

3-2000

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Kostas Myrsiades

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, kmyrsiades@wcupa.edu

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Recommended Citation

Myrsiades, K. (2000). Odysseus in the Poetry of George Seferis. *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 26(1), 65-70. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/eng_facpub/27

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Odysseus in the Poetry of George Seferis

by KOSTAS MYRSIADES

The new vitality in modern Greek poetry, which has resulted in several nominations for the Nobel Prize in literature (all for poetry) since the early fifties and the awarding of two Nobel Prizes—in 1963 to George Seferis and again in 1979 to Odysseus Elytis—has had several beginnings.

The movement we call modern Greek poetry begins with the vernacular Akritic epic cycle, composed between the ninth and eleventh centuries and handed down from generation to generation until it was finally committed to writing in the nineteenth century.

But it was not until the poet Kostis Palamas (1859-1943) that a completely new kind of life was infused into Greek poetry. It was Palamas who rejected the romantics and the “purist” form of Greek (*katharevousa*), to lead his contemporaries and younger poets (George Seferis among them, along with Odysseus Elytis and Yan-nis Ritsos) into a fresh world of literature in which the full possibilities of the modern Greek language and its rhythms were explored.

Finally, the proper beginning of modern Greek poetry as we understand it today, can be said to have occurred in the early 1930s. It was during this period that George Seferis's first book of poetry, perceptively titled *Turning Point* (1931), was published to mark the beginning of the strongest wave of symbolism to enter Greece. This period was also the key moment for Greek surrealist

KOSTAS MYRSIADES is professor of comparative literature at West Chester University. His latest book is *Cultural Representation in Historical Resistance: Complexity and Construction in Greek Guerrilla Theater* (1999).

poetry, with the founding of the periodical *Ta Nea Grammata* (1935). In March of that same year there appeared two more seminal texts of modern poetry—George Seferis's *Mythistorema* and Andreas Embirikos's *Ypsikaminos*—while in November of the same year, *Ta Nea Grammata* published the first poems of Odysseus Elytis. A year earlier in 1934, Yannis Ritsos's first book of poetry, *Tractor*, had appeared.

In this new poetry of the thirties, which clearly and definitively turned from old Greek forms to the more avant garde techniques of western Europe, in particular to French Symbolism and Surrealism, modern Greek poets were to create a poetry so heavily imbued with the past of that nation, that the body of their work cannot be seriously discussed without giving that past significant consideration.

During this period modern Greek poetry was caught in the great debate over Greek identity—a debate on-going since before the Greek Revolution of 1821. It involved distinctions drawn between two attitudes toward Greek identity. The European or foreign view (referred to as the Hellenic view) was characterized by a long-term love affair with the distant classical past, as a source of the values that informed European culture, and a distinct distaste for modern Greece, since Byzantium, as an ethnically mixed grab-bag of largely oriental attitudes. The European view was shared by intellectual Greeks of the Diaspora, who were to provide the new leaders of what they regarded as a backward native population.

In opposition to the Hellenic view was the Romeic view. Adopted by the autochthonous or indigenous native Greeks who populated the Turkish lands, it accepted the mixed demography of Greek lands that resulted from the variety of invasions and migrations that afflicted Greece across its history. The Romeic view defined itself as a pluralistic, largely lower-class oral culture, whose origins could be effectively traced to the Byzantine and Ottoman empires.

It was this unresolved debate that we find reflected in the poetry of the 1930s. Preoccupation with the past as opposed to insistence on living in the present, became a dominant theme, which was shared by the poets of this period. Attempts to define Greek identity during this time are torn between the Europeanized approach (exemplified by George Seferis) and its reliance

on the classical past for modern meaning; the Christian approach adopted by Takis Papatsonis, which carries us forward to an essentially Byzantine world view, but one still tempered by classical influences and European forms; a third, largely internal, subconscious view illustrated by Odysseus Elytis, which finds its direction by indirection, effectively resolving the issue by avoiding it; and finally Yannis Ritsos's view, which places the debate squarely in modern times, with the firm insistence that the value of the past lies only in the present.

Of the poets mentioned, it is George Seferis who most completely exemplifies the use of the Greek classical past and who sets the standard for its use in the Greek present. Using the Homeric hero Odysseus as a continuing figure throughout his poetry, Seferis finds for his modern Greek audience a persona at home in the global world, a man of action who, certain of his eventual return to Ithaca, does not know despair. Seferis takes this very literal Odysseus and transforms him into an exile, a fatherly sea captain, a pilgrim. His Odysseus, unlike Homer's, cannot return to the world of society and physical reality—to Ithaca—for he is incapable of communication with the dead, who alone hold the secret of his return. The secret of how he is to return home is withheld from Seferis's Odysseus, a pathetic sufferer who bends to his fate, unlike his ancestor, Homer's character, the man of action, who wrestles old Proteus as he transforms into various beasts until, at the end, exhausted, Proteus is compelled to reveal Odysseus's future.

Again in the underworld, Homer's Odysseus approaches the dead to learn from the prophet Tiresias the fate that awaits him in Ithaca. Seferis's modern Odysseus, by contrast, unable to return home, must persist in his neverending quest, without issue, overwhelmed by the memories of lost friends and relatives, weak companions submerged or dying. The poet reminds us that in modern times, Homeric Odysseus has become a shadow of regret, a ghost that haunts us "with eyes reddened by the salt of the sea." This twentieth-century hero conveys the inadequacy of the present-day Greek in equaling the feats of his forefathers. He serves as a voice for all men tormented by alienation, and the futile search for a paradise, which is no more. A surrogate for the poet himself, Odysseus is cut off from his homeland by two world wars and a lifetime career in the foreign diplomatic corps.

If a counterpart to this Odysseus exists in Homer's world, Seferis suggests, then Elpenor—a common sailor in Odysseus's crew—must be he. It is Elpenor who succumbs to the fatal charms of the goddess Circe. Trapped by Homer in a foreign mythic landscape that he does not understand, Elpenor, at a loss in heroic times, is very much at home in Seferis's world. In the poet's words, "Sentimental, mediocre, wasted," Elpenor is the "poor devil" that modern man has become, while the classical Odysseus is only the shadow of what modern man "should be." Coordinate with Seferis's groping hero of resignation and defeat, the landscape of his poetic world is one of mutilated statues and altars. Hulks of ships coated with rust and brine, a harsh and ruined legacy. These echoes of the past torment the dislocated in Seferis's own *Odyssey*, his twenty-four part poem, *Mythistorema*:

What are they after, our souls, traveling
on rotten brine-soaked timbers
from harbor to harbor?

(*Mythistorema* 8:9-11)*

Seferis retreats to the past in his own life as well as in the life of his poetry. Going back into his childhood to create an individual mythology, he becomes himself a lonely island in time. In a letter written in 1941, he refers to the conditions of creation that feed into his poetry: "There are nights," he says, "when I wake with the feeling that I am a golden fish in a bottle of electric liquid. It is an atmosphere of sick childhood; stimulating with dryness, stimulating in a bad way." This childhood world, this past, this source of his own creativity, as well as the creativity of his people, becomes identified in the poet's mind with the world of the dead, a world he finds more real than that of the living. Past and present become confused, fragments of history floating like memories of waking life in our dreams. He says in *Mythistorema*:

I woke with this marble head in my hands;
It exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to
put it down.
It was falling into the dream as I was coming out
of the dream
So our life became one and it will be very

difficult for it to separate again.

(*Mythistorema* 3:1-4)

And only in death does the possibility exist that the past might become present again, the "appearance" of the former fusing with the "reality" of the latter. Perhaps the ruins will become full again, in "the hour of death," Seferis muses in his poem "Memory II."

Thus, in Seferis, where the echo of the past is constant, one can never be certain whether he is in the company of the living or the dead. The quest is for the past, for an end to the perennial dislocations in time. It is a persistent search for the lost world of the now-dead, which somehow is yet alive, for an insistent and yet anonymous racial memory that is at the same time now a part of past history. Memory leads to disorientation and to interiorization of the external event; it leads to fatalism and to a sense of the unreliability of real time. It is the interpenetration of the inherited past and time-present removed from the accidents of time, that represents, for Seferis, essential reality.

Seferis's view is a tragically paradoxical one; there can be no hope of an end, save in cessation of the search, no likelihood of a resolution, save in catastrophe. The sense of present loss and of imminent failure is constant. Again in *Mythistorema* he states,

What are they after, our souls, traveling
on the decks of decayed ships
crowded in with sallow women and crying babies
unable to forget themselves either with the flying
fish
or with the stars that masts point out at their
tips
grated by gramophone records
committed to non-existent pilgrimages
unwillingly,
murmuring broken thoughts from foreign
languages?

(*Mythistorema* 8:1-9)

Seferis's hero is a passive figure, his *Odyssey* a resigned event that merely poses fatalistically the question of deliverance. He says in *Mythistorema*,

Having known this fate of ours so well
wandering around among broken stones, three or
six thousand years
searching in collapsed buildings that might have
been our homes
trying to remember dates and heroic deeds:
will we be able?

(*Mythistorema* 22:11-15)

The poet's final answer to the quest comes in his poem, "The Thrush." Here, he paraphrases from Plato's *Apology*, Socrates's response at his trial,

"And if you condemn me to drink poison, I
thank you
Your law will be my law; how can I go
wandering from one foreign country to another,
a rolling stone.
I prefer death.
Who'll come out best only God knows."
(*"The Thrush,"* 3:21-25)

Such a reduction in stature of Odysseus, the man of action, to acquiescence in his own death—the only end to his quest in modern times—leads Seferis to pathos. Through Socrates's response, Odysseus is reduced to an Elpenor.

*Translations of Seferis's poems are from *George Seferis: Collected Poems (1924-1955)*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).