

Irony and satire in George Seferis's poetry*

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The study by G.P. Savidis on the satirical Seferis (1979)¹ is, as far as I know, the first systematic attempt to discuss the presence and function of political satire in the work of Seferis, with the exception of a brief article that the same scholar published in 1974, but clearly with less preparatory work.² In this paper Savidis noted (my translation):

Wit and humour are two terms that have been rarely used up until now by Seferis scholars. It is a pity, because those at least who had the privilege of meeting the poet personally will retain the lively memory of the banter that lightened his seemingly heavy disposition, without any recourse to the "spirit" of the *salon* or to unimaginative play on words. And this joviality, for someone who knows how to read him, is all-pervasive in the work of Seferis, as much in his poetry as in his prose. Less so, perhaps, with the tone of wit (which is mainly a personal disposition when it is not used for the purpose of earning a living) and more as a wise or whimsical humour that is either eastern popular or western European learned in its origins.³

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¹ G.P. Savidis, "Γιώργος Σεφέρης", in: E. Tsantsanoglou et al., *Σάτιρα και πολιτική στη νεώτερη Ελλάδα. Από τον Σολωμό ως τον Σεφέρη* (Athens: Etaireia Spoudon Neoellinikou Politismou kai Genikis Paideias 1979), pp. 275-304. Reprinted in: D. Daskalopoulos (ed.), *Εισαγωγή στην ποίηση του Σεφέρη. Επιλογή κριτικών κειμένων* (Irakleio: Panepistimiakes Ekdoseis Kritis 1996), pp. 307-40.

² Later collected in G.P. Savidis, "Ο σατιρικός Σεφέρης", *Εφήμερον σπέρμα (1973-1978)* (Athens: Ermis 1978), pp. 104-8.

³ Daskalopoulos, op. cit., p. 308.

Savidis points to the need for the study of “the personal aspect of Seferis as a satirical poet or prose-writer” and the need for his satire to be incorporated into the central Greek tradition of poetic satire that begins with Solomos and Laskaratos, and certainly includes Palamas, Varnalis, Karyotakis and Ritsos, without overlooking other possible hybrids with eccentric personalities such as Souris, Cavafy, Papatzonis, Engonopoulos, Skarimbis, and Montis. At the same time, Savidis makes distinctions between terms such as “wit”, “humour”, “satire” and “irony”, with varying degrees of success.

If it is assumed that restrained humor is to be found, artistically, a step above immediate spontaneous wit (something not at all certain, given the conscious craftsmanship of Seferis), irony and satire most certainly belong on another scale. Because, while wit and humour are friendly or at least well-disposed expressions of impulse, both irony and satire are basically hostile manifestations, private or public; satire is undisguised, irony is veiled. Consequently they avoid meeting on the same step.⁴

Today, despite twenty more years of literary study on Seferis and Cavafy, but also on satire, irony and other related terms, I consider the need for an examination of the satirical and ironic content of Seferis’s poetry to be as great as ever, especially in light of the convincing case that has been made for regarding Cavafy as, ultimately, an ironic poet. As regards the above-mentioned definitions suggested by Savidis, it is not possible, for anyone who has undertaken a systematic study of the continually expanding relevant literature, to accept that satire and irony do not co-exist: satire frequently uses irony as a means to achieve its aim, while irony is not a hostile expression in all its manifestations. In theoretical discussions of the last few decades irony has been elevated to an evaluative criterion of literature, but also to a writing method that allows many voices, which come together in the authorial ego, to be heard concurrently. In addition, the satire of the twentieth century can be at times undisguised and outspoken and at other times low-key and implied. This does not mean that the limits between the above

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

terms are not at times blurred and difficult to distinguish, making the work of the critic rather frustrating. This difficulty comes about from the very fact that the terms do not pertain to a specific genre, nor can they be pinpointed in a particular form. Besides, their transmutable nature is responsible for many contradictions and antinomies of theory in the international literature on the subject. (Let me make it clear at the outset that I shall not engage in theoretical elucidations of the terms that interest us here, something which I do not think necessary in an article in English.) As far as Seferis studies go, the only works that I am aware of on the subject are a heretical study by Nanos Valaoritis entitled "A different reading of George Seferis",⁵ where he explores the poetics of Seferis through the perspective of modernist humour; a rather unsystematic study by Athanasios Gotovos entitled "Humour and irony in Seferis",⁶ where the above-mentioned perspective is briefly touched upon with reference to the diaries, the novel *Six nights on the Acropolis* and even less the poems; and an outstanding study by Christos Papazoglou entitled "A comment on Seferis's 'Denial'".⁷

My interest in the satirical and ironic voice of Seferis was instigated by the precise and provocative article by Savidis, and it became intertwined with the study of Cavafy's ironic method, passing unavoidably through Seferis's reading of Cavafy's poetry. Seferis's awkward and contradictory stance towards Cavafy's poetry is due, I believe, to a large extent, to the type of irony peculiar to Cavafy's poetry, with which Seferis's temperament is completely at odds. Before moving on to examine the satirical and ironic perspectives of Seferis's poetry I would like briefly to look at the relationship between the two poets, even though this relationship has constituted a point of interest for many noteworthy critics. I will focus my attention on this relationship through the prism of irony.

⁵ Nanos Valaoritis, "Μια άλλη ανάγνωση του Γιώργου Σεφέρη", *Η Λέξη* 53 (Μάρτιος-Απρίλιος 1986) 412-27.

⁶ Athanasios Gotovos, "Χιούμορ και ειρωνεία στο Σεφέρη", *Ελίτροχος* 8 (1995) 187-207.

⁷ Christos Papazoglou, "Σχόλιο στην «'Αρνηση» του Γ. Σεφέρη", in: A. D. Lazaridis, V. Barras and T. Birchler (eds.), *Βουκόλεια. Mélanges offerts à Bertrand Bouvier* (Geneva: Edition des Belles-Lettres 1995), pp. 445-61.

To begin with, one can trace the different presuppositions of the intellectual and emotional idiosyncrasies of the two poets. Seferis's inability to grasp Cavafy's modern irony in all its multilevelled magnitude, his "all-pervasive" irony according to R. Beaton's apt description,⁸ is obviously due to a large extent to Seferis's temperament, compelling a stance that is at the antipodes, as he himself admits, of the Cavafian point of view. "Le style ironique est l'homme même", notes Wayne Booth,⁹ parodying Buffon's well-known statement. Seferis becomes activated by his belief, to use Vayenas's apt evaluation, "in the values of the Renaissance, because he feels them to be an offspring of Greek values".¹⁰ As a man who believes, an admirer of Makriyannis and Theophilos, as the bearer of a specific ideology, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for him to converse in a meaningful way with the sceptic Cavafy, who chooses the Hellenistic period because it is more immoral, more liberated, and allows him to situate his characters as he likes. "The ingenious minds," according to Cavafy,

observe with accuracy and certainty; when they set out the pros and cons of a matter, we can draw our own conclusion. Why not they themselves?, I will be asked. Simply because I do not have the conviction of the absolute value of a single conclusion. From the given facts, I form one judgement, and someone else another. It is therefore possible for the two judgements to be both incorrect and both correct, as it suits each individual, because they have been dictated by our peculiar circumstances and idiosyncrasies, or adapted to them.¹¹

⁸ Roderick Beaton, "C.P. Cavafy: Irony and Hellenism", *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59.4 (1981) 516-28, at p. 527.

⁹ Wayne Booth, *A rhetoric of irony* (Chicago-London: Chicago University Press 1974), p. 133.

¹⁰ N. Vayenas, *Ο ποιητής και ο χορευτής* (Athens: Kedros 1979), p. 184 (my translation).

¹¹ Οι μεγαλοφρενείς νόες παρατηρούσι μετ' ακριβείας και ασφαλείας: όταν δε μας εκθέσωσι τα υπέρ και τα κατά ενός ζητήματος, δυνάμεθα ημείς να ποιήσωμεν το συμπέρασμα. Διατί όχι αυτοί; θα με ερωτήσωσιν. Απλώς διότι δεν έχω πολλήν πεποίθησιν περί της απολύτου αξίας ενός συμπεράσματος. Από αυτά τα διδόμενα εγώ σχηματίζω τοιαύτην κρίσιν, και άλλος άλλην· είναι δε δυνατόν να είναι αμφοτέραι εναντίαι και αμφοτέραι ορθαί καθ' όσον αφορά

Cavafy's poetry consists of an amalgam of heterogeneous signs, but his ideological identity remains confused; the most significant belief that emerges vigorous and untouched in his work is his belief in his Art. Cavafy sees and examines the futility of the freedom of the human will. Seferis, on the contrary, believes that man is to a large extent free to determine his fate. The distanced, unsentimental and intellectual, in other words ironic, stance of Cavafy, is at the antipodes of Seferis's "nakedness", of his elimination, in other words, of the intellectual functions, as much when the poem is being written as when it is being read. The "given" poems, the most authentic poetic voice according to Seferis, are, as a poetic function, foreign to Cavafy's nature. But poetic catharsis and "the dark night of the genius", as regards the initiation of the reader to the poem, are concepts very distant from Cavafian experience. Vayenas comments:

I believe that the reason that Cavafy ceases to preoccupy him is that, beyond his use of history, which, in the final analysis, is only one side of the matter of expressive accuracy, Seferis does not see other elements capable of retaining his interest undiminished.¹²

I have the impression that, irrespective of Seferis's legacy from Cavafy on the level of poetic achievement, the ironic language of Cavafy has ceased to play a catalytic role because of its lack of consistent interest and Seferis's indifference to it. In any case, however, the questions that remain are many; the points of deviation of the two poets, as regards the poetics of subversion, will appear with greater clarity once the satiric face of Seferis has been studied and – what is clearly more difficult – his ironic voice, wherever it exists, has been traced.

Our next step is the systematic examination of the conception that Seferis himself had of the terms that concern us here. The theoretical positions that appear in his study on Cavafy, ex-

έκαστον άτομον, διότι υπαγορεύονται υπό των ιδιαιτέρων μας περιστάσεων και ιδιοσυγγρασιών ή συμμορφούνται προς αυτάς. Quoted by G.P. Savidis, *Βασικά θέματα της ποίησης του Καβάφη* (Athens: Ikaros 1993), p. 101.

¹² *Ο ποιητής και ο χορευτής*, p. 224 (my translation).

pressed either directly or indirectly, as well as his views on the terms that concern us as they appear in his published correspondence, shed light from another angle on the types of humour, satire and irony that are compatible with his poetic temperament. For example, in his criticism on Cavafy we come across recurring words and phrases such as "spirit", "wisdom", "sarcasm", "caustic mockery", "derision" and "humour". The poet, in fact, considers humour an English quality and he connects it with the word "nonsense". This particular notion of his brings him to the traditional view according to which humour is primarily an English matter and consists of the distortion of the normal function of the human spirit.¹³ This is why, perhaps, when he refers to Cavafian humour, which is situated in the vicinity of Pirandellian theory, he considers it necessary to distinguish it from the spirit and to attach to it the characteristic of being cold:

Cold humour: not spirit (esprit). The witty joke is light, it dances, it does somersaults. Humour walks solemnly, indifferently. At times it missteps or trips, but it does not "sparkle". This is a serious distortion of our lives (see Edward Lear). Cavafy's humour is at times so serious that you cannot distinguish it from him personally. His existence is humour; an existence both tragic and humorous, in a hollow world that does not know where it is going (not tragically ironic). This is why he has so frequently given rise to caricature.¹⁴

Moreover, from the broad range of the at times straightforward and at times Daedalian poetics of subversion that Cavafy uses, Seferis easily recognizes satire, and it is telling that he considers the poem "Awaiting the Barbarians" a poetry that is close to the *Ptochoprodromika*, in other words a purely satirical poem, while it is commonly accepted that the poem belongs primarily to the domain of irony. Seferis decodes the open irony with ease, while he appears perplexed with its more challenging, modern sense. I consider the much-discussed nega-

¹³ Ronald Knox, "On humour and satire" (1927), in: Ronald Paulson (ed.), *Satire: modern essays in criticism* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1971).

¹⁴ See G.P. Savidis, *Ο Καβάφης του Σεφέρη*. Α' (Athens: Ermis 1984), p. 132.

tive evaluation of the poem "Che fece ... il gran rifiuto", as well as the misreading of certain Cavafian poems that have been singled out in research, to be the result of this perplexed hermeneutic position. Besides, the way Seferis alternates between the terms parody and satire to characterize his own self-parodying poem "In the manner of G.S.", and his use of the pseudonym when he is conscious of creating texts that, as he himself mentions, "are situated on the fringe of his work",¹⁵ show on the one hand that the relevant terminology concerned him, and on the other hand that obviously he considers the involvement with certain forms of writing that contemporary theory has re-established, e.g. parody, to be inferior. But perhaps one does not need to delve into poets' theoretical baggage any further, as at certain points we do well to distinguish the poet from the critic.

It is commonly accepted that, unlike irony, satire presupposes belief. For this reason it is closer to the Seferian perspective, even though the self-restraint that directs his style, his professional activity and his education do not encourage satire. Nevertheless, Seferis did use satire and humour in ways that liberated him from the above-mentioned confinements. His is a humour, however, that is completely different from the Pirandellian humour of Cavafy, as we shall see in what follows. As regards the political satire of Seferis, it was not until he had established certain of his beliefs, and his sensitivity was ignited by the surrounding atmosphere of his period, in other words not until the war years, that he wrote three of his best-known satirical poems with a distinct political point: "Kerk Str. Oost, Pretoria, Transvaal", "Days of April '43", and "Actors, Middle East". Of these three political satires, the one which is intertwined with the major themes of the Seferian mythology and is in dialogue, and at the same time in keeping with the tradition of Greek political satire, is the one written in 1943, when the poet was in the Middle East:¹⁶

¹⁵ G. Seferis—A. Karandonis, *Αλληλογραφία 1931-1960*. Φιλολογική επιμέλεια: Φώτης Δημητρακόπουλος (Athens: Kastaniotis 1988), pp. 130-1.

¹⁶ The poems quoted in English are taken from: George Seferis, *Complete poems*, trans., edited and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (London: Anvil/Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995).

ACTORS, MIDDLE EAST

We put up theaters and tear them down
 wherever we happen to find ourselves
 we put up theaters and set the stage
 but our fate always triumphs in the end

and sweeps them away as it sweeps us too
 actors and the actors' actors
 prompter and musicians: all disappear
 scattered to the five hungry winds. [...]

There were four more political satires, published after Seferis's death: "The alibi or free Greeks, 43"; "Partisans in the Middle East"; "Chorale from Mathios Paskalis prisoner", which is a pastiche, as he himself refers to it, because he imitates freely a chorus from Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes*; and "The afternoon of a corrupt person" ("Το απομεσήμερο ενός φαύλου"), which is a parody of "L'Après-midi d'un faune" of Stéphane Mallarmé.

The manner in which Seferis combines tradition and satire with song in "Thrush" has been noted by Savidis. More significant, perhaps, is the satirical function of parody in the part that is subtitled "The radio" where the target is the government voice as it was heard from the Athenian radio station in the period that followed the second return of King George II.¹⁷

The Radio

– "Sails puffed out by the wind
 are all that stay in the mind.
 Perfume of silence and pine
 will soon be an anodyne
 now that the sailor's set sail,
 flycatcher, catfish, and wagtail.
 O woman whose touch is dumb,
 hear the wind's requiem.

[...]

– "Athens. The public has heard

¹⁷ See N. Vayenas, *Ποίηση και μετάφραση* (Athens: Stigma, 1989), pp. 36-8.

the news with alarm; it is feared
a crisis is near. The prime
minister declared: "There is no more time..."
Take cyclamen... needles of pine...
The lily... needles of pine...
O woman...
- ... is overwhelmingly stronger
The war..."

SOULMONGER¹⁸

As has been noted, one satirical poem of the collection *Logbook III* is "Neophytos Enkleistos speaks-", where three voices are ironically intertwined: that of the poet, that of the monk Neophytos and, to a certain extent, that of Shakespeare in the explosive end of the poem. Savidis considers paradoxical the fact that only one of the poems of this collection is satirical. I believe, however, that this paradox is cancelled out by another significant situation: the fact that, finally, in the Cyprus experience it is redemption which predominates, a result of human communication and love, and what the poet sees as the unique experience of an authentic world that has been irrevocably lost to Greece. Undoubtedly, as we shall see in the following, this unique, perhaps momentary redemption, initially emotional and ideological, also pervades Seferis's poetics.

After 1954 the satirical vein of the poet appears to dry up; the only exceptions are the third poem of "Summer Solstice" in the collection *Three secret poems* (1966) and two poems in *Book of Exercises II* (1976). I shall cite just one effective satirical synthesis which parodies the familiar slogan of the dictator Papadopoulos: "Greece of the Greek Christians". The title consists of an anticipatory answer to the questioning sense of the poem:

ΑΠΟ ΒΛΑΚΕΙΑ

Ελλάς· πυρ! Ελλήνων· πυρ! Χριστιανών· πυρ!
Τρεις λέξεις νεκρές. Γιατί τις σκοτώσατε;

¹⁸The term "Soulmonger" was suggested to the poet by *Agamemnon*, 438: "Ares, the bodymonger".

The poem "Hippios Kolonos" (1970) is Seferis's last political satire. Its satirical nature is produced not only by the cry "yahoo", that Seferis borrowed from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, but also by the undisguised caustic tone.

But, certainly, Seferis's satire does not exhaust itself in politics. A good demonstration of the correct dosage of satirical and lyrical language is provided, in my opinion, by the superb poem "Last stop", which incorporates, together with other material, the theme that dominates in "The afternoon of a corrupt person", the mob of the mature "resistance fighters" who, at the end of September and the beginning of October, at the end of the Second World War, gathered at Cava dei Tirreni around the so-called "Government of National Unity".

LAST STOP

Few are the moonlit nights that I've cared for:
 the alphabet of the stars – which you spell out
 as much as your fatigue at the day's end allows
 and from which you gather new meaning and hope –
 you can then read more clearly.
 Now that I sit here, idle, and think about it,¹⁹
 few are the moons that remain in my memory:
 islands, color of a grieving Virgin, late in the waning
 or moonlight in northern cities sometimes casting
 over turbulent streets, rivers, and limbs of men
 a heavy torpor.
 Yet here last evening, in this our final port
 where we wait for the hour of our return home to dawn
 like an old debt, like money lying for years
 in a miser's safe and at last
 the time for payment comes
 and you hear the coins falling onto the table;
 in this Etruscan village, behind the sea of Salerno
 behind the harbors of our return, on the edge

¹⁹ The phrase is from the Introduction to the *Memoirs* of General Makriyannis, one of the principal leaders of the Greek War of Independence. His *Memoirs* are one of the most important prose works in Greek literature of the nineteenth century. See *The Memoirs of General Makriyannis 1797-1864*, edited and translated by H.A. Lidderdale (London: Oxford University Press 1966).

of an autumn squall, the moon
outstripped the clouds, and houses
on the slope opposite became enamel:
*Amica silentia lunae.*²⁰

This is a train of thought, a way
to begin to speak of things you confess
uneasily, at times when you can't hold back, to a friend
who escaped secretly and who brings
word from home and from the companions,
and you hurry to open your heart
before exile forestalls you and alters him.

We come from Arabia, Egypt, Palestine, Syria;
the little state

of Kommagene, which flickered out like a small lamp,
often comes to mind,
and great cities that lived for thousands of years
and then became pasture land for cattle,
fields for sugar-cane and corn.

We come from the sand of the desert, from the seas of
Proteus,

souls shivered by public sins,
each holding office like a bird in its cage.

The rainy autumn in this gorge
festers the wound of each of us

or what you might term differently: nemesis, fate,
or simply bad habits, fraud and deceit,²¹

or even the selfish urge to reap reward from the blood of others.
[...]

To speak of heroes to speak of heroes: Michael
who left the hospital with his wound still open,
perhaps he was speaking of heroes—the night
he dragged his foot through the darkened city—
when he howled, groping over our pain: "We advance in
the dark,

we move forward in the dark..."

Heroes move forward in the dark.

Few are the moonlit nights that I care for.

²⁰ Virgil, *Aeneid*, ii. 55.

²¹ Makriyannis, *Memoirs*, II, 258.

In the *Book of Exercises II* there are other satirical as well as humorous poems. The motto of the collection is a limerick "In the manner of E.L.", which acquires, to some extent at least, a determining force for the collection. I refer primarily to the third part titled *Events* (1931-1971), the study of which is revealing for the function of the satirical perspective of Seferis's poetry.

Apart from the satirical parody mentioned above, the poet uses parody in many other cases. Furthermore, he uses self-parody to take up thematic motifs of his early poetry within new literary contexts or to develop his well-known personas of Mathios Paskalis and Stratis Thalassinos (e.g. "In the manner of G.S.", "Chorale from Mathios Paskalis prisoner", etc.).

Parody has frequently been linked to the reception of a literary work. A typical example of such parody is the poem "Indian tale" (1931). It is common knowledge that *Turning point* received much negative criticism when it was first published. Kleon Paraschos called it word-dominated (λεξιοκρατική) poetry and Alkis Thyrylos wrote that "it is a book that can offer nothing else but words". Reacting to such critics Seferis wrote the above poem using unknown words borrowed from the translated Indian epic *Mahabarata Nalas and Damagianni*. We should make it clear that the target of parody may lie outside the textual elements which, in terms of style, theme, structure, are incorporated in the new text. "Indian tale" is a satirical parody; the explicit, indeed crude ending leaves no doubt as to the satirist's target.

Another less well-known parody written by Seferis under the title "Areti and Rotokritos" (1961) was not included by Savidis in the *Book of Exercises II* in (1976), because of its indiscretion.²² The poet created a clever new synthesis borrowing words, themes, grammar and metre from *Erotokritos*. This daring erotic parody brings to mind Seferis's words in a note to his classic essay on *Erotokritos* (1946): "*Erotokritos* is perhaps the only work, at least one of the very few Greek literary works which speak in a sensual way to a world sensually frustrated."²³ It seems to me that this parody by Seferis, who lived "climbing on words like a

²² Published in "G.P. Eftyhidis" [= G.P. Savidis] (ed.), *Μαθιός Πασκάλης, Τα Εντεπείζικα* (Athens: Leschi, 1989).

²³ G. Seferis, *Δοκιμές*. Α' . 4th ed. (Athens: Ikaros), p. 503.

rope ladder",²⁴ was directed more towards himself and less towards "a sensually frustrated work of the Cretan Renaissance". It is common ground for critics that sometimes parody is a competitive undertaking and functions in a liberating way for the writer.

But other parodies by Seferis may work in the same liberating way, as exemplified by the poem "What the camel said" (1948?), which parodies the fifth part of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and was written soon after "Thrush", the poem of Seferis most influenced by Eliot. In any case, parody in Seferis's poetry calls for a systematic study as it elucidates different aspects of his poetics.²⁵

Sometimes in the manner of parody, sometimes using open irony, and sometimes in an undisguised direct manner, Seferis marks the lack of communication that he experiences as a human being and as a poet, and he interacts with tradition, both Greek and foreign, if one excludes the political satires, which I have already mentioned ("A type-setter went mad", "Syngrou Avenue, II", "Le cheval n'a pas dit M.E.R.D.E.", "[Frontispiece to a rewriting of the 'Odes']", some parodies of the *Palatine Anthology*, "What the camel said", "Bhamdoun" etc.).

It is telling that most of his satirical poems remained unpublished up until his death, as if the poet considered them incidental or second-rate poetry, as I have already mentioned. As Avgeris notes:

Perhaps with the method of satire, using it with greater sharpness and more systematically, with the dramatic and sarcastic style which is never absent, the poet might have given greater variety, richness and power to his work, if the conditions of his life, his education and his profession had not prevented him. Because his satirical eye and his expressive capabilities, as well as sarcasm and often indignation, are not lacking and the dramatic and pessimistic feeling that accompanies his thought could have found a new outlet. Is it possible that he lacks daring? Perhaps a

²⁴ G. Seferis, *Μέρες Ε* (Athens: Ikaros 1977), p. 56.

²⁵ Katerina Kostiou, "Η τεχνική της παρωδίας στο έργο του", in: *Γιώργος Σεφέρης. Εκατό χρόνια από τη γέννησή του* (Athens: Ermis 2000), pp. 101-5, which is a summary of a lecture given at a conference marking the centenary of Seferis's birth (Nicosia, 29 February-2 March 2000).

broader conception of the satirical genre could be characterized as dramatic satire and, at the same time, the poem of the same collection with the title "Here among the bones" could be seen as a cry of despair? For someone who wished to study carefully all of Seferis's poetry, it would be easy to find many verses that could be characterized as dramatic satire. But Seferis's satire also wears dense veils like the rest of his poetry.²⁶

Seferis uses a fanciful humour that frequently alludes to the atmosphere of Tristan Corbière and Paul-Jean Toulet, but also to Valéry and to Eliot; in certain of his poems the reader finds an effusive playful intention, at times in combination with rude puns, which I will omit for many reasons, partly because they surpass my translation abilities. Tangible and forthright examples of this intention are the verses that are inserted in the novel *Six nights on the Acropolis*, the witty *Poems with drawings for small children* (1975), published in honour of Anna Krinou, grand-daughter of Maro Seferis, and the poet's involvement with limericks, a poetic form that is predominantly playful. Traces of this intention, in the form of personal notes, still exist in his unpublished archives that belong to the Gennadius Library. I think, however, that we should elucidate that the "high spirits" to which Savidis refers are none other than wit, a quality of expression or writing that can surprise and please through the reception of the incongruous or the unexpected. For the moment, I can give two examples of an obvious playful intent, expressed as early as in the *Book of Exercises* (1928-1937), which transforms itself in a variety of ways in his work and conceals a subversive view of the world, which, according to Nanos Valaoritis, in combination with elements of the absurd that are intertwined in his imagery, places Seferis among the Modernists:

²⁶ Markos Avgeris, "Η ποίηση του Σεφέρη", in: *Για τον Σεφέρη. Τιμητικό αφιέρωμα στα τριάντα χρόνια της Στροφής* (Athens: Ermis 1981), p. 46 (1st ed. 1961).

HAIKU

7

Again I put on
The tree's foliage
And you – you bleat.

PSYCHOLOGY

This gentleman
takes his bath each morning
in the waters of the Dead Sea
then dons a bitter smile
for business and clients.

The aim of the poet is to re-activate the human senses by means of the interpolation of the incongruous, the confusion of the categories of the world, and the abolition of the inert image of the world. In any case, a first reading of his diaries or his correspondence is capable of revealing the playful intent and the humorous view of the world. Also, the poet's humor finds its place in the novel *Six nights on the Acropolis*, in the mouths of Nikolas and Stratis.

One must mention here an unknown anthology by Seferis indicating his early relation with satire or the appeal that subversion had for him. Dated between autumn of 1926, when he started working in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and 1931, when *Turning point* was published, this unknown anthology by Seferis complements the poet's profile as a reader during the crucial years of his youth.

The reason why this anthology interests us here is the satirical French poems included: three poems by Vincent Hyspa: "Le déraillement du rapide de Marseilles" ("The derailment of the Marseilles express"), "Les délégués Turcs" ("The Turkish representatives"), "La sérénade interrompue" ("The interrupted serenade"); and one vulgar poem by Léon Xanrof entitled "Héloïse et Abélard", a parody of the well-known myth. All of them are satirical poem-songs written for revue, within the style and atmosphere of the famous cabarets of Montmartre, in the first decades of the twentieth century. Another long, subversive poem entitled "Complainte" is by the satirical poet Mathurin

Régnier (1573-1613).²⁷ The last one is a poem under the title "Il pleut" ("It's raining"), by Fernand Gregh (1873-1960).²⁸ This short, melancholic poem can easily be read in an ironic way, because of its exaggerated romantic tone, inappropriate to the atmosphere of Paris at that time.²⁹

However, it is common ground for critics that Seferis pre-occupies himself with fundamental problems of life which constitute the actual theme of human existence. It is natural, therefore, that the irony of fate appears in his work, as in Eliot's. As far back as *Cistern* we read:

[...]
 On the curve of the dome of a pitiless night
 cares tread, joys move by
 with fate's quick rattle
 faces light up, shine a moment
 and die out in an ebony darkness.

Faces that go! In rows, the eyes
 roll in a gutter of bitterness
 and the signs of the great day
 take them up and bring them closer
 to the black earth that asks no ransom.

But irony is transformed in multiple ways in his poetry with, as a common feature, the ironic coupling of what are, in the nature of things, incompatible opposites. As has already been stated, in *Turning point* there is a potent irony directed against tradition. Apart from the much discussed "Denial", and the poem "The companions in Hades", which according to Takis Sinopoulos would annoy those of his friends who belonged to the school of "objective" poetry as it "becomes blurred from the con-

²⁷ Mathurin Régnier, *Œuvres complètes*, précédées de *L'Histoire de la Satire en France* par M. Viollet le Duc (Paris 1853), pp. 290-5.

²⁸ Fernand Gregh, *Le Clartés humaines* (Paris 1927), pp. 157-8 (first published 1904).

²⁹ This early unknown anthology by Seferis was the topic of my communication at the conference on "Seferis as a reader of European literature", devoted to the centenary of the poet's birth (University of Patras, 14 April 2000); it will be published within 2001 by University Studio Press.

tradictory and uncontrolled circumstances of the ego",³⁰ most of the poems of the collection interact ironically with tradition, with "Erotikos Logos" marking the opposite extreme, in that it expresses nostalgia for tradition.

High points of Seferis's ironic achievement are the poems "Folk Song" and "Slowly you spoke". I quote the latter, together with the ironic reply to it in the third part, subtitled "Adolescent", of the poem "Stratis Thalassinos describes a man" from the collection *Book of Exercises I*:

SLOWLY YOU SPOKE

Slowly you spoke before the sun
and now it's dark
and you were my fate's woof
you, whom they'd call Billio.

Five seconds; and what's happened
in the wide world?
An unwritten love rubbed out
and a dry pitcher

and it's dark... Where is the place
and your nakedness to the waist,
my God, and my favorite spot
and the style of your soul!

3. ADOLESCENT

[...]

The next day a journey opened in my mind and closed
again, like a picture book;
I thought of going down to the shore every evening
first to learn about the shore and then to go to sea;
the third day I fell in love with a girl on a hill;
she had a small white cottage like a country chapel
an old mother at the window, glasses bent low over her
knitting, always silent
a pot of basil a pot of carnations –

³⁰ Takis Sinopoulos, "Στροφή 1931-1961", in *Για τον Σεφέρη* (see n. 26), p. 176.

I think she was called Vasso, Frosso, or Billio;
so I forgot the sea.

Furthermore, the use of the extract from *Erotokritos* as a motto for *Shells, clouds* is ironic, because on the one hand it announces a new perspective for the regeneration of tradition, and on the other it reveals its own subversiveness by indicating the new direction which Seferis's poetics opens up for poetry. On other occasions his irony is used in order to satirise and this technique is developed in his work, even in relation to the same motif. For instance, the ironic comment "your eyes, watching, would be beautiful", in the thirteenth poem of *Mythistorema*, which attacks lack of judgement and the alienation of man, becomes in the sixteenth poem: "they were lovely, your eyes, but you didn't know where to look", competing in sharpness with the Cavafian verse "it will have grown old, if it lives, the beautiful face."

At other moments Seferian titles crown the poems ironically, determining the interpretation. For example in the poem "Interlude of joy" the title is totally at odds with the content, as Mario Vitti³¹ and other critics have shown. At other points, the symbols in the poems, such as the sun in the same poem, are created in an ironic manner, through the positioning and cancelling out of positive and negative qualities ("a huge sun all thorns and so high in the sky").

In other respects the most interesting sense of irony in the work of Seferis, as far as poetics goes, is not satirical irony, as for instance in the poem "Letter of Mathios Paskalis", but the sort of irony that allows the reading to move on two parallel planes. This is achieved with a wealth of rhetoric that can be summarised as follows: (a) the interweaving of two time and place levels, the elsewhere and the here, the previous and the now, (e.g. the use of ironic anachronism with Shakespeare's statement in the poem "Neophytos Enkleistos speaks", as Peter Mackridge

³¹ Mario Vitti, *Φθορά και λόγος: εισαγωγή στην ποίηση του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*. Νέα έκδοση, αναθεωρημένη (Athens: Estia 1989), p. 139.

aptly notes;³² (b) the dialogue he generates with tradition through the use of quotation, allusion, parody or pastiche, which at times has an ironic perspective, since it undermines or comments on the idea of the original text (as happens, for example, in the poem "The return of the exile", to which I shall return); and (c) contrasts that undermine basic conceptual points of the Seferian universe, such as *nostos* (return to one's home), the function of light as a catalyst for *nostos*, catharsis or communication, as we shall shortly see.

From the ironic sensibility of *Turning point* to the use of personas and the polyphonic fusion in the poems "The return of the exile" and "Hampstead", or even the conversation with Makriyannis which ends up underlining the disparity between the heroic yesterday and the miserable present, the distance is great. Even though irony does not constitute a major part of Seferis's poetics, tracing it is nonetheless absolutely necessary for the interpretation of his at times complex work.

The systematic study of Seferis's irony can open up new perspectives for the interpretation of the poems, and, furthermore, affirm or make redundant older interpretations, by revealing the transitions of the poetic ego and the shades of the voices that inhabit his poems. For example, through the perspective of irony the concept of a return home (*nostos*), widely accepted as a central concept in Seferis's poetry, already undermined by Cavafy and of course by the historical developments that in 1922 definitively closed the road of return, both literally and figuratively, is also undermined in Seferis's work, where the mood-swings of the poetic subject all too often cast their shadow. Intertwined with the concept of a return home is the concept of human alienation which the satirical poems warn against, and which is constantly projected as a result of man's estrangement from the possibility of a return to Greek values. Also undermined is the catalytic (for *nostos*) presence of light with its dual nature "angelic and black", a nature that is re-established without, however, significant consequences for *nostos*, following the decisive and, at the same time, liberating experience of Cyprus.

³² Peter Mackridge, "Ο καθαφικός Σεφέρης", in: M. Pieris (ed.), *Γιώργος Σεφέρης, Φιλολογικές και ερμηνευτικές προτάσεις. Δοκίμια εις μνήμην Γ.Π. Σαββίδη* (Athens: Patakis 1997), p. 118.

The function of a return to the homeland in Seferis's poetry has been studied by scholars in the past and continues to provide nourishment for new interpretive approaches. For example, *nostos* in the work of Seferis is connected directly with concerns that began in the years of his youth and follow him all through his life, as, for instance, the absence of teachers and the consequent isolation, the impotence of the powers that be, the lack of belief in the values of the Greek heritage, the lack of spiritual belief and of conscience, pretentiousness, or, to use his own words "the ailment of Athens". "A seed that returns to its own place is a seed that is about to grow. A Greek who returns to his own place is a man who is about to blaspheme," notes the desperate poet in the novel *Six nights on the Acropolis*.³³ This quote clearly alludes to the poem "The return of the exile", which embodies poetically, by employing the method of subversive dialogue with tradition (in relation to the folk song that N. Politis had given the same title to) the disparity between Greek values and the disdain for reality that epitomises contemporary Greece. The ironic method does not detract from whatever interpretation one might adopt: that of D. Maronitis, who supports the dialogue with the folk song or that of Mario Vitti, who considers that the conversation springs from the two dialectical aspects of the same person, the divided poet, expressing the ambiguous situation to which he led himself through his dual needs, by returning to Greece during the paranoia of the war.

THE RETURN OF THE EXILE

"My old friend, what are you looking for?
After years abroad you've come back
with images you've nourished
under foreign skies
far from your own country."

³³ Ένας σπόρος που γυρίζει στον τόπο του, είναι ένας σπόρος που πάει να βλαστήσει· ένας Ρωμιός που γυρίζει στον τόπο του, είναι ένας άνθρωπος που πάει να βλαστημήσει. *Έξι νύχτες στην Ακρόπολη* (Athens: Ermis 1974), p. 103.

"I'm looking for my old garden;
the trees come to my waist
and the hills resemble terraces
yet as a child
I used to play on the grass
under great shadows
and I would run for hours
breathless over the slopes."

My old friend, rest,
you'll get used to it little by little;
together we will climb
the paths you once knew,
we will sit together
under the plane trees' dome.
They'll come back to you little by little,
your garden and your slopes."
[...]

"Now I can't hear a sound.
My last friend has sunk.
Strange how from time to time
they level everything down.
Here a thousand scythe-bearing chariots go past
and mow everything down."

Similarly ironic is the interaction of the poet with folk song in the poem "The last day", where the heroic message of the folk song is undermined and subverted thematically, and will also be subverted in terms of form, through the style of the dirge in the poem that follows ("Spring, A.D."):

My friend, walking beside me, was singing a disjointed song:
"In spring, in summer, slaves..."

It is a well-known fact that the theme of *nostos* and the conceptually positive and negative presentation of the figure of Odysseus has a long tradition in European letters, with a variety of different versions. Especially notable is the case of Dante, who, true to the call of his times (the turn of the 14th century), which thirsted for knowledge and greeted new discoveries, in the 26th canto of the *Inferno*, makes Ulysses abandon the return home for the sake of knowledge. Alfred Lord Tennyson's version

is similar: the homonymous hero does return but feels suffocated in the tight confines of his homeland and leaves for an unknown destination. The undecided destination of Tennyson is resolved by the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli in his work "Ultimo viaggio" (1904): after a nine-year stay on Ithaca, Odysseus sets out with his companions on the same journey in reverse, only to discover that nothing remains the same any longer. Similarly, in the *Odyssey* (1917) of Nikos Kazantzakis, Ithaca is not the final destination for the much-travelled Odysseus, but just another stopping-place which will be followed by many others, until the final journey, that of death. In the work of Seferis the constant concern of the poet for *nostos*, along with its related themes (the wandering, the conversation with the dead and the quest for authenticity) is validated by the references to Odysseus that begin from the first collection, *Turning point*, and extend to the last, *Three secret poems*, with a quantitative and qualitative augmentation – in terms of functionality – from *Mythistorema* up to "Thrush".³⁴ I will not discuss the references to Odysseus whose ironic dimension has been noted in other studies, as, for instance, in the poem "The companions in Hades". I will make reference to some mechanisms of Seferis's poetry that tend to produce ironic polarities, a consequence of the poet's erratic moods that undermines the ardent passion for *nostos* and consequently determines his stance towards the given mythological figures. One can possibly trace other ironic elements: for example, in the poem "Peddler from Sidon", perhaps the peddler constitutes a comic caricature of Odysseus, and forms a dialogue with the Cavafian peddler; but this hypothesis needs a convincing answer, with reference to verses that indicate through their rhetoric whether they are based on ironic contradiction or whether they create ambiguity that by its nature is ironic.

The poet frequently structures the concept of the journey and the wandering on negative images that dictate the meaning of stagnation, inaction, failed attempt, impotence, death. For

³⁴ See D. Nikolareizis, "Η παρουσία του Ομήρου στη νέα ελληνική ποίηση", *Νέα Εστία* 491 (Christmas 1947) 153-64; David Ricks, *The shade of Homer. A study in modern Greek poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989); E. Kapsomenos, "Το θέμα του νόστου στην ποίηση του Σεφέρη", *Πόρφυρας* 93 (2000) 255.

example, as early as *Turning point*, in the poem "The mood of a day" we read:

[...]

Where is love that with one stroke cuts time in two and
stuns it?

Words only and gestures. A monotonous monologue in
front of a mirror like a wrinkle.

Like a drop of ink a handkerchief, the boredom spreads.

Everyone in the ship is dead, but the ship keeps going the
way it was heading when it put out from the harbor
how the captain's nails grew... and the boatswain, who
had three mistresses in every port, unshaven...

The motif becomes denser from *Mythistorema* onwards; from the eighth section:

[...]

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

Shifting broken stones, breathing in
the pine's coolness with greater difficulty each day,
swimming in the waters of this sea
and of that sea,
without the sense of touch
without men
in a country that is no longer ours
nor yours.

The motif recurs frequently in different variations. Here is an extract from the tenth poem of *Mythistorema*:

Our country is closed in. The two black Symplegades
close it in. When we go down
to the harbors on Sunday to breathe
we see, lit in the sunset,
the broken planks from voyages that never ended,
bodies that no longer know how to love.

And from the well-known poem "In the manner of G.S." in the *Book of Exercises*:

Meanwhile Greece goes on traveling, always traveling
 and if we see "the Aegean flower with corpses"³⁵
 it will be with those who tried to catch the big ship by
 swimming after it
 those who got tired waiting for the ships that cannot move
 the ELSI, the SAMOTHRAKI, the AMVRAKIKOS.
 The ships hoot now that dusk falls on Piraeus,
 hoot and hoot, but no capstan moves,
 no chain gleams wet in the vanishing light,
 the captain stands like a stone in white and gold.

As early as the first poem of *Mythistorema* the idea of returning to the homeland is undermined:

We returned to our homes broken,
 limbs incapable, mouths cracked
 by the taste of rust and brine.

It is commonly accepted that the function of *nostos* in Seferis's poetry is connected with the loss of identity on both the collective and the individual level. The lost paradise of ancient Greek tradition and the subsequent alienation of man on both levels is usually expressed through images of a dualistic dialectical movement, exemplifying the attempts of the poetic subject (to find, to feel its way through, to understand), which result in failure (it drowns, ends, dies). At times this ironic imagery, so frequent that we need not give further examples, is followed by the certainty of disillusionment, where, of course, there is no room for irony: "Sinks whoever raises the great stones" ("*Mycenae*", *Gymnopaïdia*).

As I have already noted, the rhetoric of Seferis's irony is impressively inventive. Apart from the dual structures, it is frequently supported by the reversal of normal categories of reality, as in the poem "Stratis Thalassinos among the Agapanthi", where the dead and the living exchange roles:

³⁵ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 659.

[...]

It's painful and difficult, the living are not enough for me
first because they do not speak, and then
because I have to ask the dead
in order to go on farther.

At certain points, the irony is supported by the intermingling of linguistic codes, as in "*Thrush*", or in the poem "In the manner of G.S."; at other points by means of grammar and syntax, where the instrumental energy of the poem is sustained by the use of gerunds; and at other times by the versification, as the use of traditional metre intertwines with the poetic impasse. Typical from this angle is the poem entitled "*Ballad*", less innocent than it appears at first glance. The poem was composed in 1931 in the idiom of *Erotokritos* and uses unaltered verses from *Erofili*. The form is in ironic contrast to the content of the poem, which projects metaphorically the theme of failure to compose poetry. The present is intertwined ironically with the past, as three time levels are constructed in the poem: the late Middle Ages of the fifteenth century through the form, the Cretan Renaissance of the seventeenth century through the language, and the barren present which the poet tries to overcome, by managing to write a poem with borrowed elements in a single composition.

[...]

Στάλσιμο

Μοίρα που μας επίηρες την εξιά,
μη γδικιωθείς, τ' ακάτεχα κορμιά
τό δεν το μαστορέψα δεν το ξέρα,
βούηθα κι αλάφρωνέ μας την καρδιά
να χτίζουμε περβόλια στον αγέρα.³⁶

However, rhyme sometimes also becomes a joke in Seferis's poetry (e.g. "*Crickets*") or even dissonant (e.g. "*Fog*"). Sometimes the poet uses undisguisedly ironic techniques, inserted in an ironic language in order to create a momentary irony and to direct the mood of the reader, and even perhaps at times his or her inter-

³⁶ G. Seferis, *Τετράδιο γυμνασμάτων Β'*, ed. G.P. Savidis (Athens: Ikaros 1976), p. 55.

pretation. For example, in “*Thrush*” we read: “sometimes the hunter hits the migratory birds, / sometimes he doesn’t hit them. Hunting / was good in my time, many felt the pellet”.³⁷ One cannot fail to notice the enjambement and its contribution to the intensification of the irony.

The systematic study of Seferis’s rhetoric of irony and satire is necessary, not to arrive at a static and barren typology of its tropes, but to endeavour to address, by way of a different route, fundamental questions that his poetry poses, such as: what exactly is his attitude towards tradition? With which poets does he engage in a meaningful dialogue, and how? What are the constituents of his spirituality? What is the development of his poetics, in terms of his courage to state certain things that build up inside him? And so on.

The questions are certainly many and even more the gaps left by this presentation, as my study is still in progress. But one must begin somewhere.

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³⁷ κάποτε ο κυνηγός βρίσκει τα διαβατάρικά πουλιά / κάποτε δεν τα βρίσκει το κυνήγι / ήταν καλό στα χρόνια μου, πήραν πολλούς τα σκάγια.