

THE "HUMBLE ART" AND THE EXQUISITE
RHETORIC: TROPES IN THE MANNER OF
GEORGE SEFERIS

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The poetry of George Seferis has already been established as a major work of art in the corpus of modern Greek literature, and has even acquired the status of an exceptionally influential poetic discourse tantamount, in its prestige and authority, to the indisputable literary preeminence of the works of Solomos, Kalvos, Palamas and Cavafy. It is worth noticing that in the last twenty years we have not only witnessed a ceaselessly increasing concern for Seferis' poetry, but also a manifold proliferation of poetic styles and imagery emanating from the appeal of his artistry to a new generation of poets.

Equally impressive is his avowed *auctoritas*, exerted on literary criticism and historiography by means of an elaborate essayistic language and a powerful historical insight. Moreover, his fame has been ensured by the award of the Nobel Prize in 1963 and by the posthumous publication (still in progress) of many works, among which the most prominent are a novel, a volume of poems and his political and literary diaries.

It can be said that Seferis' continuing domination over the most significant issues in contemporary Greek literature and thought owes its strength and its lasting vigor to his perspicacity and adroitness in appropriating, modifying and exploiting ideas and beliefs of his time as well as in carefully grafting some concepts and practices of European modernism onto the legacy of Greek tradition. He developed, either in prose or in verse, a new artistic ideal, comprising mainly myths, symbols, historical images,

national sensitivities and rhetorical techniques that enabled him to present himself as the last sonorous bard of a decaying Hellenism. Seferis alone of his contemporaries has been able to set himself up as a "national" poet by avoiding becoming entrapped in an excessive modernism and by having a poetic vision that encompassed a historical symbolism, a national mythology and a lyric idiom of great leverage.

It is not surprising, then, that his work has been and is constantly analyzed, interpreted and translated. Besides, it is considered very "Greek"¹ (whatever this adjective might mean for critical discourse), as the embodiment of a spirit and a past undeniably Hellenic, and it is identified with a certain notion of "Greekness" as a *modus vivendi* that has inspired the efforts of many Greek writers and intellectuals to build up a national ideology.

Seferis' literary stature derives its authority precisely from that dexterous infusion of national "values" into a modern poetic diction and from his admirable critical clairvoyance, whose importance lies mainly in its thematic persistency and consistency. By focusing his attention on the topics of tradition and language he touched upon two of the most serious and haunting issues in Greek society and literature, closely related to the crucial question of national identity. In dealing with them he has been able to offer both a new historical perspective and a new literary style. This partly explains why his work, in spite of its difficulties, is being regarded as an exemplary manifestation of national consciousness and as a unique achievement in terms of language-ethos and moral vocation in general. It is rather evident that he is the father figure, the patriarch of contemporary Greek literature, whose shadow looms large in the minds of the descendants and in whose literary garden vegetate numerous docile acolytes.

To a great extent the critics of Seferis' work have been mesmerized by the luster and lure of his style and patronized by his authoritative omnipresence in almost every domain of literary discourse. This by no means implies that they confined themselves exclusively to the passive role of either reproducing and

¹"The poetry of George Seferis, whatever it may have to the literature of other countries, stems first of all from a tradition that is eminently Greek" (Keeley and Sherrard, 1969:v).

perpetuating his ideas or guaranteeing and defending his master-image of an ingenious and charismatic poet. Although the predominant tendency has been by and large one of advocating the idolization of the poet and the mystification of his writings, it did not prevent the development of alternative readings and interpretations. But even in these cases most of the critics accommodated and comforted themselves by virtually remaining in the old premises of criticism and abiding by established methods and ideas. The scenery is all too well known: biographical excavations as a widely recognized practice of supplying "true" information for understanding poetry; thorough investigations for the detection of sources, influences, similarities and plagiarisms; historical commentaries assuming a palpable and immediate correlation between poetry and history; procrustean paraphrases and inflated descriptions in the disguise of systematic interpretations; stylistic analyses amounting to picturesque accounts of the poet's outstanding inventiveness, and so forth.

However, the conformity to the prevailing norms of critical discourse has not always been unchallenged. We can notice here and there some slight alterations, some deviations and aberrations on a small scale, but they are, as it were, marginal resistances, insufficient for changing the whole picture. Even a few endeavors to provide new methods of analysis resulted in no more than their own isolation as noticeable but fruitless exceptions.² Seferis' poetry therefore is still being studied through either an old-fashioned empiricism embedded in received prejudices and preconceptions about history, society and culture or an idealistic grandiloquence assuredly invoking the timelessness of aesthetic values, the transparency of language and the sublimated presence of the poet's voice.

At any rate, it is not my intention to examine the character of this critical discourse in all its complexity, that is, to give an account of critical responses to Seferis' poetry, nor to challenge directly the validity of concrete critiques and militate against specific strategies, ideologies and policies reigning in the field. On the other hand, what has prompted me to engage myself in

²See, for instance, the structuralist analysis of Seferis' poetry proposed by Kapsomenos (1975); a work which, in spite of its shortcomings, could have been fruitful, if Greek criticism was not so indifferently provincial.

this detour on Seferis' poetry is precisely the conviction that traditional criticism has been caught in the web of its own pedantry and, furthermore, has been emasculated by its arrogant refusal to put its criteria and principles under systematic scrutiny and doubt. So it may well be that this paper implicates a polemic, though it has not been designed as such but rather as a preliminary reading that has apparently originated in preexisting oppositions without placing them in the center of its problematics; its objections to other readings is a point of departure, rather than of antagonistic coexistence.

More specifically, what I am going to propose is not a "definitive" interpretation or a "true" analysis but something quite different, which might be perceived as a "test-reading" in the sense that it connotes experimentation aiming, as far as Seferis' poetry is concerned, at delineating a virgin reading territory and opening up a new space of interpretative possibilities. As the title suggests, the approach of this reading is designated by rhetorical considerations and not by thematic or referential ones. What is at stake here is not the "proper" or "literal" meaning of the poems but their rhetorical status, the all-embracing figurality of their language and the topological function of their "representation." Thus, the pivotal question is "whether a literary text is about that which it describes, represents or states" (de Man, 1979:57) and, consequently, whether the "reading is truly problematic" (58) or not. If meaning follows a secure path leading to the convergence of "the meaning read with the meaning stated" (57) in and by the text, then there would be no difficulty in finding it. This latter conjecture characterizes in fact a critical approach favoring the priority and uniformity of meaning, whereas the rhetorical one (to which this paper is primarily subscribed) interrogates both the production of meaning through a game of tropes and the conditions of its own problematic form.

This kind of reading which I am pursuing is therefore based on the assumption that the text, far from being an ontologically distinctive "entity," is a rhetorical construction never achieving its completion since its function is interminably deconstructive in that it "simultaneously asserts and denies the authority of its own rhetorical mode" (17). Yet such a reading should not be

understood as a realization of a systematic theory about literature and language, for it does not employ a rigid method or a definite set of rules but stems from the intention to enliven the critical game with a proliferation of discursive practices. To a certain extent I adopt some of Paul de Man's views as they are illustrated in his version of rhetoric (which implies a "recoinage" of terms) and, particularly, as they are exemplified in his readings of Rilke, Nietzsche, Proust and Rousseau (de Man, 1979). This does not entail an unconditional approval of his deconstructive techniques or rhetorical devices, since I am not using his texts as a model but as a pre-text, as a starting point for a tentative reading. Therefore, modifications and digressions are not altogether excluded.

My purpose is neither to put Seferis' poetry under "the terrors of tropology" (Eagleton, 1982:22) nor to succumb to the "imperialism of rhetoric" (Kellner, 1981:15) but, to use a milder metaphor, to challenge the authenticity of poetic meaning by deploying topological techniques devoid of any claim to originality, immediacy or innocence.

This essay could be labeled a "working paper" in the sense that it is enveloped in its own rhetorical mode, and as such it "intends to elicit from those to whom it is addressed a deepening rejoinder and continuation" (Steiner, 1980:ix).

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After Palamas—the poet who marked with his imposing presence the whole field of Greek literature in the first half of this century—Seferis is perhaps the only poet who followed his example in exercising literary criticism not as a *parergon* but as a high-valued *ergon*. Throughout his life he had shown a keen interest in bringing together criticism and poetry and directing them toward a common ideal—an attempt that can also be seen in connection with the pattern used by poets like Valery and Eliot, whose works Seferis knew and admired.

Among the themes that recur both in his poetry and in his prose we can trace those that bear witness to an all-pervasive ambition for an art vigilant and self-aware: thus, he never ceases to be a poet in his literary criticism and a critic in his

poetry. Some of the most privileged themes in his work refer to subjects like language, tradition, literary history, national spirit and artistic morality, and affirm his aspirations to proffer to his nation a new poetic mythology. With enviable skill and erudition, Seferis unfolds his vision for a poetry requiring of the poet a professional knowledge of and a mastery over his material regardless of the price he has to pay in order to get hold of them. For the poet "who does not strive for mastership over his material is not an artisan and his sensibility is imperfect" (1976:13). The acquisition of craftsmanship must reach so high a level that it will be impossible for the reader to single out the artificial elements of the poem.³ By perceiving the poem as an organic unity containing "elements of the outside and inside world" (41) Seferis thinks of the poet as a conscientious *bricoleur* whose task is to provide the poetic meaning with a seamless, nearly invisible form. The *ousia* of the poem coincides with the *morphe*⁴ because the poet smooths the rough edges of the material, and by so doing he facilitates the hidden meaning's ascent to the surface, leaving the dark depths of nature and human soul. Yet for this ideal unity to be achieved, the poet's skillfulness and grand technique do not suffice; what is further required is a strong dislike for ornamentation, embellishment and exaggeration, which strip the poem of its original purity, structural balance and harmony. In this sense poetry is neither a complex rhetorical device nor a rhetorical construct of a rich imagination but something similar to a natural object wisely carved and perfected by a humble craftsman—the poet as creator has almost disappeared behind the mask of an ordinary man. This metaphor, a prevalent one in Seferis, illustrates succinctly his determination to inaugurate a poetic idiom different in its tropological economy from contemporary or preceding ones and powerful enough to lay claim upon the future of the national poetry. For a better understanding of this strategy we can turn our attention to one of his poems, bearing in mind that what matters here is not Seferis' "real" intention but our encounter with an "orphaned" poem that "turns back upon itself in a

³"The artificial that gives us the impression of the artificial is...bad art" (1976:67).

⁴"...there is no distinction between form and essence in art" (1976:201).

manner that puts the authority of its own affirmations in doubt, especially when these affirmations refer to modes of writing that it advocates" (de Man, 1979:26-7).

In the poem "An Old Man on the River Bank" (1969:285), written in 1942, we have a stanza located at the very center of the text that divides it into two equal parts or, to put it differently, links the first and the second part in a very curious way, since it seems that it has nothing in common with them. The importance of this stanza has been stressed by many critics, who considered it a synopsis of Seferis' poetics, a straightforward statement about his artistic intentions. The presence of a speaking subject, presumably that of the poet, and the apocalyptic tone of its voice create so compelling an illusion that inevitably they have been taken as proofs of a *de profundis* confession:

I want no more than to speak simply, to be granted that
grace.
Because we've loaded even our songs with so much music
that they're slowly sinking
and we've decorated our art so much that its features have
been eaten away by gold
and it's time to say our few words because tomorrow the
soul sets sail.

If, instead of looking for the meaning of the text, we try to observe *how* it means, the horizon of our reading would be entirely different. Such a reorientation of the interpretative act would not only separate the means of the text from its meaning but would also underscore the absolute indeterminacy of the latter and its dependence on the rhetoricity of language.

All the same, the presence of that "I" in the first line attracts our attention by conveying a desire for speaking, that is, by addressing to us a "voice" that we cannot ignore: "*I want no more than to speak simply.*" But instantly, at the very moment of its "eventuation," the "I" disappears and gives way to the general "we," the predominant collective subject of the text. In fact, this is the one of the two instances in the whole poem in which the first person singular is foregrounded, alluding to a strong impulse on the part of the poet to make, even momentarily, his

presence to be felt and his voice to be heard. Yet its disappearance is not a "real" one, since it has never existed in the first place as *the* "true" subject but only as a figure among many others; its figurative significance is established by virtue of place and function, rather than of truth and essence, because it is nothing but a grammatical "entity" emerging from the intratextual nexus. Its disappearance, therefore, should be understood as a grammatical transformation resulting in the revalorization of the rhetorical relationships in the text.

Inasmuch as the "subject" is identified with an intention to speak it takes the form of an explicit and diaphanous "I," but when it proceeds to a retrospective justification of its claims it slips into an abstract and vague "we." The transition indicates, as it were, a dislocation of the voice due to the oscillation of the subject between a desire for immediate speech and a need for self-assurance. The resort to the collective subject reveals both a complicity in the distortion of the poetic language (as if there existed a common guilt for what has happened) and a reaffirmation of the willingness to save the purity and originality of speech. The mode of this movement is a synecdochical one, for it permits the substitution of whole for part and part for whole. The subject is no longer a concrete and unified center, a promise for salvation from the sin of language, a universal voice announcing the paradise of art, but the last subterfuge of the trope, the ultimate synecdoche of writing, a mask behind a mask. The inequality between "I" and "we" is not literal but figurative, and what seems to be a linear grammatical transformation or miraculous metamorphosis of meaning is counterfeited by the elusiveness of the synecdoche and its endlessly reciprocating motion. The subject remains suspended, never achieving a full identity—a mere incident of the trope. Thus, we can, for instance, substitute the "I" for something more general and abstract and, by the same token, we can reduce the "we" to the singularity of a personal voice or intention without ever managing to pinpoint an extratextual presence, since the inexorable evasiveness of the trope renders the "meaning" inexhaustible. The interaction of what is written with what is read produces an infinite play of substitutions in which there is no likelihood for a stable meaning, and hence neither the "I"

nor the "we" can escape from their tropological indeterminacy. Synecdoche in this case could be designated as "one of the borderline figures that create an ambivalent zone between metaphor and metonymy and that, by its spatial nature, creates the illusion of a synthesis by totalization" (de Man, 1979:63). In this sense, the "I" in the first line appears to be absorbed by the following "we" in a metaphorical rather than metonymic manner. Yet the looseness of the metaphorical link renders possible a metonymic contingency. It is because of this discrepancy in the behavior of the trope that the subject is always deferred: its presence is subverted by the figurality of language and the immanent ambiguity of its signifiers. And it is for this reason that we cannot take it for granted that the "voice" behind the "I" is the "voice" of the poet.

It can be said then that the stanza under discussion does not constitute a more reliable statement for Seferis' poetics than any other of his poems. The presence of the "I" and its filiation to "we" do not guarantee any clarity, honesty and unmediatedness, for both of them partake of the rhetorical game and operate as one more ruse through which the poem pretends to be speaking or intending to speak its master's voice in order to make its writing neutral and invisible.

We can pursue the argument in the same direction and within the same context by exploring the following plethora of tropes. The disapproval of the decorated art and the longing for an unmediated "simplicity" are expressed in spectacular metaphors arrayed in a complex system of substitutions and transformations. First we have the classical analogy poem/song, again a synecdoche of metaphorical nature (since any metonymic contiguity has been enfeebled in the historical course of the two words), which in its turn becomes the vehicle of another metaphor, that of the association of the song to an object we can "load." Similar metaphorical correspondences are obvious in utterances like "We've loaded . . . with so much music" and "they are slowly sinking." All these intertwined tropes are used to emphasize the assertion that the excessive decoration of the poem ("so much music") results in its disappearance: it lapses into silence not because it is short of language but because it has an enormous figurative surplus; its presence is almost nullified

by its inability to control the inflation of tropes. The paradox here is that this dismissive assertion is itself overdecorated, and thereby the poem falls prey to the same rhetorical extravagance it had so rigorously denounced.

The rhetorical feast continues its unrestrained transfigurations in the following emphatic prosopopeia, by means of which a new series of metaphors comes into being. The "face" of art fades away at the very moment of its glorification; the "gold" of language, the prosperity and propitiousness of the signifier, instead of adding to the aesthetic integrity and unity, deprives art of its voiced presence; behind the dazzling facade the corrosive accumulation of tropes accelerates the collapse of the entire poetic edifice. The "disfiguring power of figuration" (de Man, 1978:29) exposes the void lurking in the verbal overflow, but at the same time evinces the attachment of the poem to the very language it tries to escape from: the void, like silence, is no more than another rhetorical trick. When it is named as such, it ceases automatically to be a "real" void and when, conversely, it remains anonymous it does not exist as such. Every time the poem finds a way out of the impasse, it is confronted by the insurmountable density and impenetrability of its own language and is thus forced into a never-ending "inscape": in the end of any "end" a detritus of "tropes troping themselves" (Kellner, 1981:28) promises a new advent of the poem. The "few words" that must be said for the sake of salvation are condemned to a perpetual deferment, lost in the delusory quest of a "voice" and irredeemably estranged from their origin.

The initial desire for a pellucid and unadulterated language, for an art without semantic scruples or figurative complexities, for a representation saturated by complete meaning and for an accurate (i.e., "honest") expression of simple, unadorned experiences is destined to remain unfulfilled. There is no place for the poem outside figurality, that is, there is no possibility to disambiguate language, to overcome its inherent arbitrariness and conventionality. Within the infinite play of signifiers the poem never acquires the status of a concrete and tangible object but is always in progress, always in becoming—never in being. Yet, although it is bound up with this figurative rotation, it never refrains from seeking *plenitude*, *totality* and *literalness*:

its contradictory structuration generates the constitutive *aporia* that accompanies its "existence" and engenders its "meaning." Even when it is aware of its powerlessness to dissolve the ambivalence of its inscription and to come to terms with its aporetic language, the poem insists on exploring the tropological labyrinth and questioning the impossibility of unequivocal signification.

When Seferis envisages a poetic language sheltered from the eroding effects of verbal alchemy, pure in its meaning and simple in its form, the tropology of his writing is anchored on metonymic ground, or, at least, it aspires to a comprehensive discourse articulated by contiguity and intended to regulate the representational lopsidedness of the signifier. In adumbrating such a mode of writing the text itself invokes the authority of speech ("I want . . . to speak," "it's time to say") and blurs the boundaries between speaking and writing by inseminating the familiarity of the former into the ambiguity of the latter; in order to enact the play of communication the poem tends to prefigure its own reading. Nevertheless, this process never takes place *in* the poem but is described *by* it as a desirable development and is echoed in an imagined poetic form. The writing of the poem is about the originality and uniqueness of its future and is realized as the narration of its postponement: the absence of the poem as *being* "constitutes" the presence of the poem as *reading*. In so far as the poem has to write whatever it intends to say, envision and dream, it cannot naturalize language or neutralize discourse, and therefore, when it renounces figuration and, especially, metaphor, it does so by means of a "tropological defiguration" (de Man, 1978:22) imbued with elaborate allegories, and when it tries to achieve the immediacy of speech, by disavowing the authority of written signs, it is always already locked up in the duplicitous function of writing.

It seems as if the poem is helplessly enclosed in a vicious circle of rhetorical devices, severed from its subject, voice and literal meaning and deconstructed by its own textuality. But does this mean that there is nothing beyond the spurious propositions of rhetoric and the treacherous equivocations of tropes? Could we say that the poem is definitely wrapped up in its *aporia* and enfolded in its inwardness? There is no easy answer to these questions but, even provisionally, I would suggest that the

tropological mode of a poem appears as a response to other analogous modes within an intertextual framework and, perhaps, the interaction of different discourses brings the poem out of the abyss of rhetoric to the circumstantiality of history and society and, especially, to their discursive antinomies and antagonisms.

In Seferis' stanza (and generally in his poetry) we can ascertain a refutation of a certain tradition of poetic writing, a disapproval of recognized rhetorical techniques and, subsequently, we can assume that the signifiers, far from being whirled into the void, spring out from an act of reading whereby they enter into the realm of history. The difficulty arises when we realize that Seferis' venture to undermine tradition, by initiating a new poetic model that proclaims its emancipation from tropology, is beset with the same rhetorical figures it had been designed to oppose and, finally, to eliminate. This contradiction does not prove the subjugation of history to rhetoric but rather outlines their complementary *antithesis*, which generates the fundamental paradox of a language (and an art) in constant *crisis*. In this sense, Seferis' poetry is governed simultaneously by an ineluctable rhetorical repetitiveness and an eager interest in displacing, deflecting and differentiating a strong tradition within its own omnivorous diction; his poetic idiom could be classified as modernistic, despite its hesitancy to take great risks—if modernity is to be understood as a phenomenon inextricably woven with both history and rhetoric. All the same, as de Man has pointed out, "assertions of literary modernity often end up by putting the possibility of being modern seriously into question. But precisely because this discovery goes against an original commitment that cannot be dismissed as erroneous, it never gets stated outright, but hides instead behind rhetorical devices of language that disguise and distort what the writer is actually saying, perhaps in contrast to what he meant to say" (1971:152). Similar is Seferis' commitment to modernity. By employing a double strategy he revalorizes traditional values and concepts and appropriates a considerable number of discursive techniques, but at the same time he obliterates the historical traces through an eloquent rhetoric; his writing shuttles histrionically between "I" and "we," metonymy and metaphor, presence and absence, voice and

silence, tradition and modernity. These putative dichotomies perhaps explain why he so often resorts to catachresis, hyperbole and allegory as a means to provide his poetry with a seemingly unified and flawless mythology, though behind the consistent rhetoric the tropes never cease, by means of their deconstructive impetus, to unveil the hidden or translucent discrepancies. As for his poetics, there may well be no other apparent gain in my reading than the suspicion that beyond what is "literally" said or meant there is always another "story" in abeyance, which is never the last one but "simply" one more in the succession of rhetorical games.

For reasons of expediency I found it preferable to limit the reading to only one stanza, which has been chosen as an exemplar for looking at some of Seferis' poetic strategems. However, we can approach the whole poem quite effectively, if we are interested in the rhetorical interplay, without changing perspective.

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Seferis' poetic work is in many respects permeated by images of silence, voidness, doom, fragmentation and belatedness. The poet is represented as a suffering artist on the verge of destruction and oblivion, as a lonely and desperate prophet who witnesses hopelessly to the degeneration of civilization and foresees the precipitating ruination of the humanistic tradition. He resembles an old man who has endured much and felt the sorrow and bitterness of experiencing the decline of a world in which he had invested the dreams and the hopes of his adolescence. Art is frequently conceived of as a fairy tale, efficacious in healing the wounds of a life full of losses, separations, disillusionments and betrayals. It tells the painful story of national misfortunes and personal frustrations in a calm, thoughtful and wistful language; its tone is that of melancholy, nostalgia and restrained emotion and could be likened to a slow-going and rhetorically embroidered narrative.

In the poem "An Old Man on the River Bank" we can locate such a narrative, told, as the title indicates, by an old man and intended to rhapsodize the predicament of a community, with which the speaking subject shares an unpredictable future.

It is a prolonged and ramified narration that seems to be the final stage of a larger but unknown story, the conclusion of an unwritten adventure that can be only partly reconstructed by the poem. In the opening lines a need for radical consideration of the future and for determination in making the necessary decisions in life is expressed directly by means of an almost unaffected language, while instantaneously a torrent of figures emphasizes the urgency to escape from the agonies and torments inflicted on the community by the historical milieu:

And yet we should consider how we go forward.
To feel is not enough, nor to think, nor to move
nor to put your body in danger in front of an old loophole
when scalding oil and molten lead furrow the walls.

And yet we should consider towards what we go forward,
not as our pain would have it, and our hungry children
and the chasm between us and the companions calling from
the opposite shore;
Nor the whispering of the bluish light in an improvised
hospital,
the pharmaceutical glimmer on the pillow of the youth
operated upon at noon.

On the rhetorical level the fabric of the narration again sets off a desire (here presented as a necessity) to bypass the dramatization of language by reiterating the syntax of a moral imperative. The text, through successive negations of figuratively reflected experiences, points to a revision of history that would not take into account the rhetoric of struggle and pain. To the indirect questions "how we go forward" and "towards what we go forward" it does not provide an outright answer but, by means of a negative logic, it triggers a chain of metaphors meant to prevent a further proliferation of the trope. The movement forward presupposes a clearing of the ground, a transmission to a more contiguous grammar freed from the bonds of a disturbing rhetoric. But, while the text alludes to a grammar not yet found, the narration itself flows amid static metaphors that turn out to be, in a curious way, the only movement forward

in terms of textual space and time. What the text tries to forget reemerges from its own writing, and the language it aspires to erase proves, though in a superficially negative manner, the impossibility of such an erasure. On the other hand, as the story proceeds, the agglomeration of tropes creates the impression that what will follow should be a kind of linguistic compensation, a positive answer to the rhetoric of suffering, the "real" movement forward. These expectations, far from being fulfilled, are being met with another figurative transformation, this time an absolute one with regard to the construction of the text:

but it should be in some other way, I would say like
the long river that emerges from the great lakes enclosed
deep in Africa,
that was once a god and then became a road and a benefactor,
a judge and a delta;
that is never the same, as the ancient wise men taught,
and yet always remains the same body, the same bed, and
the same Sign,
the same orientation.

Unexpectedly, the language of the poem becomes the main subject of the story, for instead of corresponding to the question of "literal" meaning ("how" and "towards what") it plunges into figurative repetition and consents to be carried away by the stream of metaphors. The movement forward does not bring the narration to the next logical stage of syntactic contiguity but disperses it to the metaphorical similarities.

The image of the "river" represents here the absolute metaphor that seems to have absorbed any other secondary trope and to have set the pace of the story. In fact there is no story any more, since this super-metaphor has reduced everything to mere incidents of its function and the only thing that is still being narrated coincides with the trope itself: the text eventually consists of a metaphor about metaphor, of an allegorical reading of the metaphorical movement toward its own reiteration. Moreover, the self-referential character of the trope unravels as a figure never changing and yet never the same, static and yet always in motion. Like the "river," which keeps its identity un-

divided in spite of its various metamorphoses, the trope remains unaffected by its persistent transfigurations. The allegory thereby not only thematizes the modalities of metaphor but, by affirming the ambiguity of the signifier, brings forward the immanent heterogeneity of all language, so much so as it assigns to the symbol of the "river" the status of a sign in which the Same and the Other seem to converge.

Thus, a narration that started searching for a language appropriate to its arcane purposes ends up by putting into question the very notion of language and by disclosing its differential sameness—its own unstable, elusive and ambivalent signs. The text, after this tropological self-examination, can no longer maintain its linguistic coherency and prevent its total deconstruction. The poet has potentially two interchangeable possibilities: either to leave his work "unfinished" in order to accentuate its problematic language or to carry on determined to accept the consequences and thus to participate in the ambiguous game of signs. Each of these possibilities would require a particular sense of irony (as a rhetorical mode) and a deep-rooted suspicion of poetic conventions (a suspicion exceeding the thematic and formal aspects of writing)—attributes rather rare in Seferis' work. However, he opts out of both possibilities and, as if in a state of anxiety and uncertainty, retreats immediately to a safer and more familiar area from where he strives to ensure that the subject, language and mythology of the poem remain intact. We have seen how his attempt had been subverted by what he tried in vain to surpass, namely by the very figurality of language; but even so the stanza that follows this first part of the poem underlies a desire to save the text from the unpredictability of figuration by inserting the authoritative voice of the "creator."

Furthermore, in an effort to mitigate this temporal deviation from the language and thematic congruity of the text, Seferis returns, in the second part of the poem, to the abandoned metaphor of the "river" ("that symbol which moves forward") and resumes his narration as if nothing has happened in the meantime, as if no change had taken place in the text. And this time he manages to handle the trope ably and aptly as to its figurative entropy by converting it into a long series of new metaphors

that offset the disturbing rhetorical antinomies. Like the "river," which by moving forward disappears into exotic linguistic landscapes, the self-reflexive trope is stripped of its allegorical power and stands bereft of its critical efficacy. Thus, the poem finds itself at the point of its departure, harboring all the images and symbols it tried to depart from, facing the same historical impasse it hoped to escape, and holding the frail metaphors of its failure to tell a story without, in the process, breaking it. But even these metaphors, with their consoling symbolism, do not suffice for retaining the unity of the text; the loose connection among the three main parts of the poem reintroduces a forgotten but still acting metonymy that achieves an ostensible totalization by contiguity.

Seferis's language favors metaphor, although sometimes he declares the opposite. Indeed, the more spectacular the metaphorical inventions are, the more vulnerable the poem becomes to the gaps and discontinuities of its contiguous "meaning." When the poem we are dealing with approaches its end, we find ourselves stranded again in a language "with so much music" that even the familiarity of the interpersonal "we" is not enough to shorten the distance between lyricism and verbosity:

... we the patient dough of a world that
throws us out and kneads us,
caught in the embroidered nets of a life that was a whole
and then became dust and sank into the sands
leaving behind it only that vague dizzying sway of a tall
palm-tree.

The whole poem, as it unfolds its movements of tropes, as it takes the shape of a river both always identical to itself and never the same, alludes to a totality as much desirable as it is unattainable. And it is in the middle of this purposeless movement that the poet feels obliged to appear, leaving its hiding place and declaring his intentions in an effort to create a solid ground of reference and to reinstate his absolute authority, which has momentarily been lost in its own labyrinth. It is, at the same time, an attempt to dissociate himself from the uncontrolled proliferation of tropes, to disengage himself of a language

emblazoned by the old insignia of poetic nobility, and to save the poem from its discursive inflation by interposing the assertive "I" of a responsible and knowing subject. The central stanza reveals a desire for directly addressing the voice of this subject to itself and to the reader—a gesture of self-assurance and warning. But it is precisely the centrality of this double assertion that makes the two long parts of the poem seem irrevocably broken; the cleavage caused by the intrusion of the subject appears to inform an unbridgeable void at the heart of the figurative movement. Within this void the subject denies what it continues to perform—namely, the excessive play of writing. When it renounces the overproduction of signifying structures and advocates an *economy* of written signs, it is already inseparably tied to the most exquisite rhetoric, a rhetoric that avoids the void by reintegrating the appearance of the self into the anonymous prolixity of figurality. The void, as an interruption of ornamental representation, is inhabited by the ghosts of language; it offers what it destroys, it becomes what it was never thought to be: "The representation of a rhetorical structure which, as such, escapes the control of the self" only in order "to reintroduce the authority of a self at the far end of the most radical negation" (de Man, 1979:172).

Whatever its discrepancies, contradictions and illusions, however self-critical or self-doubting, with all its hesitations, interrogations and expectations, Seferis' poetic language represents a compact idiom rooted to the tradition more than the poet is prepared to recognize in his writing. The occasional evocation of themes, sentiments and anxieties belonging to modernism remains marginal or is effaced by the innermost realization of historical priorities. What he negates is not a worn-out language but the main preoccupations of modernism: the violence of writing and the writing of violence, the torturing exile of the subject, the explosion of the signs, the reduction of nationalism and the unrestrained passion for extremities both in life and in art. Confronted with the void Seferis, like the old man on the river bank, wants only to speak "simply," recalls nostalgically the lost vocation of the poet-craftsman, longs for the few words necessary to justify death, to surpass death through the lesser language of language. But, as he is fascinated by his own

yearning, surrendered to his dream of a poetry returning to the simplicity and purity of nature, he keeps forgetting that he is still speaking the harmful language of art. Seferis' dream is an old dream—it reflects the guilt for the separation from an original harmony, immediacy and identity. He is like those old men who fall half-asleep when reciting a story but, despite their apparent lack of articulation, continue the narration without realizing the dividing line that separates dream from reality. And the "reality" is that they never ceased speaking—that is, writing—inside and outside the dream. These old men are very fond of their childhood, which they strive to recover either in language or in a community with which they share their oddities.

If Seferis can be regarded as a modern poet it is only insofar as he circumscribes modernism in the horizon of his poetry, at the periphery of his symbolic rhetoric. In his poetry the poet, the subject, the notion of Greekness represent the impossibility of being modern, since there is always a memory that compensates by being ever present. Even when this presence consists of mutilated statues, dead or lost companions, ruins of a glorious past, empty symbols, historical catastrophes and existential voids, in general of significant absences, what is present in and of the absent and absent in and of the present constitutes a mythology that turns modernity into unaccomplished history. To say this means that one does not take Seferis' language at face value, that is, as conveying a "truth," a "reality" or an "inner thought." Rhetoric and history (or rather rhetoric in and of history) in Seferis supplement the desire for artistic innocence and linguistic deflation with an overflow of signs. It is through this necessity of the written word that the poet envisages an economy of signs, an impossible language that approaches the materiality of things in order to disappear in the literal world of essential needs. The only truth of such an endeavor is that "truth" remains constantly deferred or, more precisely, it gives in to what it tries to defeat, that is, to the falsity, deceptiveness and inauthenticity of poetic language. The humanist Seferis seems to be afraid of his modernity, which he tries to keep under control by resorting to the dreams of an unbroken, though misunderstood, tradition. His relation to European modernism is eventually transformed into

a passion for an ideal *topos* (Greece) and an ideal medium (Greek language).

It is by no means surprising then (especially if we take into account the present state of Greek criticism) that most of his critics share with him the same values and ideas. Thus, for instance, two of them, commenting on the central stanza of the above poem, note:

His relation to the concrete, which is mainly an artistic characteristic, may be one of the motives that prompted him to look for simplicity, a simplicity which is the substance of the object . . . without which the function of the existence is inconceivable. All he asks for is this simplicity . . . because only this can save him from formlessness, schematization, and aimless versification [*stichographia*] . . . Seferis has indeed this grace of simplicity. (Karandonis, 1963:215-6)

Poetry and poetics together are this turn [in Seferis' writing]. And I hope that we agree that here Seferis accepts unreservedly the need for clarity and simplicity in expression and, particularly, in poetic language. (Sinopoulos, 1972:52)

This longing for an original and thus pure art, for an Apollonian order within the expressive nature of language and for an economizing wisdom over death marks the concept of "Greekness" in Seferis. In this sense, to be Greek and modern is to experience a profound antinomy or, in other words, to make your modernity the touchstone of a transcendental "Greekness." Finally, to be Greek is to keep your modernity in constant exile. In fact, such a dichotomy offers a *via negativa* to confer "Greekness" upon modernity, to subsume the latter under the former.

* * *

The aspiration for a "simple" language, as it is expressed in the poem we have just analyzed, is closely related to another

theme that prevails in his poetry—that of the "humble art." The ideal function of the poetic language consists in abandoning its elitist ambitions, its predisposition to exaggeration and arrogance. The poet is no more than a humble craftsman, a wordsmith by trade who manages, through hard work, to deliver his message; his skill is acknowledged only if he is able to say more without intensifying the complexity and density of the language, in other words, if he possesses the knowledge of being "simple" and "humble." The former indicates a restrictive economy of expression while the latter alludes to a moral consciousness that favors an aesthetics of poverty and guilt, a style that refrains from posing as such. As early as 1934 Seferis introduced the rhetoric of an unaffected style, of a style devoid of stylization:

We brought back
these carved reliefs of a humble art.
("Mythistorema," 1)

The poet seeks to recover an art not yet evicted from the paradise of things, an art without "so many charms and so many symbols" ("Siroco 7 Levante"). This utopic land does not know the difference between words and things, thought and action, nature and culture: it is a land where everything happens in its "natural" order. Reading (and by implication writing) do not disturb the unity of life and the poet's happy consciousness, for there is no artificial light to break the darkness and the silence of the night:

The evening would fall
the flocks would echo descending to their fold
like some quite simple happy thought
and I would lie down to sleep
because I wouldn't have
even a candle to light,
light,
to read.

("Five Poems by Mr. S. Thalassinis; I. Hampstead")

Seferis presents the poet as an individual who experiences the

antinomies of a divided self. All his attempts toward purification and originality are doomed to failure: his companions bear their own destiny, "their oars/mark the place where they sleep on the shore./No one remembers them. Justice" ("Mythistorema," 4). His people are the anonymous mob of the poems, the cause of his loneliness and misery, a threatening chorus, ignorant of the enacted drama; his images of human life, of nature and of happiness are distorted by the sinful mediation of language. Yet, in spite of this awareness, the poet retains his hope for a collective redemption, for a communal justification, for a return to nature. Seferis is the modern poet, the educated European, who sacrifices his cosmopolitanism in order to secure a privileged place that would enable him to provide a tradition, a mythology and a utopia to an imaginary people. For this purpose he resorts to a poetics of popular themes and stereotypes while, at the same time, he tries to establish his modern idiom as a common language. The tension between these two contradictory aims of his poetics undermines constantly the effort to reach an ultimate affirmation of his Rousseauistic dreams. Seferis, the poet who "speaks humbly and calmly" ("Upon a Foreign Verse"), is very anxious about the future of his writing: the "humble art" is by no means inferior to its rivals—on the contrary, it is precisely through that "humbleness" that it pursues its glorification. Such an art is an art of memory that makes recourse to a lost originality, aiming at a reconciliation between life and writing; its target is to recuperate what has been consumed or dissimulated by writing. Nevertheless, this memory is bound to rediscover its past within its most artful future:

I imagine that he who'll rediscover life in spite of so much paper, so many emotions, so many debates and so much teaching, will be someone like us, only with a slightly tougher memory. We ourselves can't help still remembering what we've given. He'll remember only what he's gained from each of his offerings.

("Mr. Stratis Thalassinis Describes a Man; 5. Man")

The future that Seferis envisions moves retrospectively in an effort to restore life and reality as the original sources of an art

spontaneous and simple: a commodity of the real life. Or, in his metaphorical language:

I prefer a drop of blood to a glass of ink.
("Notes For A 'Week'; Sunday")

Writing for him is an act of suffering, the difficult task of confronting "a blank piece of paper which he must overcome" (1976:56), a desperate attempt to become the servant of life:

Dawn finds us beside the tired lamp
drawing on paper, awkwardly, with effort,
ships mermaids or sea-shells;
("Mythistorema," 5)

It is this melancholic nostalgia of the artist who has no other choice than to write even when he is suspicious of writing that makes Seferis unhappy: he has no other alternative than "to draw up idols and ornaments" (*ibid.*, 2) in spite of the menacing void he has invented as a point of silent happiness. It is somewhere here that we can trace the root of the anti-intellectualism of the most intellectual of contemporary Greek poets:

Life has ruined us, along with Attic skies and the
intellectuals clambering up their own heads.
("Letter of Mathios Paskalis")

The "humble art"⁵ is Seferis' escape from modernism, an escape toward an illusory nation, society and culture. But if he failed to become the craftsman he was dreaming of, he succeeded in becoming the only possible modern poet for a nation that has never recovered from its failure to understand history as such, a nation still searching "for the other life/beyond the statues" ("Mythistorema," 5).

Seferis' poetic mythology then, which, in the form of a fairy tale, would offer to the national community a didactic nar-

⁵In a naive comment on this concept in Seferis' poetry, one of his critics writes: "For Seferis' poetic logic the expression of a *humble art* has the meaning of an art made by humble people" (Argyriou, 1980:39-40).

ration of past glories and hardships (the dream of the never-never land of Hellas) should be considered not as a literal statement of a suffering individual, but as an elaborate poetic strategy that bestows on his poems an exquisite, though somehow monotonous, rhetoric. His work thereby should be regarded neither as a monument for national admiration nor as a masterpiece for critical servility, but as an opportunity for varied interpretative games that would invigorate the act of reading and liberate meaning from its closure: "The act of understanding is a temporal act that has its own history, but this history forever eludes totalization" (de Man, 1971:32).

Without taking into account the irreversibly lost intentions of the poet, the enfeebled authority of his name and the irretrievably dissipated meaning of his language, the rhetorical reading opens a new space within which the poem is adopted by the critical praxis and thus is endlessly recreated by new modes of signification.

From this perspective, Seferis' poems cannot be considered as "offering insights that carry with them the weight of universal truths" or as serving "to retreat the deeper meaning of our times" (Keeley and Sherrard, 1969:xiii), but rather as rhetorical constructions amenable to change and exploitation. Defined in this way, poetry is liable to perpetual deconstruction—and, of course, so is criticism. According to de Man:

The critical function of deconstruction is not to blur distinctions but to identify the power of linguistic figuration as it transforms differences into oppositions, analogies, contiguities, reversals, crossings, and any other of the relationships that articulate the textual field of tropes and of discourse. Hence the distinctively critical . . . function of texts, literary or other, with regard to aesthetic, ethical, epistemological, and practical judgements they are bound to generate." (1982:510-1)

If such a rhetorical reading, as practiced here, seems incompatible with Seferis' poetry, it is appropriate to answer by invoking the poet himself: "There is no artist who has given the

authentic interpretation of his work. Because even if there was one, he would have been able to prevent nothing" (1976:57).

To conclude: we cannot deprive writing of its future and authorize interpreters for our intentions; moreover, we do not have the power to eternalize meaning by incriminating the language. Let therefore rhetoric be the name for an interpretive expedition: at the end of the journey we realize, once more, that the fearful white whale of meaning is nothing but a figure of writing traveling through the centuries in different texts and encountering, in various disguises, its persistent hunters.

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