

Fotiny CHRISTAKOUDY-KONSTANTINIDOU<sup>1</sup>

## Formalistic Markers of the ‘Modern’ in Greek Poetry: a Retrospective from the Point of View of Literary History

### Abstract

Defining Greek Modernism proves to be a difficult task. It can be said that trying to outline its boundaries raises more questions than provides us with answers, because it somehow resists homogeneous and pure categorisations. Through analysis of verse building we shall try to give a formal answer to the question of what is ‘modern’ for Neo-Greek literature and how, in fact, poetry becomes ‘modern’. As far as the measured speech is concerned, this argument can be easily solved by opting to examine the verse building techniques (versification, rhythmic steps, rhymes, tropes, etc.) and especially the presence of the free verse as a marker of emancipation from the iambic verse of fifteen syllables, emblematic for the Greek folk-song tradition and known also as decapentasyllabic verse. The occurring changes in metric structures are both a complex and a long process that gave its most mature fruit in the works of the 1930s generation (G. Seferis, O. Elytis, I. Ritsos, etc.). However, it turns out that these changes could not possibly be considered as the only leading indicator of modernity, perhaps once again because Greek poetry remained firmly rooted in the local tradition of artistic conventions (which can be seen as a general projection of the spiritual impulses dominating the Balkan peninsula) and metamorphoses encompassed the literary body at a somewhat conservative pace.

**Keywords:** Greek Modernism; Neo-Greek poetry; the Greek folk-song iambic verse of fifteen syllables (decapentasyllabic verse); from freed to free verse (the poetic works of the 1880s generation, K. Hadzopoulos, C. P. Cavafy, K. Karyotakis, G. Seferis)

### Резюме

#### Формалистични маркери на *модерното* в гръцката поезия – литературно-исторически екскурс

Гръцкият модернизъм и неговото дефиниране се оказват нелека задача. Може да се каже, че опитът да се очертаят границите му поражда повече въпроси, отколкото отговори; той някак определено се съпротивлява на хомогенните и чисти категоризации. Чрез анализа на стиховото изграждане ще се опитаме да дадем формален отговор на въпроса какво е *модерно* за гръцката поезия и по какъв начин всъщност поезията става *модерна*. По отношение на мерената реч за някои изследователи този спор може да бъде лесно разрешен, ако заложим на нейната функционална натовареност и търсим в техниката на стиха (стихосложение, ритмични стъпки, рими, тропи и т.н.) и най-вече в присъствието на свободния стих белег за еманципиране от емблематичния за гръцката народно-песенна традиция ямбичен петнайсетсричков стих. Настъпващите промени в метричните структури са сложен и дълъг процес, който дава най-зрелия си плод в произведенията на поколението творци от 30-те години на XX в. (Г. Сеферис, О. Елитис, Я. Ритос и др). Тези промени обаче не биха могли да осигурят всички отговори и да бъдат единственият водещ маркер за модерност, може би още веднъж поради факта, че гръцката поезия по балкански остава твърдо вкоренена в местната традиция и метаморфозите обхващат литературното тяло с някак консервативно темпо.

<sup>1</sup> **Fotiny Christakoudy-Konstantinidou** [Фотини Христакуди-Константиниду] is a Senior Assistant Professor of Greek Language and Literature at the University of Sofia St. Kliment Ohridski since 2005 (Department of General, Indo-European and Balkan Linguistics, Faculty of Slavonic Studies). In 2007 she received a Ph.D. degree with a thesis on the topic of *The modern literary movements in Greek poetry (first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.)*, which was carried out at the Institute for Balkan Studies. Currently, she has been working on different authors from Greek 20<sup>th</sup> c. poetry such as Nikos Kavvadias, Kostas Ouranis, Kostas Karyotakis, etc. (or poets from the so-called ‘second symbolist wave’). She has published articles on the work of Greek symbolist poets from the 1890s (K. Hadzopoulos, L. Porfyras, etc.), Odysseas Elytis, the problem of Greek diglossia, presenting also in Greek the poetry of Bulgarian authors such as Nikola Vaptzarov and Valery Petrov.

**Ключови думи:** Гръцки модернизъм; новогръцка поезия; гръцката народно-песенна традиция и петнадесетричковият ямбичен стих; от освобождения към свободния стих (поколението от 80-те години на XIX в., К. Хадзопулос, К. П. Кавафис, К. Кариотакис, Г. Сеферис)

Defining Greek Modernism proves to be a difficult task. It can be said that trying to outline its boundaries raises more questions than provides us with answers, because it somehow resists homogeneous and pure categorizations<sup>2</sup>. Still, this remains one of the most interesting, debated and controversially interpreted fields of Neo-Greek literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> c. The questions about the cultural identity, the literary canon and the concept of continuity, the place of Greece in relation to Europe and the European models (adopted and creatively interpreted in Greek literature in contemporary times) usually come out in the foreground, where the position of Greece as a recipient inevitably gets connected to its status as a cultural dominant over several historical eras (the Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the period of the Balkan Enlightenment). Greece's cultural hegemony in Pax Mediterranea, its role as a political and a cultural regulator during the époque of the Byzantine Empire and its being a leading factor at the time of the national Revival on the Balkans quite naturally intertwine with the aporias about what place it is assigned to take in the phase of the New History. The big problem is how to master and channel the conquests of tradition and how to respond to the modern, the eccentric, the innovative, so that in modern times in this process of cultural reinvention it becomes possible for Greek literature to redefine itself (and not to lose itself either) in this conundrum (reminiscent of Alice's wonderings in Wonderland).

It is not easy to define the modernization of Greece at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. – yes, it is undoubtedly both material and social (certainly these data can be quantitatively traced); but it is also spiritual and conceptual – and this is firstly evident in the manifesto-essays and in poetry, where the 'I', as a literary subject, gets most visibly and quickly emancipated, expressing the mentality of the modern individual with his tyrannical sensitivity and the innate sense of primordial loneliness.

In order to put the research of Modernism with regards to Greek poetry (and the modernization of Greek culture in general) on a proper scholarly basis, I think it would be particularly useful to analyze verse building. Through it we will try to give a formalistic answer to the question of what is 'modern' for Neo-Greek literature and how, in fact, poetry becomes 'modern'. As far as the measured speech is concerned, this argument can be solved easily by opting to examine the verse building techniques (versification, rhythmic steps, rhymes, tropes, etc.) and especially the presence of the free

---

<sup>2</sup> Tziovas, D. Mapping out Greek Literary Modernism (edited by D. Tziovas). In: *Greek Modernism and Beyond*. Oxford, Romans and Littlefield Publishers, 1997, p. 25.

verse as a marker of emancipation from the Greek folk-song tradition emblematic **iambic verse of fifteen syllables** also known as decapentasyllabic verse (Greek: δεκαπεντασύλλαβος στίχος, lit. ‘15-syllable verse’), named as well political verse (Greek: πολιτικός στίχος)<sup>3</sup>.

The use of the iambic verse of fifteen syllables, which was essential to the whole Byzantine period and later to the Neo-Greek poetical versification, was established around the 10<sup>th</sup> c. In the following centuries (10-15 c.) the iambic verse of fifteen syllables functioned as almost the only versification instrument of a number of narrative poetry texts (*the Epic poem of Digenis Akritas, the Acritic songs*<sup>4</sup>, *the allegorical and satirical poems from the Byzantine Middle Ages, the Byzantine romance novels written after the 12<sup>th</sup> c., etc.*). The way it is represented in the lyrical works from the Golden era in the development of the literature at the island of Crete (late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> c.) shows that it not only acquired stable morphological characteristics, but became also a poetic instrument in the hands of bards with a sense of the authorship of the creative process. In the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. the rhyme, which until then was unknown to Greek poetry, appeared in the Cretan literature. The rhyming iambic verse of fifteen syllables, used by Vintsentzos (Vikentios) Kornaros (1553-1614) in his narrative poem *Erotokritos*, produced this impressive masterpiece in the early 17<sup>th</sup> c., creating a greater semantic and metric entity and thus generally updating the Greek metric patterns<sup>5</sup>. The non-rhyming decapentasyllabic verse in the period of the Ottoman domination in the Balkans was developed actively in the folk songs. Greece’s national poet D. Solomos (1798-1857)<sup>6</sup> and the established by him Ionian School of Romanticism also brilliantly used the iambic verse of fifteen syllables, leaning on the achievements of folk-song art. The 1880s generation of poets with its representatives G. Drosinis (1859-1951), N. Kambas (1857-1932), Ioannis Polemis (1862-1924) and the last, but not least K. Palamas (1859-1943)<sup>7</sup>, managed to modernize the subject, but not entirely the

<sup>3</sup> More about the decapentasyllabic verse see in: Jeffreys, M. J. The Nature and Origins of the Political Verse. In: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28, 1974, pp. 141-195. The term ‘political’ most probably has a meaning related to ‘simple’, ‘ordinary’.

<sup>4</sup> The Acritic songs (Greek: Ακριτικά τραγούδια, ‘frontiersmen songs’) are the heroic or epic poetry that emerged in the Byzantine Empire probably around the 9<sup>th</sup> c. The songs celebrated the exploits of the so-called Akrites, the frontier guards defending the eastern borders of the Byzantine Empire.

<sup>5</sup> Γαραντούδης, Ε. Στιχουργία. Στο: *Λεξικό της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας. Πρόσωπα. Έργα. Ρεύματα. Όροι*. Αθήνα, Εκδόσεις Πατάκη, 2007, σ. 1418.

<sup>6</sup> Dionysios Solomos (1798 –1857) born on the island of Zakynthos was a poet of Greek origin who is best known for writing the *Hymn to Liberty* (Greek: Ύμνος εις την Έλευθερίαν), of which the first two stanzas, set to music by Nikolaos Mantzaros, became the Greek national anthem in 1865 and later of the Republic of Cyprus. A central figure of the Ionian (or Heptanese) School, Dionysios Solomos is considered to be the national poet of the Greeks, because he made use of the earlier poetic tradition (Cretan literature, folk songs) and was the first to systematically cultivate the demotic language, altering its status and paving the way for its implementation in literature. A literary circle is formed around Solomos, which promotes the recognition of *dimotiki* as a language of literature, including I. Polilas, S. Markoras, G. Markoras, C. Manesis, I. Tipaldos, etc. See more in: Δημαράς, Κ. Θ. *Ελληνικός Ρομαντισμός*. Αθήνα, Ερμής, 1994, σ. 24.

<sup>7</sup> Kostis Palamas (1859-1943) is a national literary icon, a central figure of the Greek literary life and, particularly, of the Greek literary generation of the 1880s, being one of the cofounders of the so-called New Athenian School (or Palamian School, or Second Athenian School) along with Georgios Drosinis, Nikos Kambas, Ioannis Polemis. The New (Second)

metre of Greek verse. The long-awaited changes came into being when Symbolism entered Greek poetry and sparked a poetic revolution through the achievements of the 1890s generation of symbolist poets.

It is well known that in order to convey the intangibility of music Western European symbolist bards were trying to get rid from the chains of the classical metre patterns<sup>8</sup> gradually substituting the ‘freed’ or ‘liberated’ verse (French: « vers libérés »)<sup>9</sup> with the free verse (French: « vers libres »). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> c. the work of the 1880s poetic generation became a creative workshop where not only the old versification tradition was modified, but also prerequisites for its radical change were created with the emergence of the liberated verse – a transient variant between the consistent syllabic patterns and the free verse. However, most important steps for the development of the Neo-Greek versification models were made during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and especially between the 1920s and 1930s. It is then that the use of the free verse, whose domination up to these days imposes new rules for the reading and the analysis of modern poetry, increased substantially<sup>10</sup>.

But whether, in fact, in terms of Greek literature, formalistic changes can be traced in pure type? And as a marker of modernity, are they, in the case of Greek poetry, a relevant litmus for assessing and answering the question of how modern a work is? Even some of the ‘modern’ authors, precisely the 1890s Greek symbolist poets, and even the authors from the 1920s and the 1930s, continue to use traditional metrics. I will proceed to analyse what is actually happening in Greek 1890s poetry.

In his first collection of poems *Songs of the Wilderness* (*Τραγούδια της ερημιάς*) (1898) K. Hadzopoulos (1868-1920)<sup>11</sup> follows the tradition of Symbolism, according to which the lyrical cycle is the fundamental structural unit of the poetic text<sup>12</sup>. The verses, included in the five parts that make up the collection of poems *Songs of the Wilderness* (with the cycles *Songs of the Wilderness*, *Flute*,

---

Athenian School was opposed to the pompous and stereotyped style of the Old Athenian Romantic School (1830-1880), which showed preference for the use of *katharevousa* in poetry writing.

<sup>8</sup> Or should we say “the tyrant demands of the metered line” (Allen, Ch. Cadenced Free Verse. In: *College English*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1948, pp. 195-199.

<sup>9</sup> The French symbolists, most notably Verlaine, introduced new metrical forms and modifications of the traditional ones. The intention was to free French versification from classical conventions. But this ‘liberated’ verse was still syllabic and still rhymed. See more in: Cuddon, J. A. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (5<sup>th</sup> edition). Oxford, Penguin, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Γαραντούδης, Ε. Στιχουργία. Στο: *Λεξικό της Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας. Πρόσωπα-έργα-ρεύματα-όροι*. Αθήνα, Εκδόσεις Πατάκη, 2007, σ. 1418.

<sup>11</sup> K. Hadzopoulos (1868-1920) is a major representative of the first symbolist generation of the 1890s, considered to be also its ideologist through a series of theoretical works among which the renowned *The Psychology of Symbolism* (1920) (See in: *Κριτικά κείμενα* (επιμ. Κρίστα Ανεμούδη-Αρζόγλου). Αθήνα, Νεοελληνική βιβλιοθήκη Ιδρύματος Κώστας και Ελένης Ουράνη, 1996, σσ. 124-137). He was a poetry, novel and essay writer, a translator and an editor of the short-lived, but significant, avant-garde magazine *H Téχνη* (1897-1899), which fervently defended *dimotiki*.

<sup>12</sup> Ιλίνσκαγια, Σ. Συμβολιστικές διαστάσεις στην ποίηση του Κ. Χατζόπουλου. - <http://www.epoxi.gr/scriptum66.htm> (24. 01. 2018).

*Dreams of Love, Winter Songs, The Songs of Linos*), express with precision the specifics of the transition from romantic poetry to verses related to Parnassism (in the fourth part) and wonderful symbolist verses (in the fifth part). The musical orchestration of the poetic language in it reflects one of Hadzopoulos's idealistic aspirations, i.e. the search for harmony. The author admires harmony in nature and strives to revive it in his poems. For that purpose, Hadzopoulos accepts the artistic impulses for a freed versification, but in the meantime, he **tries not to avoid** the traditional metric expression at all costs. On the contrary. The obvious symmetry of the verses and the carefully selected rhyming in the first part of the work (the eponymous *Songs of the Wilderness*) contribute to the melodic sound of a meaningfully organized measured speech, saturated with psychological parallelism and perceptible suggestion. The author, however, does not go far beyond the traditionally organized verse, but we rather observe his desire for it to be varied with much imagination. In the following cycles some metric limitations seem to drop out – in the second part, *Flute*, the iambic verses of fifteen syllables are already non-rhyming, while in the fourth and the fifth part, *Winter Songs* and *The Songs of Linos*, the poetic experiments deepen through noteworthy rotation of the rhyme and rhythm, however, they still remain reminiscent of the folk-song verse<sup>13</sup>.

In *Elegies and Idylls* (1898), which was published the same year as *Songs of the Wilderness*, we are witnessing a much more systematic use of modern verse building techniques – syntactic and graphical verse breaks, non-periodic rhyming, repetitions of words and whole phrases, alliteration, assonance. This collection of poems explicitly shows that Hadzopoulos has probed into the essence of the interpretative possibilities of Symbolism through its power to convey meanings thanks to the implied, the allusion and the association<sup>14</sup>.

Even the work of C. P Cavafy (1863-1933), who is unambiguously considered 'modern', brings us no closer to a definite assertion that the completely altered organization of the verse is a *sine qua non* qualifier of modernity. Let us analyse the poetry of the Great Alexandrian. With his dual view to the world, both from the 'outside' and the 'inside', Cavafy has put an end to subjectivity and has prepared the ground for a new poetry – objectifying simultaneously the external and the internal world. His language, however, is one of the most colourful blends in Modern Greek literature of *dimotiki* and *katharevousa* with borrowings from the Constantinopolitan Greek idiom. The rhythm is iambic and so crafted that it is hardly perceivable<sup>15</sup>. Rhyme is present (especially in the early verses of Cavafy), gradually becoming less and less frequent, and the punctuation marks are still playing a particular role

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., <http://www.epoxi.gr/scriptum66.htm> (24. 01. 2018).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., <http://www.epoxi.gr/scriptum66.htm> (24. 01. 2018).

<sup>15</sup> Ρούσσου, Β. *Ο ελεύθερος στίχος υπό το πρίσμα της σύγχρονης μετρικολογίας: τα πρώτα ελληνικά ελευθερόστιχα ποιήματα (1920-1940) (διατριβή)*. -<http://thesis.ekt.gr/thesisBookReader/id/23160#page/198/mode/1up> (24. 01. 2018).

in the poems. That is why the famous literary critic and poet A. Karandonis declares that Cavafy can be considered a forerunner of modernity, but still he is not a completely modern poet, because as far as the modelling and the composing of his verses is concerned, he remains a self-conscious classic craftsman<sup>16</sup>.

It is only in the poetry of K. Karyotakis (1896-1928) during the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. that we can discuss the bolder exploration of new poetic techniques. In his work, we can already witness the lack of rhymes and the lack of a concrete length of the verses, which gradually acquire a more narrative tone, also the appearance and more systematic use of the free verse, contributing to his becoming an icon of modernity. Despite that, many of his verses remain rhymed and many critics doubt the depth of his literary reformism<sup>17</sup>. Karyotakis' influence "continued to be felt well into the 1930s, but the poetry of his sterile imitators could lead to nowhere"<sup>18</sup>. The advent of Surrealism in Greek poetry during the 1930s will largely contribute to the spread of new versification techniques.

Hence, originate G. Seferis' (1900-1971) creative quests – his work is doomed to revive Greek poetry. The lyrical renaissance, which is associated to his name, has its roots in the work of two less known poets: Theodoros Dorros (1895-1954) and Nikitas Rantos – a pseudonym of N. Kalamaris (1907-1988). It is exactly they who, in contrast to any traditional forms, give free expression in their verse of "subconscious elements uncontrolled by reason"<sup>19</sup>. But their writings are soon forgotten.

Theodoros Dorros is the author of a single poetic collection titled *Saving the Pleasure* (*Στου γλυτωμού το χάζι*, Paris, 1930, Athens 1981)<sup>20</sup>. It consists of fifteen poems written in free verse and described as "exile experiences" and allegory of "the absence that has an ontological meaning"<sup>21</sup>. The references of his poetry are related to the poetics of the City and the writing techniques in the style of Charles Baudelaire, including the theory of cosmic 'correspondences' (French: « les correspondences »); echoes from the poems of Karyotakis are also present (with poetic phrases expressing despair and suicide impulses)<sup>22</sup>. Obviously this is the first poetry collection entirely subordinate to a language that is distant from the conventional verse. It remains, however, almost unknown in Greece. On the first pages of the first issue, it is written: "This book is not sold. It is sent free of charge to those who request

<sup>16</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *Εισαγωγή στη νεώτερη ποίηση. Γύρω από τη σύγχρονη ελληνική ποίηση*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Παπαδήμας, 1990, σ. 150.

<sup>17</sup> Trypanis, C. *Greek poetry (from Homer to Seferis)*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1981, p. 686; Καραντώνης, Α. *op. cit.*, σ. 143.

<sup>18</sup> Trypanis, C. *op. cit.*, p. 694.

<sup>19</sup> Trypanis, C. *op. cit.*, p. 694.

<sup>20</sup> Δανιήλ, Χ. Ντόρρος Θεόδωρος. Στο: *Λεξικό Νεοελληνικής Λογοτεχνίας. Πρόσωπα-έργα-ρεύματα-όροι*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Πατάκη, 2007, σ. 1593.

<sup>21</sup> Αθανασοπούλου, Μ. Θεόδωρος Ντόρρος (εισαγωγή). Στο: *Στου γλυτωμού το χάζι*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Γαβρηλίδης, 2005, σ. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Αθανασοπούλου, Μ. *op. cit.*, σσ. 16-17.

it". The address is provided as well: Theodore Dorros, 17 Rue Bachaumont Paris or 1 East 33rd Street, New York<sup>23</sup>. Only the third edition from 1981 was accompanied by introductory remarks by the literary critic Alexandros Argririou<sup>24</sup>.

The criticism towards the poet's style is that his language is unintelligible, with a frequent use of French and English words, which are often being used in a mixed manner. The result is "a confused and an incomprehensible expression"<sup>25</sup>. Reserves are also shown by M. Vitti<sup>26</sup>; A. Karandonis is talking as well in negative terms about Doros – for him the title of the poetry book is "odd", "funny" and "stupid". He recognizes its avant-garde character as far as the introduction of new writing techniques is concerned, but identifies the author as an artist who "could not and would never become a poet"<sup>27</sup>. This underestimation of Dorros' role for the reception of Surrealism on Greek soil, and in the meantime the lack of aesthetic promptness to accept more radical forms of Modernism in terms of poetic versification, show some essential features of the literary and, in general, of the Greek cultural climate in the interwar period.

It is not by accident that the first suggestions for adopting the new literary credo for writing poetry, based on association and syntactic fragmentation, come from authors working outside Greece. Dorros spent most of his conscious life, living in the United States and France, and N. Randos was born in Switzerland and resided briefly in Greece as a student at the Philosophical Faculty of the Athens University. Randos' lyrical style underwent several stylistic changes related to his artistic interest in the modernist trends of the early 20 c. such as futurism, expressionism and surrealism, which won him some negative criticism as well. In 1933, Randos' debut collection of poems *Poems (Ποιήματα)* was published. Being one of the first true modernists in Greece, Randos was appreciated highly by André Breton who in his third manifesto of Surrealism called him "one of the most brilliant and boldest minds of our age"<sup>28</sup>. Overall, nevertheless that he is considered to be part of it, Randos has distanced himself from the 1930s generation, casting doubt on the Greek character of the new art propelled by it<sup>29</sup>.

But let's turn to the work of one of the most recognized representatives of the mythical 1930s generation – Seferis and his *Mythistorema (Μυθιστόρημα)* (1935) (Greek: 'μυθιστόρημα' translated as 'novel', but also as 'mythical story' – in the age of Modernism polysemantic become even the titles of

<sup>23</sup> Αργυρίου, Α. *Ιστορία της ελληνικής λογοτεχνίας και η πρόσληψή της στα χρόνια του Μεσοπολέμου (1918-1940)*, τομ. Α. Αθήνα, εκδ. Καστανιώτης, 2002, σ. 264.

<sup>24</sup> Αργυρίου, Α. *Εισαγωγή στην τρίτη έκδοση της συλλογής «Στο γλυτωμού το χάζι»*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Αμοργός, 1981.

<sup>25</sup> Βαγενάς, Ν. Γύρω από τις αρχές του ελληνικού Μοντερνισμού. Στο: *Η ειρωνική γλώσσα. Κριτικές μελέτες για τη νεοελληνική γραμματεία*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Στιγμή, 1994, σ. 69.

<sup>26</sup> Vitti, M. *Η γενιά του τριάντα*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Ερμής, 2012, σ. 89.

<sup>27</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *op. cit.*, σ. 163.

<sup>28</sup> Μπρετόν, Α. *Μανιφέστα του Υπερρεαλισμού*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Δωδώνη, 1983, σ. 139.

<sup>29</sup> Τζιόβας, Δ. *Ο μύθος της γενιάς του Τριάντα*. Αθήνα, εκδ. Πόλις, 2011, σ. 319.

poetry collections)<sup>30</sup>. It shows that the artist is increasingly inclined to use the free verse, but in fact, iambic verses of fifteen syllables *are present* in it as well. Thus *Mythistorema* best reflects the balance that a reading audience needs – in it the modern expression, that is unbridled by metrical norms, is balanced with the rhythm of the verse of fifteen syllables; thus the lyrical ‘I’ imperceptibly merges with the voice of the lyrical ‘We’, implied by the deep connection of the verse of fifteen syllables with Greek literary history and folk art. With a narrative diction the verses of *Mythistorema* express the most important topics for Seferis’ poetry – the antique and the Neo-Greek tradition as well as their crossing point with the European culture; the melancholy that arises from the fate of Hellenism and the nostalgia of the people, belonging to the Greek diaspora, who have lost their homeland. The pessimism prevailing in the works of the 1920s and 1930s generation is a reflection of the socio-political crisis that followed the wars from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. and the subsequent Asia Minor Catastrophe; this pessimism is present in Seferis’ lyrical creations, but the poet, who comes from Smyrna (today Izmir), the burnt pearl of the Middle East, does not lose faith in the people belonging to the Greek diaspora. He sculpts through his words their longing for the idyllic *topos* of the native, related to the image of the restored paradise, and presents it to us with splashes of salt, light and remnants of shipwrecks:

Mythistorema 23

A little farther  
 we will see the almond trees blossoming  
 the marble gleaming in the sun  
 the sea breaking into waves  
 a little farther,  
 let us rise a little higher.

(Translation by Sherrard, Philip; Keeley, Edmund)<sup>31</sup>

A fruitful symbiosis between now and then, between history and memory, between the just happening and the irreversibly lost, all reflected in a versification where the past and the present share a common territory similarly to the verses of fifteen syllables and the free verses present in this Seferis’ poetic creation. Perhaps that is why Seferis is so much liked, so highly appreciated by the reading audience – it is remarkable how he made the necessary linguistic, poetic and stylistic synthesis for the Greek culture on her way to modernity.

<sup>30</sup> Christakoudy-Konstantinidou, F. The Motif of Travelling in Greek Poetry in the Interwar Period, p. 96. - <http://ejournal.uni-sofia.bg/index.php/Colloquia/article/view/61/52> (24. 01. 2018).

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.babelmatrix.org> (24. 01. 2018) [Λίγο ακόμα/ θὰ ἰδοῦμε τις ἀμυγδαλιὲς ν’ ἀνθίζουν/ τὰ μάρμαρα νὰ λάμπουν στὸν ἥλιο/ τῆ θάλασσα νὰ κυματίζει/ λίγο ακόμα,/ νὰ σηκωθοῦμε λίγο ψηλότερα. Σεφέρης, Γ. *Ποιήματα*. Αθήνα, Ίκαρος, 2014].

We have seen that in a cultural paradigm as the Greek one, which remains permanently connected with its past, but is also eagerly looking to meet the new, the proposed literary-historical retrospective, analysing the development of poetic versification, is a mixture of “tradition” and “innovation”<sup>32</sup>. The occurring alterations in metric structures are both a complex and a long process that produced its most mature fruit in the works of the 1930s generation (G. Seferis, O. Elytis, I. Ritsos), etc. These changes, however, could not possibly give all the answers and be considered as the only leading indicator of modernity as we saw, perhaps once again, because Greek poetry remained deeply rooted in the local tradition of artistic conventions (which can be seen as a general projection of the spiritual impulses dominating on the Balkan peninsula) and the metamorphoses encompassed the literary body with a somewhat conservative pace. Examining the dynamics of these influences, let us recall as well what the early 20 c. historian Robert Byron has said: “As the sapphire and the aquamarine are distinguished from the turquoise, so the waters of the Aegean Sea differ from the flat blue of the entire Mediterranean”<sup>33</sup>. Inspired by the quest to catch up with the achievements of Western artists, Neo-Greek poets explored Modernism in order to apply its experiences and ideas skilfully to the mentality of a southern nation with an undeniably rich cultural heritage. They pointed the path to the new, gave life to the begotten from the predecessors and thus formed the matrix of modern literary-aesthetic tastes.

---

<sup>32</sup> Καραντώνης, Α. *op. cit.*, σ. 112.

<sup>33</sup> Byron, R. *The Byzantine Achievement: an historical perspective, A.D. 330-1453*. London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987 (reprint; first published in 1929), p. 7.