inexpressible sweetness.<sup>12</sup>

While making rounds with its tray Pluto was once offered a piece of meat by some joking students but instead of devouring it right away it resisted the temptation and first offered this delicacy to its master and only then ate its share.

The three of them, two humans and one dog lived happily and in harmony until the night when drunk Giambatista tried to build a pyramid out of miscellaneous objects and to perform some risky manoeuvres on the top. He fell headlong to the ground breaking both his shinbones. He was transported to a local hospital where an amputation proved necessary. Giambatista forbade his son to be present, but asked for Pluto to stand by the operating bed. The dog assisted his master during this painful operation and later stayed by his bed. Regrettably, before Giambatista was able to recover Pluto was kidnapped by a vicious Italian street peddler who wanted to use its enterprising skills and took it away to some remote village. The unfortunate acrobat mourned for the lost dog and lost his fight with illness. Unfortunately, before Pluto managed to escape and made its way back to Syros' hospital, Giambatista was already dead and buried. The dog fell instead into the hands of a foul amateur vivisectionist who almost killed it; Pluto was saved by a good-hearted doctor, the one who had operated on his master. Then, catching somehow the trace of his master's smell Pluto ran towards the cemetery and died by its gates, out of grief and injuries. Roidis sums up this distressing story by pondering on whether animals have souls. If it were so, the writer concludes that "it is very likely that among many of my immigrant friends I will find a soul of this good dog."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Roidis, *op. cit.*, vol. 4, pp. 386-387.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 391.

Very similar in structure and theme is the *Ιστορία ενός αλόγου* (*A Story of a Horse*), first published in 1894. In the first paragraphs Roidis explains why horse-driven carriages appeared in Syros (well-born ladies did not want to walk to dancing parties because mud might destroy their delicate shoes). He then continues with a story of a carriage horse, called Zanabetis (literally: ‘mean or forward person’), aggressive to all but one human, a poor Italian boy. Only the boy could come close, only the boy could fondle the horse and feed it. And again the animal, when the right time came, stood in defence of his beloved master, until beaten to death by angry stablemen, who were just looking for a pretext to get rid of it.<sup>14</sup>

The next animal story – *Ιστορία μιας γάτας* (*A Story of a Cat*), published in 1893 – is much more cheerful but also scientific. Roidis starts off with a long lecture on the coexistence of humans and cats as seen through the eyes of ancient and contemporary writers and historians. Roidis evokes several renowned cat “personages,” among them...

...we have a well-known and recent example of a gigantic white cat belonging to late Koumoundouros, which, though it was the time of oestrus, did not walk away for a single moment from its master’s bed, who was fighting a long [and lost] fight with death and then the cat died itself in some corner out of its grief, while the dogs of the deceased continued to eat, drink and bark and his friends went to pay respects to Trikoupis.<sup>15</sup>

He then continues telling a story about his own cat, an angora named Samira. She was his companion during his year at the Greek-American school. Though delightful, she had one mortal enemy at school – an elderly maid, nicknamed by pupils “Lamia.” Like the other inhabitants of Syros, Lamia was taking part in the social process called by Roidis *xevrakoma*, literally taking off *vrakes* (baggy sailor trousers, a popular element of traditional island dress). The point was to become less Oriental and more Occidental, i.e. European and one major visible feature of changes was the rapid offensive of Western fashion. Lamia, for example, had a huge, sumptuous hat decorated with flowers and feathers. Her hat was her pride and joy.

The bone of contention between the two ladies, the cat and the maid, was Lamia’s bed, an enormous, old-fashioned lavishly decorated piece of furniture that Samira

<sup>14</sup> Bezas (op. cit., p. 28) underlines the naturalism in the description of animal suffering, pointing at the similar fragment in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The work of this Russian author was known to Roidis. He even wrote an essay on this Dostoyevsky’s masterpiece (Roidis, op. cit., vol. 3, pp. 342-347).

<sup>15</sup> Roidis, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 395. Alexandros Koumoundouros and Charilaos Trikoupis were prominent 19<sup>th</sup> century Greek politicians.

adored for her afternoon naps. Lamia was ruthless in chasing the cat away but Samira kept on coming back to her usual place. One evening Lamia noticed a characteristic lump on the bed and started to beat it up breathlessly, hoping to vanquish her feline enemy once and for all. However it was not Samira she was bashing, but her favourite hat, now flat and pathetic. And Samira was just waking up from her nap at the top of the wardrobe. It was not discovered what joker hid Lamia's hat in her bed, though the school principal conducted an investigation. However another discovery was soon made – Samira's body was found in a well. And this is how this otherwise joyful story abruptly ends.

*Ιστορία ορνιθώνος* (*A Story of a Hen*), published in 1897, is a parable of married life. Roidis sketches the story of adultery in a hen house somewhere in Chios. One little hen had for a husband a faithful rooster who took good care of his companion. Until the day when he started to be seen with another hen, of a different breed. The estranged wife pretended not to notice her husband's infidelity, and when his mistress died of some chicken disease, the wife took back her repentant husband. In my opinion the story is rather feeble, especially compared to the ones discussed above, but the general introductory remarks of the writer are worth a notice:

[Animals] live according to the Evangelical example with anything that sends the God's Providence, they are not subjected to the urge of composing the last will and they do not know that here exist in the world notaries, as well as executioners, courts, doctors, prisons, barracks, hospitals, poor-houses and cheap restaurants. Saying this I do not intend at all to doubt the usefulness of those things and their need, but I want to say that it is difficult to make man happy taking necessarily into consideration his feeble quality of the body and of the soul or to consider a small advantage of animals that they can eat without cooks, dress without tailors, marry without priests, bear children without help from a midwife and die without cooperation of a doctor or an executioner.<sup>16</sup>

The last known, not dated,<sup>17</sup> animal story is the *Ιστορία ενός πιθήκων* (*A Story of a Monkey*), which is actually a kind of extended anecdote about an intelligent chimpanzee that belonged to a count in Livorno. The monkey was so clever that it

<sup>16</sup> Roidis, op. cit., vol. 5, pp. 218-219.

<sup>17</sup> Angelou states that first edition is unknown and that the first Roidis' editor remarked that the story has no ending (Roidis, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 456).

accompanied his master in all his activities, and even held the post of a librarian.<sup>18</sup> Roidis described a visit he paid to the count during which the chimpanzee, pantomiming stories from its life was the main attraction. After its master died, the animal received a pension that allowed it to prosper in a zoo in reasonable conditions, or even in luxuries it had grown fond of.

One can find essays that focus on animal subjects, e.g. on the common history of mice and men – *Κννομομαχία (Struggle of Dogs and Mice)*<sup>19</sup> – or on ephemerids, the short-lived insects that frequent river banks,<sup>20</sup> as well as passages about animals in other texts, e.g. a paragraph comparing animals and men in *Pope Joan*<sup>21</sup> or philosophically defining the difference between them and us.<sup>22</sup> The critics demonstrate that Roidis was a supporter of Darwinism to which he referred in his texts on several occasions.<sup>23</sup> Regrettably, neither these allusions, nor especially the animal stories, are in the centre of literary critics' attention.

Apart from the label as a writer of *Pope Joan*, he is more and more often praised as a master of polemic language and many regard his literary style as unrivalled in 19<sup>th</sup> century Modern Greek writing.<sup>24</sup> His affection for animals is clearly displayed through the most compassionate texts in his work. Roidis compares the lives and deeds of humans and animals and in conclusion humans always lose. They are vicious, heartless, loveless and petty in their pursuit of egoistic happiness. Animals on the other hand are truly affectionate, sincere and unselfish. If they adopt anything from their masters, these are only virtues, like wit, playfulness and cleverness. At one point Roidis expresses his disappointment at not being an animal himself, saying: "I am, as I believe, the one man who, if somebody calls him an animal, will not consider this an offence."<sup>25</sup> And while summing up his argument on superiority of animals over humans he says:

<sup>18</sup> It is very doubtful that this is the source of inspiration for Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* character, the monkey librarian at the Unseen University. After all the Librarian there is an orangutan.

<sup>19</sup> Roidis, op. cit., vol. 5, pp. 326-337.

<sup>20</sup> *Τα εφήμερα (The May-Flies)*, in: Roidis, op. cit., vol. 5, pp. 279-286.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, vol. 1, p. 238.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, vol. 2, pp. 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bezas, op. cit., p. 26; E. Voyiatzaki, *Δαρβινικό και θετικιστικό πνεύμα στις ιστορίες ζώων του Εμμανουήλ Ροΐδη (Darwinistic and Positivist Spirit in E. Roidis' Stories about Animals)*, in: E. Close, G. Couvalis, G. Frazis, M. Palaktoglou, and M. Tsianikas (edd.), *Greek Research in Australia: Proceedings of the Biennial International Conference of Greek Studies, Flinders University June 2007*, Flinders University Department of Languages – Modern Greek, Adelaide 2009, pp. 755-764.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Kalokyris, op. cit., pp. 30-31.

<sup>25</sup> Roidis, op. cit., vol. 5, p. 218.

All the preceding argument is enough, we think to prove how err those who consider animals to be without reason. It is true that there passes over a generation of philosophers who thought that animals are a kind of machines which are set in motion by a mysterious force, not unlike the way steam moves an engine of a steamboat or wind moves wings of a windmill. They called this force ‘instinct,’ according to the custom of the sages for whom it was enough to call with a new name whatever they were unable to explain and they consider it to have nothing in common with the soul or the intellect of men and that is why they deny immortality to animals. This point of view started to be getting old, there are however many who still stay eagerly admit that animals also have souls, but they persuasively sustain that passions and feelings of this animal soul have nothing in common with those of a human soul.<sup>26</sup>

Luckily for Roidis he was so ironic that one may only guess if he really meant what he wrote. What seems rather clear is his aversion to fellow humans that permeates most of his work. However, when he writes about animals I sense in his words envy rather than irony, envy at not being one of them. Maybe these were the only moments when he decided to share with his reader a glimpse of his true animal-loving self.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 219.