

The excessive element of the hero in both the poetic and artistic expression of Nikos Engonopoulos: The case study of “*Bolivar*” and the contemporary revival of Greek mythology

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It is, I think, in itself an heroic act to speak today of heroes and heroic excession in an era that is characterised as antiheroic. In earlier times – much earlier than the nineteenth century – the history of human achievement was not conceived of as anything but the history of heroic deeds which the distinguished dared to undertake and successfully managed to execute (J. P. Vernant, 1989: 145) and whose memory is still alive. But, nowadays, achievement is considered to be the transient personal flaunting in fields such as politics, economics, athletics and entertainment. Those people, indeed, inspire admiration bordering on deification, reverence, in other words, equal to the admiration for heroes of earlier times, adoration of idols. Our time is antiheroic, a time in which idols have substituted for heroes and the necessity for self-assertion and personal benefit wins over this collective development.

However, the question still remains as to the excess in human potential and the choices confronting an adventurous temperament extinguishing or at least neglecting fear in the face of danger. No matter how extraordinary and insane it might be, very often, heroic behaviour continues to enchant. This happens, possibly, because of the element of excess which is characterised, more than at any other time, by a convergence of the desire of modern man not to be hemmed in by individual “musts” of the technological civilization and a desire to return to the charm of the fairy-tales of his childhood years. This effort to accept the reality is never completed since no human being can be freed of the pressing necessity to unite an external and internal reality. That’s why the adult secures a relief from this pressure with the immediate environment of the experience whose value is not called into question, just as a child is preoccupied in a game. (R. A. Segal, 2003: 34).

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FIGURE 1
Leandros

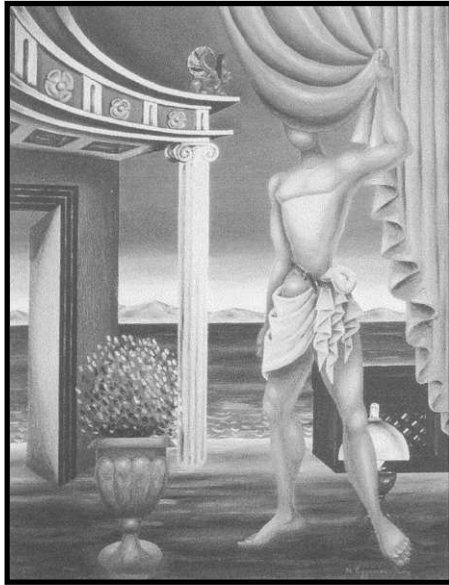
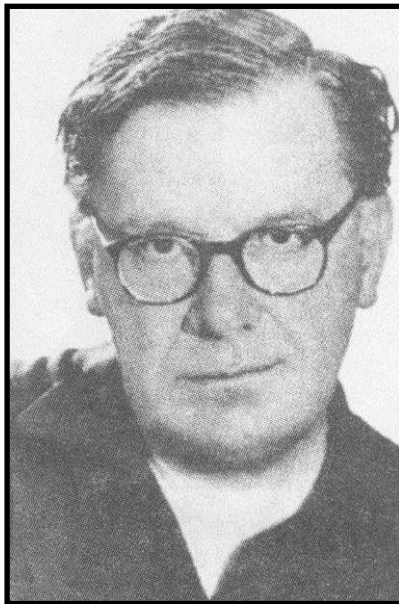


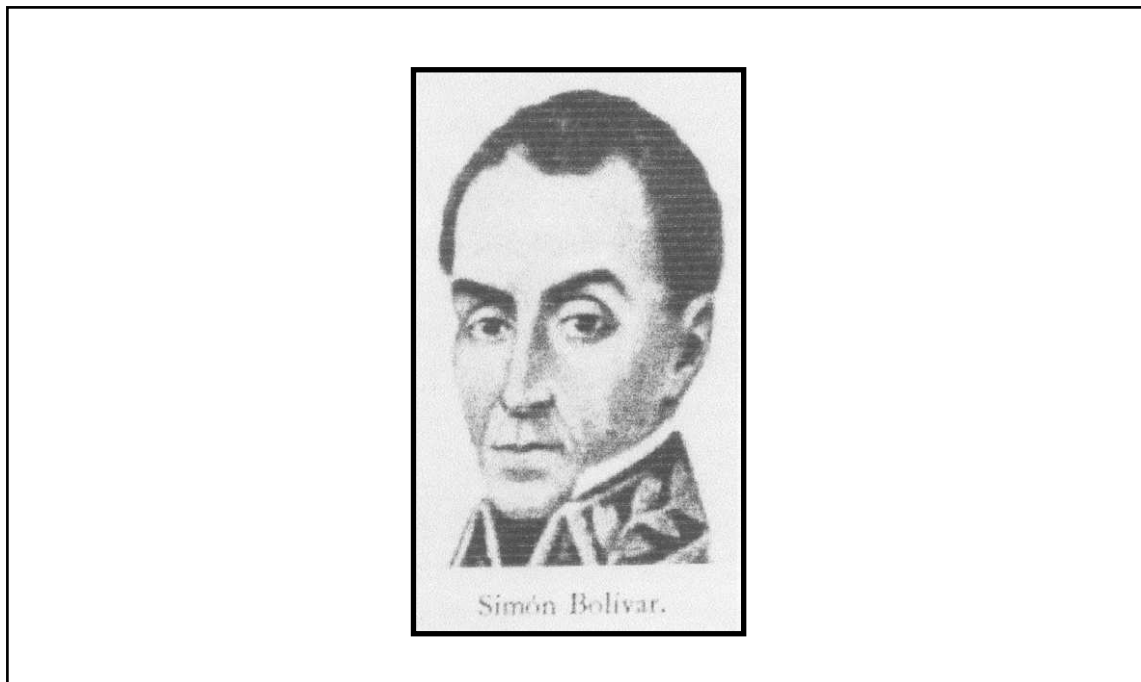
FIGURE 2
Nikos Engonopoulos



Many times, literature and art offer this immediate environment. Nikos Engonopoulos is one of the first surrealist poets – with Andreas Empirikos – and he might also be classified as the first Greek surrealist artist. Engonopoulos created an air – artistic and literary – in which he combined aspects of traditional Greek poetic and artistic forms with contemporary surrealist elements. It is worth, in fact, mentioning that – even though the surrealist movement, which originated initially in France, confronted tradition negatively – not only in the Hispanic world but also in the Greek world, surrealism and tradition were combined creatively with the contemporary surrealist opinion, perhaps because tradition is directly related to the psychological make up of those peoples. (Y. Andreadis, 2001: 77). This is the particular way in which Engonopoulos converses with the hero, not only when he paints but also when he composes verse.

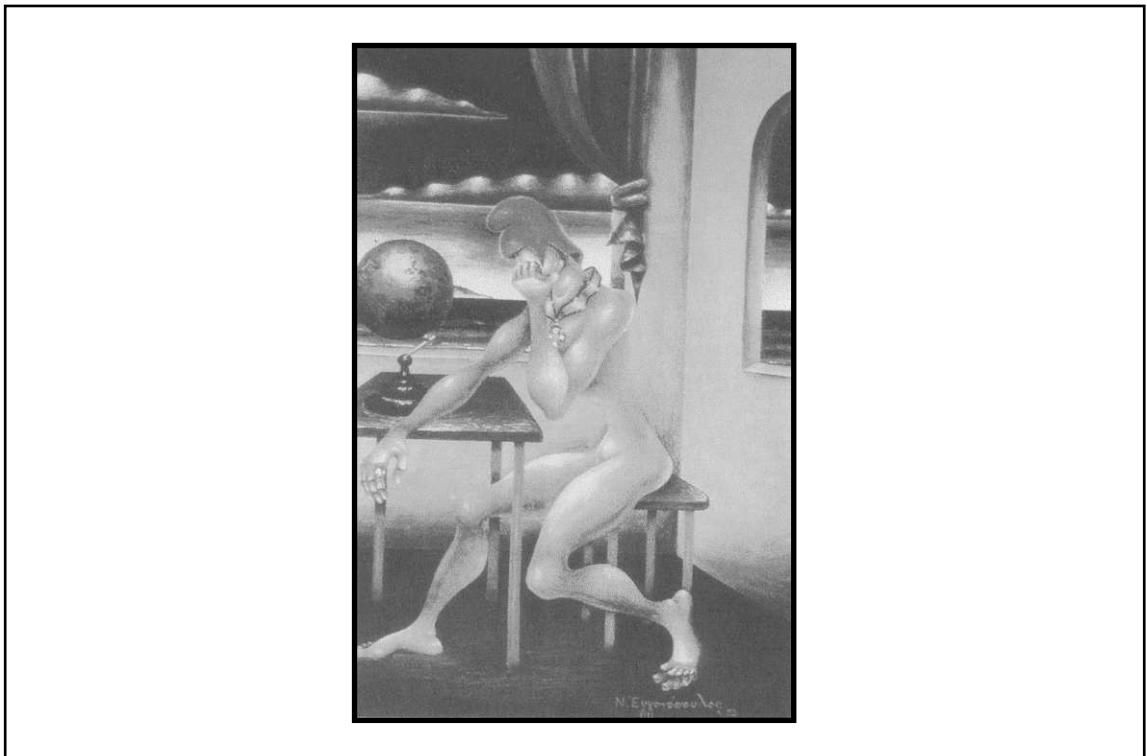
“*Bolivar*”, which is perhaps his most important work of poetry, made surrealists well known as central players in greek spiritual life. It was written during the years 1942 and 1943, during the German occupation of Greece, and initially it circulated in hand-written form and was read at resistance gatherings. The reference to Simon Bolivar, whose name is connected with the struggle for independence in Latin American countries to such a degree that he is characterized as a liberator and is remembered as a hero, was in itself an act of resistance against German occupation. The reason is that in “*Bolivar*” of Engonopoulos the hero, despite being distant in both time and place, is reborn and reappears as a contemporary for which the poet is searching. The fact that as a subtitle of the work the phrase “*A Greek poem*” is written, is, in itself, important, in an attempt, maybe, of the writer to introduce this foreign hero into the drama of his sorely tried homeland, precisely because the heroes don’t have a homeland or because their homeland is all the globe. Something analogous nevertheless, happens when Engonopoulos speaks about “*the severe and wonderful figures of Odysseus Androutsos and of Simol Bolivar*” which

FIGURE 3
Simón Bolívar



*“have both withstood the test of time, always alone and free, brave and strong”*¹. It is interesting to draw parallels between Bolivar and Odysseus. Odysseus was a Greek hero and freedom fighter of another historic moment, the Greek revolution against the Turks in 1821. Both Bolivar and Androutsos, even if contemporaries, didn’t meet at all. Despite that fact, according to Engonopoulos, what connects them is their same unsubdued and striving thought and the same powerful presence in respective struggles for races and peoples. Nevertheless, the labyrinth is always known and there remains nothing other than to follow the same thread of the hero trail. (J. Campbell, 1998: 223). It is necessary for the hero to be strictly dedicated to his principles and with a superiority in the face of others to surrender his life to something greater than himself. Other than those liberal and fighting manifestations, Engonopoulos mentions both the element of singularity and of loneliness which accompanies Androutsos and Bolivar and quite possibly every heroic individual. It is that loneliness and singularity which distinguish each special and unique person or – as the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotelis said – each strange, in other words, distinguished individual whose essential attribute is melancholy, because he moves with tortuous frustration between personal prohibition and resistance to social coercion and exclusion. This melancholy, which is connected with real reactions of the being, and whose etymology indicates, *melena choli*, that is black bile, expresses the internal turmoil of the hero and the struggle of his resistance to the social conventions. (P. Rigopoulou, 2003: 390-402).

FIGURE 4
Odysseus thinking



¹ Translation into English by Paul-Stanley Aleksiewicz.

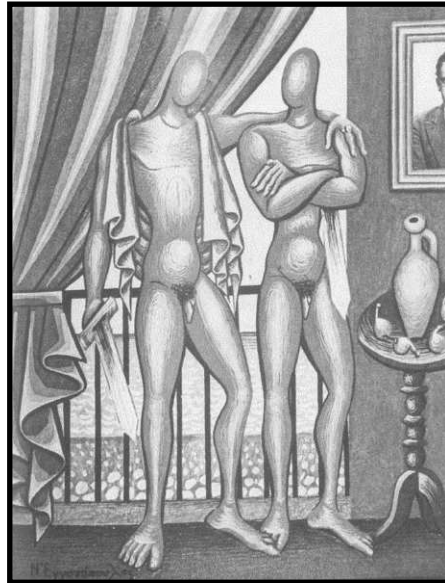
We can see that singular and melancholic hero in a painted work of Nikos Engonopoulos which is entitled “*Odysseus thinking*”. It concerns the Homeric Odysseus even though nothing is visible that gives witness to the identity of the sacker of Troy. Here, the heroic form of Odysseus is depicted in the muscular naked male as a reference to the statues of Greek antiquity. The fact, however, that he sits pondering in a hunched position might divert us from the certainty of the power of the hero. It indicates, more, the man who is questioning what is happening around him, especially a warrior who is burdened by responsibility and ingenuity. This is shown not only by his singularity in an enigmatic building whose opening leads to a deserted area, but also by the globe on the table. The reference to the world with the globe which is clearly smaller than the human form, is, perhaps, the artist’s proof that this world, our world, is too small for the greatness of the bodily and, more important, the spiritual form of the hero.

This vastness is celebrated when the poet Engonopoulos says: “*Bolivar, Name made of wood and metal, You were a flower in the gardens of South America. You had all the nobility of flowers in your heart, in your hair, in your look. Your hands were huge as your heart, were dispensing both good and evil. As you crossed the mountains, the stars trembled, You were coming down the plains with your golden epaulettes bearing all the insignia of your grade, The gun hanging from your shoulder and your chest Uncovered, your body full of wounds*”. In these words are excluded not only bodily but also mental capabilities of the hero to such an extent that they surpass human limits. Limbs from rigid or unbending materials, such as metal and wood depict his durable being. All his strength is concentrated in his arms, which are large and powerful, a strength which is capable at the same time of both good and evil, because the end of a struggle surely involves biological or spiritual death. In his presence, the stable and unperturbed elements of the universe quake, as happens in Greek popular poetry. So the poet intervenes and overturns natural laws in his attempt to present the intensity of Bolivar. The same, moreover, happens when he maps out America on the body of Bolivar saying: “*The Amazon and Orinoco rivers spring from your eyes The high mountains have their roots in your chest The Andean chain of mountains is your backbone. On the top of your head, my hero, run untamed horses and the wild buffaloes, the wealth of Argentina*”. Engonopoulos adds, however, that dynamism with the spiritual greatness of the hero and those already mentioned geophysical elements give immeasurable support with its beauty. The fact that Bolivar’s chest is presented bare is important, indeed, just as most of Engonopoulos’s heroes in his painting are naked or semi-naked. In his work “*The Tyrantkillers*”, Armodios and Aristoyeiton, the two Athenians who killed the tyrant Ipparchos in 514 B. C., are drawn naked and with one leg slightly forward, something which betrays the kouros of Ancient Greece. The naked body certainly shows the bodily force and also, at the same time, the individual who does not hesitate to confront danger, who reveals the nakedness of his body and reveals his willingness to compete and withstand the injuries that he might have to suffer in the attempt. The position of his body, the enormous limbs and exposed sword, as well as the golden colours which are all too familiar in Byzantine iconography and which also show the flesh, denote an individual presence of the two heroic forms. However, the two heads are faceless just as faceless as the global and everlasting hero is. The hero without a surname, a hero with which the poet Engonopoulos baptises Bolivar and gives him Greek citizenship when he mixes Greek national colours with the colours of Bolivar’s native Indian forefathers, saying: “*And people were coming and to paint you², as was the custom of Indian warriors with chalk, half white and half blue, so that you should look like a small chapel at a coast of Attica Like a church in the Tataula area³ or a palace in a deserted town of Macedonia*”. In the same way, Engonopoulos interferes with the painting and changes the

² On specific Cyclades islands, it is customary on religious festivals to paint the exterior of the church or the churchyard walls with whitewash and bluing.

³ A densely – populated district of Constantinople.

FIGURE 5
The Tyrantkillers

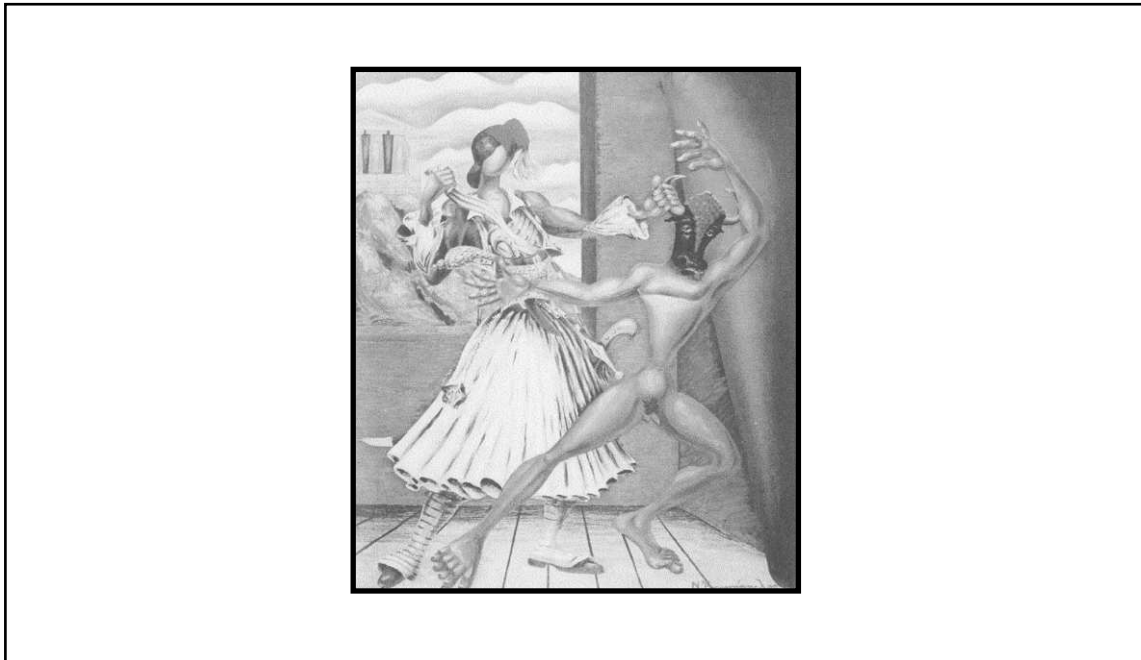


myth, by dressing Theseus in the traditional skirt, the fustanella, of the Greek freedom fighter of 1821 in his work “*Theseus and the Minotaur*”. Theseus is also alone with the Minotaur in an enigmatic room, like an isolated chapel and a deserted Macedonian town, like the ever – lonely path of the hero that he himself cuts. Even if lonely, however, the heroic presence induces a strong feeling of difference and revolutionary action. That’s why Engonopoulos, speaking about the hero Bolivar, wants not only South America but also Greece to quake with his passing and to participate in a revolutionary act. He says: “*When you speak, terrible earthquakes ravage everything, From the imposing Patagonian deserts to the multicoloured islands, Volcanoes erupt in Peru and vomit their wrath to the heavens, The soil is shaking everywhere and the holy icons at Kastoria⁴, the silent city close to the lake, tremble*”. This trembling is expressed both in a painted work of Engonopoulos with the title “*The liberator*”. This concerns a work of 1940 and I believe that the date of the painting indicates a direct relation with the historic facts in Greece in that period. In this work, both acute colour changes as well as arching lines with which the body of the liberator is depicted, show the uncontrollable impulse, as if sweeping away everything in his path, as if he is the one who controls the flow of events. This is the same thing that Engonopoulos emphasises when he speaks about Bolivar: “*You saw for the first time the light in Caracas It was your own light Bolivar, as before you came, the whole of South America was buried in bitter darkness. Now your name is a burning torch illuminating America North and South and the*

⁴ A picturesque lake-side town in Northern Greece.

Universe!” The fact that Engonopoulos uses the words universe and now is important because he irrevocably places Bolivar as a shining beacon in time and place of human existence. For that reason he claims that the liberating force and activity of Bolivar remains when the situation requires. He says: “*Bolivar! You were and are real, not a mere dream. When the wild hunters nail the wild eagles and the other wild birds and beasts above the wooden doors in the wild forests you come back to life and strike and you are yourself the hammer and the nail and the eagle*”. And it is especially interesting that, according to Engonopoulos, the hero is reborn with the same characteristics of the predator and the prey.

FIGURE 6
Thesseus and the Minotaur

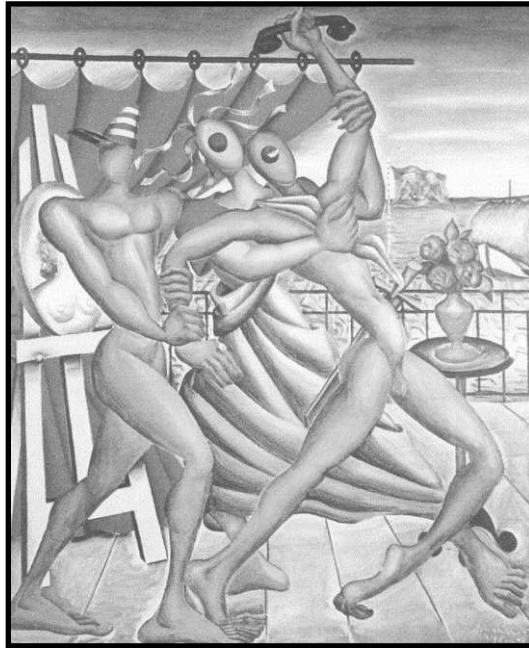


Nikos Engonopoulos, consequently, restores the liberator Bolivar restructuring the basic elements which characterise a hero: boldness to go to the front lines in dangerous, common struggles, stretching human limits and also a profound recognition of the individuality of his path, a profound recognition that he is both the dynamic and the feeble body of a struggle.

Nikos Engonopoulos doesn't bring back Bolivar speaking in anniversaries and festival celebrations because, in that way, the facts would be all the less real and historical and all the more imaginary and mythical and, finally, the heroic memory of Bolivar would become invalid. In contrast, he again poses the question of revolutionary tactics and he brings back the Latinamerican hero in occupied Greece and introduces him into its revolutionary struggle. For that reason in conclusion he says: “*Bolivar, you are beautiful like a Greek*”, believing what the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates said: To be a Greek is nothing to do with origins but to do with nurture. (N. Engonopoulos, 1993: 49)

Might it be the case that this heroic nurture, this nurture which leads to the excession of our personal safety, is always tested in a time and place, when the conditions demand it? And could these conditions pose the question of a redefinition of history?

FIGURE 7
The liberator



Certainly, Nikos Engonopoulos adopts this opinion about heroes within both his paintings and his poems, when he refers to Greek nurture without, of course, taking possession of cultural chauvinism, related to cultural superiority and the “peculiarity” of the Greeks (Gellner, 2002: 45). Moreover, this further proves the transatlantic nature of his *Bolivar*. I believe, however, that appropriate upbringing can create only a leader and not a man who achieves heroic excess. After all, the effort to trace the “behavioural map” through the familiar origins – according to the opinion of Monica Mc Goldrick –⁵ even when it can be accessed, often leads to contradictory conclusions. However, neither Freud’s argument – and subsequently Rank’s – who emphasise to the significance of children’s fantasies related to parents, that drives its origin from the Oedipus myth, provides – I think – adequate explanations. Yet the argument of Aristotelis who places the concept of the hero into biological basis, speaking about the “black bile” that determines the heroic nature, proves the philosopher “one track minder” and excludes the free choice.

Thus, I conclude, that internal and external factors that consist the “behaviour of the hero”, can not be interpreted by only one theory – psychoanalytical or not – as, at least, is proven from the different interpretations through which we defy a poem or a painting with heroic substance.

⁵ “Geneogramma” according to Monica Mc Goldrick, 2002.

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