GEORGE SEFERIS: FROM SATIRE TO IRONY?

G. P. Savidis' study "The satirical Seferis" (1979) 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 paper that he himself published in 1974 under the same title ("The satirical Seferis"), but clearly with less prior preparation. In this paper Savidis noted that "wit and humor are two terms that have been rarely used up until now by Seferis scholars. It is a pity, because for those that had the privilege of meeting the poet personally, they should maintain the lively memory of the banter that uplifted his seeming heavy disposition, without any recourse to the well-to-do drawing room "spirit" or to unimaginative play on words. And this joviality, for someone that knows how to read Seferis, 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 (that is mainly a private intent when it is not used for professional reasons) and more as a wise or impressive humour that is either eastern popular or of western European learned derivation". In this treatise the scholar 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 in the central Greek tradition of poetic satire, that begins from Solomos, Lascaratos, and certainly passes from Palamas, Varnalis, Karyotakis, Ritsos, without overlooking other possible hybrids with eccentric personalities such as Souris, Kavafy, Papatsonis, Egonopoulos, Skarimbas, and Montis. Concurrently, Savidis made distinctions of terms such as "wit", "humor", " satire", "irony", at times with greater success and at times less so. "If it is assumed that the controlled humor is to be found, artistically, a step

* The text that follows is a lecture given at the Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies Seminar in King's College (School of Humanities, London), in the 20th of March 2000.
higher from the initial spontaneous wit (something not at all certain, given the conscious craftsmanship of Seferis) irony and satire most certainly belong on another scale. Because, while the wit and humor are friendly or at least spirited expressions of impulse, the irony as much as the satire are basically hostile manifestations, private or public; the satire is undisguised, the irony is disguised. Consequently they avoid meeting at the same step”.

Today, after 20 years of philological study on Seferis and Cavafy, but also on terms such as satire, irony and other related to these, the need for broadening the satirical and ironic substance of Seferis’ poetry continues to remain an objective of literary studies, while, equivalently, it has been supported, in a convincing case that Cavafy constitutes ultimately an ironic poet. As regards the proclamations of the above mentioned terms that Savvidis suggests, it is not possible, following the systematic study of the continually expanding relevant bibliography, for one to accept that satire and irony do not co-exist, since it is commonly accepted that satire frequently uses irony as a means to achieve its aim, while irony is not a hostile expression in all its manifestations. Its development in the last few decades has elevated irony to an evaluative criterion of literature, but also to a writing method that allows many voices, which gather in the authorial ego, to be heard concurrently. In addition, the satire of the 20th century can be at times undisguised and of high tones and at other times low toned and implied. This does not mean that the limits between the above terms are not at times blurred and difficult to distinguish, making the work of the critic rather distressing. This difficulty comes about from the very nature of the terms that 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 bibliography [I should like to declare that at the outset that I will not delve into theoretical elucidations that have to do with the terms that interest us here, because an English audience is obviously more well-versed in these than the equivalent Greek one]. As far as Seferis studies go, the only monographs that I am aware of on the subject is one heretic study by Nanos Valaoritis entitled “A different reading of George Seferis” (1986), where he explores the poetics of Seferis through the perspective of modernist humour and a rather unsystematic study by Athanasios Gotovos entitled “Humour and Irony in George Seferis” (1995), where the above mentioned perspective is briefly touched on in the diaries, in the novel Six nights at the Acropolis and even less in the poems.

My interest for the satirical and ironic voice of Seferis was instigated from the precise and provoking article by Savvidis and it became interwoven with the study of Cavafys’ ironic method to pass unavoidably through
Seferis’ reading of Cavafy’s poetry. Seferis’ 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’ idiosyncrasy is completely at odds. Before we move on to examining the satirical and ironic perspectives of Seferis’s poetry I would like to briefly look at the relationship of the two poets, even though this relationship has constituted a point of attraction for many noteworthy critics. I will center my attention on this relationship through the prism of irony.

Initially, one can trace the different presuppositions of the intellectual and emotional idiosyncrasies of the two poets. Seferis’ weakness to identify Cavafy’s modern irony in all its multileveled magnitude, his “pervasive” irony according to R. Beaton’s apt description, is obviously due to a large extent to his idiosyncrasy, compelling a stance that is at the antipodes, as he himself admits, of the cavafian point of view. “Le style ironique est l’homme meme”, notes Wayne Booth parodying the well known statement of Buffon. Seferis becomes activated by his belief, to use Vagenas’ apt evaluation, that he “believes in the idea of the Renaissance, because he feels them to be a re-birth of Greek values”. As a man who believes, an admirer of Solomos, Makrygiannis, Theofilos, as bearer of a specific ideology, it is very difficult, if not impossible, for him to converge in a meaningful way with the skeptic Cavafy who chooses the Heilenistic period because it is more immoral, more liberated and it allows him to situate his characters as he likes. “The ingenious minds” according to Cavafy, “observed with accuracy and from a position of security; when they did not display the positive and negative of a matter, compelling us to create the conclusions. Why not they? I will be asked. Simply because I do not have the conviction of the absolute value of a single conclusion. From this as a given I form this judgement, and someone else another. It is therefore possible to be both incorrect and to be both correct, as it suits each individual, because they have been inspired under the peculiar circumstances and idiosyncrasies”. Cavafy consists of an amalgam of heterogeneous signs, 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. “Seferis’ world view” writes Vagenas, “if we wish to view it under the light of the philosophical climate of his period, we would say that it is close to existencialism”. The distanced, unsentimental and intellectual, in other words ironic, stance of Cavafy, is to be found in the antipodes of Seferis’ “nakedness”, of his reservation, 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. "I believe that the reason that Cavafy ceases to preoccupy him is beyond the use of history, that, in the final analysis, is one side of the matter of expressive accuracy, Seferis does not see other elements capable of retaining his interest undiminished" writes Vagenas. I have the impression that, independent of Seferis' legacy to Cavafy on the level of poetic achievement, the ironic language of Cavafy has ceased to play a catalytic role for the lack of consistent interest, and the Seferian moodiness towards 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 when the satiric face of Seferis has been studied, as well as the clearly more difficult tracing of his ironic voice, wherever it exists.

Our next step, sufficiently enlightening, 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 expressed either directly or indirectly or even views on the terms that concern us, as they appear in his published correspondence, shed light from another angle on the type of humour, satire and irony that are compatible with his poetic idiosyncrasy. For eg. in his criticism on Cavafy we come across recurring 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. This is why, perhaps, when he refers to the cavafian humour, that is situated in the vicinity of pirandellian theory, he considers necessary to distinguish it from the spirit and to attach to it the characteristic of being cold.

"Cold humour: not spirit (esprit). The wity joke is light, it dances, it does somersaults. Humour walks solemnly, indifferently. At moments it missteps or tries, but it does not "sparkle". This is a serious distortion of our lives (see Edward Lear). Cavafy's humour is is at times so serious that you can not distinguish it from him personally. Its existence is humour. An existence both tragic and humouristic, in an empty world that does not know where it is leading (not tragically ironic). This is why he so frequently gave caricature an opportunity".
Moreover, from the broad fasm of the at times straightforward and at times deadalian 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 *Ptoxoprodromika*, in other words a purely satirical poem, while it is a known fact 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. It is as a result of this perplexed hermeneutic position that I consider the much discussed negative evaluation of the poem "Che fecce ... il gran rifiuto", as well as the misreading of certain cavafian poems that have been singled out in research. Besides, Seferis' alternating between the terms parody and satire, when he himself characterizes the self parodying poem "In the manner of G. S.", and the use of the pseudonym, when he is consciously led to texts that as he himself mentions, "are situated at the foot of his work", shows on the one hand that the relevant terminology had concerned him, and that obviously he considers deprocating the involvement with certain versions of writing that contemporary theory has re-established, e.g. parody. But, possibly, one does not need to delve into poets' theoretical baggage any further, as at certain points we do well do distinguish the poet from the critic.

It is commonly accepted that, contrary to irony, satire presupposed 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. Despite this, Seferis used satire and humour, to the extent that it can liberate from the above mentioned confinements. A humour, however, completely different from the piradellian humour of Cavafy, as we shall see in the following. As regards the political satire of Seferis it will be necessary to establish certain of his beliefs, and to have his sensitivity ignited by the surrounding atmosphere of his period, to reach in other words the war years, in order for him to write three of his most well known satirical poems with a distinct political point: "Kerk Str. Oost, Pretoria, Transvaal", "Days of April '43", and "Actors, M. E." From these three political satires of Seferis that which is intertwined with the major themes of the seferian mythology, and is in dialogue, simultaneously, with the tradition of Greek political satire, is the one written in 1943, when the poet was in the Middle East (all the poems in English come from: George Seferis, *Completed poems*, translated, edited, and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton, 1981 [expanded edition]):
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.

Bodies, mats, wood, make-up rhymes, feelings, veils, jewelry masks, sunsets, wails and howls exclamations and suns rising cast off helter-skelter along with us (Where are we going? Where are you going?) nerves naked upon our skin like the stripes of an onager of zebra exposed and naked, dry and burning (When were we born? When buried?) and taut like the strings of a lyre incessantly humming. Look also in our heart: a sponge ambling through the street and market place soaking up the blood and bile of both the tetrarch and the thief.

Another four of Seferis poems follow, that were published after his death ("The alibi or free Greeks, 43", "Partisans in Middle East", "Chorale from Mathios Paschalis 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", which is a parody of "L'apres-midi d'un faune" of Stephane Mallarme. The manner in which Seferis combines tradition and Satire with song in Thrush has been noted by Savidis. More significant, perhaps, is the satiric function of parody in the part that is subtitled "The Ra-
dio" 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 George the Second.

«The Radio»

---“Sails puffed out by the wind
are all that stay in the mind.
Perfume of silence and pine
will soon be the 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
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…”

SOULMONGER*

As has been noted, the only satirical poem of the collection Logbook III is the poem “Neofytos confined speaks” where three voices are ironically intertwined: that of the poet, that of Leondios Mahairas and to a certain extent, at the end of the poem, that of Shakespeare in the explosive exodos 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, that finally, in the Cyprus experience is redemption which predominates, a result of human communication and love, and the unique, for the poet, experience, of an authentic

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

world that has been lost from Greece irrevocably. Undoubtedly, as we shall see in the following, this unique perhaps momentary redemption, initially emotional and ideological, also pervades Seferis’ poetics.

After 1954 the satirical vein of the poet appears to dry up with few exceptions the 3rd poem of “Summer Solstice” in the collection Three secret poems (1966) and two poems in Book of Exercises II (1976). I read you only one effective satirical synthesis which parodies the familiar statement of the dictator Papadopoulos “Greece, of the Greek Christians”, where the title consists of an anticipatory answer to the questioning sense of the poem:

«Από βλακέλα»

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

The poem “Ippios Kolonos” (1970) consists the last political satire of Seferis whose satirical nature is not constructed only from the cry “yahoo”, that Seferis borrowed as it is commonly known from Giulivers Travels by Jonathan Swift, but from the undisguised caustic tone.

But, certainly, Seferis’ satire does not exhaust itself in politics. A good demonstration of the correct dosage of satirical and lyrical language consists in my opinion the superb poem “Last stop”, that incorporates together with other material the theme that dominates in “The afternoon of a corrupt”, the mob of the mature “resistance fighters that at the end of September, and the beginning of October, at the end of the second World War, gathered at Kava 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*;

*The phrase is from the Introduction to the Memoirs of General Makriyiannis, one of the principal leaders of the Greek War of Independence. His Memoirs is, perhaps, the most important prose work in Greek literature of the nineteenth century. See The Memoirs of General Makriyiannis 1797-1864, edited and translated by H. A. Lidderdale (London, 1966).
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 top 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 on to the table;

in this Etruscan village, behind the sea of Salerno

behind the harbors of our return, on the edge

of an autumn squall, the moon

outstripped the clouds, and houses

on the slope opposite became enamel:

Amica silentia lunae**.

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

fester the wound of each of us

or what you might term differently: nemesis, fate,

or simply bad habits, fraud and deceit***,

** Virgil, Aeneid II, 55.

*** Makriyiannis, Memoirs II, 258.
or even the selfish urge to reap reward from the blood of others.

Man frays easily in wars;
man is soft, a sheaf of grass,
lips and fingers that hunger for a white breast
eyes that half-close in the radiance of day
and feet that would run, no matter how tired,
at the slightest call of profit.
Man is soft and thirsty like grass,
insatiable like grass, his nerves roots that spread;
when the harvest comes
he would rather have the scythes whistle in some other field;
when the harvest comes
some call out to exorcise the demon
some become entangled in their riches, others deliver
speeches.
But what good are exorcisms, riches, speeches
when the living are far away?
Is man ever anything else?
Isn't it this that confers life?
A time for planting, a time for harvesting.

"The same thing over and over again", you'll tell me,
friend.
But the thinking of a refugee, the thinking of a prisoner,
the thinking
of a person when he too has become a commodity—
try to change it; you can't.
Maybe he would have liked to stay king of the cannibals
wasting strength that nobody buys,
to promenade in fields of agapanthus
*to hear the drums with bamboo overhead,
as courtiers dance with prodigious masks.
But the country they're chopping up burning like a
pine-tree—you see it.
Either in the dark train, without water, the windows broken,
night after night
or in the burning ship that according to the statistics is
bound to sink
this is riveted in the mind and does n't change
this has planted images like those trees
that cast their branches in virgin forests

*** African lilies. See “Stratis Thalassinos among the Agapanthi”, p. 258.
so that they take root in the earth and sprout again;
they cast their branches that sprout again, striding mile
after mile;
our mind's a virgin forest of murdered friends.
And if I talk to you in fables and parables
it's because it's more gentle for you that way; and horror
really can't be talked about because it's alive,
because it's mute and goes on growing:
memory-wounding pain
drips by day drips in sleep******.

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.

In the *Book of exercises II* there are other satirical along with humoristic
poems. The motto of the collection is a limerick “In the manner of E.L.”,
that acquires, even if partly, a determining force for the collection. I refer
primarily to the third part named *Events* (1931-1971), whose study is reveal-
ing for the function of the satirical perspective of Seferis' poetry.

Sometimes in the manner of parody, sometimes using open irony, and
sometimes in an undisguised direct manner, Seferis marks the lack of com-
munication, that he experiences as a human being and as a poet, and he
interacts with tradition, both Greek and foreign if one excludes the politi-
cal satires which I have already mentioned (“A type setter went mad”, “Sy-
gru Avenue, II”, “Le cheval n'a pas dit M.E.R.D.E.”, “Frontispiece on re-writ-
ing Odes”, some parodies of *Palatini Anthologia*, “What the camel said”
which is a parody of the third part of Eliots' *Waste land*, “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 M. Avgeris notes “perhaps with the
method of satire, using it with greater sharpness and more systematically,

with the dramatic and sarcastic style that is never missing, the poet could provide a great variety of wealth and force to his work, if the conditions of his life, his education and his occupation were not to become obstacles. Since, his satirical eye and his expressive strengths as well sarcasm and often anguish are not lacking and the dramatic and pessimistic feeling that accompanies his thought could find a new form of expression. Is it possible that he lacks daring? Perhaps a broader concept for the satirical genre could define as dramatic satire and together as a cry of anguish the poem of the same collection with the title “Here among the bones”? For one who wishes to study carefully all of Seferis poetry, it is quite easy to find many verses that could be characterized as dramatic satire. But Seferis’ satire also wears dense veils like the rest of his poetry”.

Seferis uses a fanciful humour that frequently alludes to the climate of Tristan Corbiere and Paul Jean Toulet, but also to Valery 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 in today’s lecture, for many reasons, partly because they also surpass my translation abilities. (I mention in passing the well-known limericks and the publication or *Enteptsizika* by Mathios Paschalis, edited by G.P. Eftyhidis in 1989. Tangible and forthright samples of this intention are the verses that are inserted in the novel *Six nights at Acropolis*, the witty *Poems with drawings for children* (1975), edited in honour of Anna Krinou, grand daughter of Maro Seferis, and the poets’ involvement with limericks, a poetic form that is principally playful. Traces of this intention still exist unpublished in his archives that belongs to the Gennadeius 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 you two examples of an obvious playful intent expressed as early as in the *Book of exercises* (1928-1937), that transforms itself in a variety of ways in his work and conceals an undermining view of the world, that according to Nanos Valaoritis, in combination with elements of the absurd that are interwined in his imagery places Seferis in the modernists:

«Haiku»

Again I put on
The tree’s foliage
And you—you bleat.
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«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 through the interpolation of the incongruous, through the confusion of the categories of the world, and the abolishment of the idle image of the world ["Narration"]. In any case, a first reading of his Diaries or his correspondence is capable of revealing the playful intent and the humoristic view of the world. Also, the poets' humor finds its place in the novel Six nights at Acropolis, by way of Nikola and Strati, as Gotovos has shown.

It is common ground for critics that Seferis preoccupies 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 Eliots’ work. As far back as the 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 a common feature the ironic coupling of opposites that the very nature of things imposes. As has already been stated, in the Turning point there is a potent irony towards tradition. Apart form the much discussed "Denial" and the poem "Companions in Hades" that according to Takis Sinopoulos would annoy his friends who belonged to the school of “objective” poetry as it “becomes blurred from the contradictory and uncontrolled circumstances of
the ego”, most of the poems of the collection interact ironically with tradition, with “Erotikos Logos” constituting exactly the opposite end, as it expresses nostalgia for tradition.

High points of his ironic achievement are the poem “Folk Song” and “Slowly you spoke”, the last of which I will read to you because of the unfolding of the self-irony in the third part, that is subtitled “Adolescent” in the poem “Stratis Thalassinos describes a man” from the collection Book of exercises A. I quote the first poem as well as its ironic reply:

«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!

«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—
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 opens a new perspective for the regeneration of tradition, on the other hand it indicates metaphorically its subversion, indicating the new direction his poetics opens up for poetry. On other occasions his irony is used in order to satirize and its technique is developed in his work even when it has to do with the same motif. For instance, the ironic comment that attacks lack of judgment, and the alienation of man “your eyes, watching, would be beautiful”, in the well known 13th poem of *Mythistorema*, becomes in the 16th 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.”

Besides at other moments seferian titles crown the poems ironically determining the interpretation. For example in the poem “Joy interlude” the title is at total odds with the content, as Mario Vitti has shown as well as other critics. At other points, the symbol in the poems, such as the sun in the above poem are composed in an ironic manner, through the positioning and canceling 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 satiric irony, as for instance in the poem “Letter of Mathios Paschalis”, but that irony which allows to the reading to move on two parallel planes. This is achieved with a wealth of rhetoric that can be summarized 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 the ironic anachronism with Shakespeare’s statement in the poem “Neo-fytos”, as Peter Mackridge aptly notes; b) the dialogue he generates with tradition that is carried out either through quotation, mention, parody and pastiche, that at times has an ironic perspective, since it undermines or comments on the idea of the original text (as for e.g. happens in the poem “The return of the exile”, to which I shall return); c) contrasts that undermine basic conceptual points of the seferian universe, such as repatriation, the function of light as a catalyst for repatriation, catharsis, communication as we shall see in the following.

From the ironic sensibility of the *Turning point* to the use of personas and the polyphonic fusion in the poems “The return of the exile” and “Hamstead” or even the conversation with Makriyannis that 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’ poetics, all the same, tracing it is absolutely necessary for the interpretation of his at times complex work.
The systematic study of Seferis' irony can open up new perspectives for the interpretation of the poems, or, furthermore, to establish or to make redundant older interpretations, as it can reveal the transitions of the poetic ego and the shades of the voices that inhabit the poems of Seferis. For e.g. through the perspective of irony the concept of repatriation, a central concept for Seferian poetry as is widely accepted, already undermined by Cavafy and naturally by the historical developments that in 1922 closed definitively the road of return, literally and figuratively, is also undermined in the seferian works as the moodiness of the poetic subject casts its shadows on it all too often. Intertwined with the concept of repatriation is the concept of human alienation that the satirical poems inform against, and is projected constantly as a result of man's estrangement from the possibility of a homeward return to Greek values. Similarly, the determining for repatriation presence of light with its dual nature "angelic and black" light, a nature that is re-established without, however, significant consequences for repatriation, following the decided and at the same time liberating experience of Cyprus.

The function of return to the homeland in seferian poetry has been studied by scholars in the past and continues to provide food for thought for new interpretive approaches. For e.g. repatriation in the work of Seferis is connected directly with concerns that began in the years of his youth and follows him all through his life, like, 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 his homeland is a seed that goes to grow. A Greek who returns to his homeland is a man who is going to blaspheme", notes the desperate poet in the novel Six nights at Acropolis. [...] This quote clearly alludes to the poem "The return of the exile" that embodies poetically, employing the method of subversive dialogue with tradition (in the given situation the folk song that N. Politis had entitled as such) the disparity between Greek values and the disowns of reality that epitomise contemporary Greek reality. 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".

"I'm looking for my old garden; the trees come to my waist and the hills resemble terraces wet 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".

"I am looking for my old house, the tall windows darkened by ivy; I am looking for the ancient column known to sailors. How can I get into this coop? The roof comes to my shoulders and however far I look I see men on their knees as though saying their prayers".

"My old friend, don't you hear me? You'll get used to it little by little. Your house is the one you see
and soon friends and relatives
will come knocking at the door
to welcome you back tenderly”.

“Why is your voice so distant?
Raise your head a little
so that I understand you.
As you speak you grow
gradually smaller
as though you’re sinking into the ground”.

“My old friend, stop a moment and think:
you’ll get used to it little by little.
Your nostalgia has created
a non-existent country, with laws
alien to earth and man”.

“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”.

Of a similar irony is the interaction of the poet with the folk song, as
was expressed in the approach of S. Laoumitzi at the last conference on Se-
feris, in the poem “Last day”, where the heroic message of the folk song is
undermined and subverted thematically, for it to be subverted also in terms
of form, through the style of the digre in the poem that follows, entitled
“Spring, A.D. [—My friend, walking beside me, was singing a disjoined song:
“In spring, in summer, slaves...”].

It is well known fact that the theme of repatriation and the conceptual
positive and negative presentation of the figure of Odysseus has a long tra-
dition in European letters and presents a variety of different versions, with
the marked case of Dante who true to the call of his times (the turn of the
13th in the 14th century) that thirsted for knowledge and supported discov-
eries, in the 26th song of the Hell, he wants Odysseus to betray repatriation
for the sake of knowledge. Alfred Lord Tennyson’s version is similar, where
the homonymous hero does return yet suffocates in the tight confines of
his homeland and leaves for an unknown destination. The undecided des-
tination of Tennyson is substituted by the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli in his work “Ultimo viaggio” (1904), where Odysseus makes the same journey after a nine years stay on Ithaka, together with his companions, only to discover that nothing remains the same any longer. Similarly in the Odysse (1917) of Nikos Kazantzakis Ithaka is not for the much traveled Odysseus but only another passing place that will be followed by many other still, until the final journey, that of death. In the work of Seferis the constant concern of the poet for repatriation along with the related themes (The wandering, the exchange with the dead, and the quest for authenticity is validated by the references to Odysseus, that begin from the first collection, The turning point and extend up to the last, the Three hidden poems with a quantitative and qualitative culmination—from the point of functionality—from the Mythistorema up to Thrush. At this point, I will not discuss references to Odysseus whose ironic dimension has been noted in other studies, as, for instance, in the poem “Companions in Hades”. I will make reference to some mechanisms of Seferis’ poetry that tend to produce ironic polarities, a condition of the poets erratic moods that undermines the ardent passion for repatriation and consequently determines his stance towards the figures of the given mythology. I am not ready to accept George Kehagioglous’ interesting verbal comment at the last conference on Seferis, that “possibly the form of the peddler in the poem “Peddler from Sidon” comprised a comic caricature of Odysseus, because I can not substantiate a convincing answer, by pointing to verses that reflect 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. E.g.: As early as The 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 the *Mythistorema* and onwards:

H'

[...]

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. I read an extract from the 10th 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 Book of exercises:

* The Symplegades, through which Jason and the Argonauts had to pass, were dangerous clashing rocks at the juncture of the Bosporus and the Black Sea (Pontus Euxinus).
Meanwhile Greece goes on traveling, always traveling
And if we see “the Aegean flower with corpses”
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 the *Mythistorema* the idea of returning to the homeland is self-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 repatriation in Seferis’ poetry is connected with the loss of identity on both the collective and 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 course, as it exemplifies the attempts of the poetic subject (to find, to feel its way through, to understand) that results in failure (it drowns, ends, dies). At times the position of this ironic imagery, that is so frequent as to not require a mention of examples, is succeeded by the certainty of disillusionment, where of course there is no room for irony: «Sinks whoever raises the great stones» (“Mycenae”, *Gymnopedía*).

As I have already noted, the rhetoric of Seferis’ irony is sufficiently inventive. Apart from the dual structures, it is frequently supported by the reversal of normal categories of reality such as in the poem «Stratis Thalassinos among the Agapanthi», where the dead and alive exchange roles:

[...]

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.

*Aeschylus, Agamemnon 659.*
At certain points, the irony is served from the fusion of linguistic codes, as in *Thrush*, or the poem «In the manner of George Seferis», at other points with the grammar and syntax, since the instrumental energy for the poem is taken on by the participle syntax, and at other times by the versification as the use of traditional meter intertwines with the poetic deadlock. 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 it uses unaltered verses from *Erofylé*. The form is in ironic contrast to the content of the poem that 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 last middle age of the 15th century through the form, the Cretan Renaissance of the 17th century through the language, the barren present that the poet tries to surpass, managing to write a poem with borrowed elements in a single composition. (Στάσιμο. Μοίρα που μας επηρέα την εξία, / μη γνώσωθες, 
τ’ακάτεχα κορμά / το δεν τα μαστορέψα δεν το ξέρα, / βούθα κι 
alάφρωνέ μας την καρδιά / να χτίζομε περβόλα στον αγέρα.)

But rhyme, at times, also becomes a joke in Seferis’ poetry (e.g. “Crickets”) or even dissonant (e.g. “Fog”) etc. 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 interpretation. E.g. 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”. One cannot help but notice Seferis’ achievement and contribution to the augmentation of irony through stride.

The systematic study of Seferis’ rhetoric of irony and satire is necessary, not to conclude in 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, for what is his position exactly towards tradition, with which poets does he engage in a meaningful dialogue and how, what is his spirituality comprised of, what is the development of his poetics, as regards 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 from somewhere.

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