

SEFERIS IN LIGHT OF THE GREEK LITERARY SCENE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, THROUGH THE CORRESPONDENCE OF HIS YOUTH (1919-1924)

[Seferis a la luz de la escena literaria griega de comienzos del siglo XX, a través de la correspondencia de su juventud (1919-1924)]

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ABSTRACT

Yorgos Seferis' correspondence with his sister Ioanna is an interesting autobiographical document of the poet from many perspectives. Literature is one of the central themes of his letters, so we find many comments about the Greek philological landscape. Through these comments we can get a clear sense of Seferis' position with respect to the philological situation of Greece at that time. This can help us better understand his process of poetic formation, which was to be revealed with the publication of his first books.

KEYWORDS: Yorgos Seferis, personal correspondence, Greek philological movement, language.

Seferis' correspondence with his sister Ioanna¹ is housed in the Gennadius Library archives, at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. Seferis' letters can be found in envelope 52, file 1 of the Constantinos and Ioanna Tsatsos Archive, while Ioanna's letters are located in envelope 99, file 1 of the Yorgos Seferis archive. It consists of more than 800 letters and covers a broad period of the poet's life, from 1919 to 1970, with some interruptions when both lived in Athens or during the Second World War, when they did not have postal communication. It can be divided into three periods: the period of his youth, which is currently in press, encompassing the years between 1919 and 1924; the middle period from 1927 to 1937²; and the final period from 1948 to 1970.

We are going to work with the letters from the first period, which correspond to the almost 7 years Seferis was studying in Paris. It was a

¹ Ioanna Tsatsos (1902-2000) née Ioanna Seferiadi in Smyrna was also an interesting writer and intellectual. She wrote various collections of poems and stories of an autobiographical nature. For more information see: García-Amorós 2021.

² Part of the correspondence from this period has recently been published. Seferis 2019; Seferis 2021; Seferis – Seferiadi 2021.

fundamental period in his life and education, since these were the years when he separated from his family for the first time to live alone in Paris and began his literary research. These are the years of his avid reading of French and Greek literature and of the untiring search for his own poetic and genuine language which would make him stand out. These are the years of the war with Turkey, the Asia Minor Catastrophe and population exchanges, all of which would forge his personal and poetic character.

This period of studying in Paris opened up a dual divide in young Seferis. Firstly, with his family, who returned to Smyrna in the summer of 1919 and later settled permanently in Athens³. Secondly, with his country, since during those years he did not at any time return to Athens or Asia Minor. Regarding this second factor, the distance he felt regarding the literary reality of his country and his constant search for contact is clearly shown.

At that time, Ioanna was responsible for building bridges as it was she who mediated Seferis' difficult relationship with their father, and also on occasion with their mother and younger brother Ángelos, who was very little given to writing. Likewise, it was Ioanna who through her letters tried to bring her brother closer to the Greek reality. During those years when contact with Greek literature was so difficult due to his prolonged absence from the country, Ioanna was also the connecting link between the young poet and the Greek philological movement, because she kept him informed about new publications, signed him up to literary journals and sent him books.

One of the most important factors of this correspondence is precisely that through it we can understand first-hand not only the literature Seferis used to read at that time, but above all, his opinion of it and thus the influence it may have had on his youthful poetic output. Through the requests he made to his sister, we can surmise what his preferences were at that moment, or at least the works which awakened his curiosity. Some of these requests will be considered below, since they are of particular interest. The first dates from March 1920, when Seferis wrote to his sister to ask her for a series of books:

Μιά πού σοῦ μιλω̄ για βιβλία, ἤθελα νά σοῦ ζητήσω μιά χάρη, μπορεῖς νά μοῦ στείλεις τά ἐξῆς; [...] Τά ποιήματα τοῦ Ὁ. Καγιάμ μεταφρασμένα ἀπό τόν Κ. Κατσίμπαλη⁴, τούς *Σκαρβαίους* τοῦ Γρυπάρη, τή *Γλωσσα*

³ In 1917, the whole Seferiadis family moved to Paris and lived there until the summer of 1919. Only Seferis stayed in Paris that summer of 1919.

⁴ This refers to Constantinos Katsimbalis (1868-1937), whose translation of *Rubaiyat* was published in 1919.

καὶ ζωὴ τοῦ Ἐ. Γιαννίδη, τούς *Βωμούς* τοῦ Παλαμᾶ, *Τὰ Παράτονα*⁵ τοῦ ἴδιου καὶ τὸ ἔργο τοῦ Κρυστάλλη (ἄν τὸ βρεῖς) (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 117).

Here the first mention of Kostis Palamas appears, but it will not be the last, since his name appears in almost all the orders Seferis places with his sister. In addition, he asks for the *Σκαρabaῖοι καὶ τερρακότες* by Gryparis (1919), a collection of poems which had appeared a few years before. Unfortunately, there is no evidence in the correspondence of whether he received them, or his opinion of the work. It is representative of his linguistic position, which will be discussed later, that he asked for a book such as *Γλώσσα καὶ ζωὴ*, whose author Eliseos Giannidis (1908) presents the theoretical principles of demotic language.

One year later, in March 1921, considering the possibility that his mother and sister were going to spend some time in Paris, he took advantage of the opportunity to ask his sister to bring him a selection of books:

Ἄμα θάρθετε, κοίταξε νά μοῦ φέρεις μερικά βιβλία, μάζευέ τὰ ἀπό τώρα: Ὅσα ἑλληνικά μένουν σπίτι δικά μου. Τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Παλαμᾶ ἐκτός τούς *Βωμούς*, *Καημός τῆς Λιμνοθάλασσας* καὶ *Πρῶτα κριτικά*. Ἔχει πολλά ὁ μπαμπάς στή βιβλιοθήκη του. Ἔργα νέα ὅσων μπορεῖς. Ἔργα τοῦ Μαβίλη, τόν Σολωμό τόν ἔχει ὁ μπαμπάς (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 225).

The strong yearning of the young man to be in touch with his country's literature appears clearly in the phrase 'ἔργα νέα ὅσων μπορεῖς'. As we can see, the poet asks his sister once more for the work by Palamas, as well as works by two of the most important poets using demotic language in their poetry, Lorentzos Mavilis and Dionisios Solomos. This is by no means insignificant, since through these letters we are witnessing the beginnings of Seferis' linguistic research, through which the young poet was looking for models of a popular literary language.

In another letter a few months later, Seferis enlarged his request, asking his sister not only for more books, but also that she dedicates part of her letters to describing the philological situation at the time. He also involved his childhood friend Nikos Aronis, who studied philology with Nikolaos Politis, in this process.

Παρακάλεσε, ἄν θέλεις, τόν Νίκο, νά σοῦ κάνει ἕναν κατάλογο τῶν ἔργων τοῦ Πολίτη τοῦ καθηγητῆ του, καθώς κι ἕναν κατάλογο τῶν

⁵ Perhaps this refers to *Τὰ παράκαιρα* (1919), although Seferis clearly writes 'Παράτονα'.

γλωσσολογικῶν καί λαογραφικῶν ἔργων πού θά μπορούσε νά βρεῖ κανεῖς κάτω στήν Ἑλλάδα. Ἡ Φιλολογία τοῦ Μεσαιωνικοῦ Ἑλληνισμοῦ καθώς καί τά ποιήματα τοῦ ἀκριτικοῦ κύκλου μ' ἐνδιαφέρουν πολύ. Γράψε κι ἐσύ μερικά γιά τήν τωρινή φιλολογική κίνηση στήν Ἑλλάδα καί ποιά φιλολογικά περιοδικά βγαίνουν. Στεῖλε μου, σέ παρακαλῶ, τά ἔργα τοῦ Παλαμᾶ ὅλα. Τά περισσότερα βρίσκονται σπίτι θά μοῦ κάνεις μεγάλη χάρη (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 236).

Consistent with his previous request, Seferis insisted once more on Palamás, which demonstrates the immense respect and admiration he already felt for the poet from Patras. In addition, he asked for works on medieval Hellenism and specifically the works of the Akritic cycle, which is unsurprising as they are the first work of Modern Greek literature to be written in popular language. Perhaps it should be emphasized that this letter was written in May 1921, when Seferis found himself on the cusp of his final bachelor's degree exams. The interests of the poet, however, are quite removed from Law books. In fact, remember that Seferis did not take his exams in June, but had to prepare them in summer and finish in October. In these passages, it is evident that during these years Seferis started his research on literary sources in search of Greek poetic language and that this research was the centre of his interest, above and beyond any other issues, although his studies prevented him from dedicating as much time to philology as he would like.

To cite the last, but not least important, of the examples, in March 1922, Seferis gave his sister a new assignment: that she regularly inform him about the country's philological situation. This passage is a little long, in fact the poet dedicated the whole letter to this necessity, but given its importance, it is worth including here. In this passage we can observe Seferis' strong desire to be in contact with his country's language and literature and moreover the serious difficulties this entailed, judging by how insistently he had to ask his sister for this favour:

Ἰδού, σοῦ εἶναι δυνατόν νά μοῦ κάνεις μιά μεγάλη χάρη; Μπορεῖς νά μοῦ στέλνεις ταχτικά πληροφορίες γιά τήν ἐλληνική πνευματική κίνηση; Καταλαβαίνεις πόσο ἀπαραίτητο μοῦ εἶναι ὕστερα ἀπό τόσα χρόνια πού λείπω ἀπό τήν πατρίδα. Γνωρίζεις τόσους καί τόσους διανοούμενους αὐτοῦ, ὥστε δέν πιστεύω νά σοῦ κάνει πολύ κόπο νά τοῦς ρωτᾶς γιά ὅ,τι καινούριο γίνεται καί γιά ὅ,τι βιβλίο || βγαίνει. Κάνε μου τή χάρη νά μοῦ στέλνεις ταχτικά κανένα δυό σελίδες γιά τήν ἐλληνική φιλολογία, χωρίς νά μοῦ τίς κόβεις ἀπό τά γραμματάκια σου. Μ' ἐνδιαφέρουν πολύ οἱ κριτικές γιά τά ἐλληνικά καί γιά τά ξένα ἔργα, πρόσεχε μου τίς ιδιαίτερα. Ἐπίσης μπορεῖς νά μοῦ στέλνεις μαζί μέ τίς ἐφημερίδες (τό *Ἑλ. Βῆμα* μέ φτάνει, ἂν μπορεῖτε, καί τό *Ἐμπρός*, ὅταν γράφει ὁ Παλαμᾶς) || ἐλληνικά

ἀθηνείκα περιοδικά, θά σοῦ εἶναι εὐκόλο νά μάθεις, γράφε μου ἀκόμη ἄν μαθαίνεις τίποτα ἀπό Σμύρνη, φιλολογικά ἐννοεῖται..

Στεῖλε μου ἕναν κατάλογο τῶν ἔργων τοῦ Παλαμᾶ. Θά προτιμοῦσα ὅλα του τὰ ἔργα, ἄν σοῦ εἶναι δυνατόν, τὰ περισσότερα τάχομε ἄδετα σπίτι. Κανένα δύο τόμους μόνο θά πρέπει νά σοῦ ἀγοράσει ἡ μαμά. Στεῖλε μου τόν Σολωμό.. [...] Ἄν ἔχουν βγεῖ θέλω καί *Τά τραγούδια τοῦ Ραμπαγάλ* καί τόν δεύτερο τόμο τῶν διαλέξεων περί Ἑλλήνων ποιητῶν. Ὅλ' αὐτά σιγά σιγά. Βάλε καί τόν Ἄγγελο νά σέ βοηθήσει. Θά μέ ὑπερποχρεώσεις, ἄν μοῦ ἐπιτρέπεται ἡ λέξη (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 338-339).

Naturally, Palamás is once again the focus of Seferis' request to his sister. It seems this issue is not simple: once more he writes to her «Θά προτιμοῦσα ὅλα του τὰ ἔργα», which inevitably leads us to imagine that Ioanna had not sent those books the last time he asked for them. Thus, Seferis saw the necessity of insisting once more, making sure his sister knows how important this is for him. On this occasion, he did not only ask her to send him books, but also that she regularly write a few pages about the Greek literary situation, something Ioanna seems to have overlooked in the previous letter of 5th March 1921, when he asked her for this same favour.

Why does he ask his sister in particular for such a favour? There are various reasons which could be the answer to this question. Firstly, because it was only with her that could he share his great interest in literature. It has to be taken into account that although he was a poet, their father Stelios was so obsessed about the professional future of his child, that he would not be amused that so many hours were taken away from studying Law in order to be dedicated to literature. His mother was not especially interested in literary issues, whilst his youngest brother, Angelos, did not correspond with Seferis by letter, whether due to the big age difference or his timid and reserved character. Therefore, Ioanna was his only connection with Greek literature at that time. In addition, it should be noted that she was not only in Athens during this time, which allowed direct contact with the Greek philological movement, but she was also an avid reader and shared with her brother a great passion for literature.

An especially striking aspect of Ioanna's letters is her total conviction, even then, that her brother was destined to be a great poet: «Ἐσύ τῶχεις στό αἷμα σου, δέν εἶσαι καμωμένος γιά νά περάσεις τή ζωή σου ἐρασιτέχνης» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 325), she wrote in January 1922, while, in one of the first letters she wrote to him after the Catastrophe of 1922, plunged into a profound despair, she wrote:

δέν καταλαβαίνω γιατί γεννήθηκα, ἐσύ ναί, ἔπρεπε νά γεννηθεῖς, θά κάνεις κάτι καλό, ἔχεις αὐτή τή δύναμη, θάρθει καιρός πού οἱ ἄνθρωποι πού θάρθουν θά μουρμουρίζουν τῶνομά σου μέ || συγκίνηση καί εὐγνωμοσύνη (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 358).

For this reason, Ioanna endeavoured to diligently carry out all the requests her brother made of her. Thus, in response to Seferis' letter of March 1921, Ioanna dedicated the whole letter to satisfying his request that she speak about the Greek literary movement. This is what she wrote:

Ἀποφάσισα αὐτές τίς μέρες νά κοιτάξω λίγο τή δική μας φιλολογία. Αὐτή τήν καλή πρόθεση μου τήν ἔδωσε κάποιο τελευταῖο σου γραμματάκι. Ἐπειτα θάθελα νά σοῦ στείλω καί μερικά βιβλία γιά τό καλοκαίρι.

Ἐφέτο, ἴσως ἐπειδή εἶναι τά 100 χρόνια τῆς Ἑλλάδος, βγαίνουν πολλά καινούρια, δέν ξέρω ὅμως ἂν ὅλα ἀξίζουν τόν κόπο νά διαβαστοῦν. Κάποιος Κυριαζῆς⁶ νεότατος ἔχει ἕναν τόμο, ἕνα εἶδος *Stances*, *Στιγμές πού ζῶ*. Αὐτός εἶναι νεότατος κι ἔχει μερικά πραγματάκια καλά. Κάποιος ἄλλος Πετιμεζᾶς⁷ (δέν πιστεύω νά εἶναι ὁ καθηγητής) ἔχει ἐκδώσει ἕναν τόμο μέ στίχους *Ἀπλά λόγια*. Αὐτόν δέν τόν διάβασα. [...] Τώρα, Γιωργούλο, ξέρεις αὐτά τά διαβάξεις για νά παρακολουθεῖς τήν ἐξέλιξη, ἂν θέλεις νά βρεῖς εὐχαρίστηση ὑπάρχουν ἄλλα τόσο καλύτερα. Ἐτσι ἔχουν μεταφραστεῖ ὅλα τά *Ἰταλικά σονέτα* τοῦ Σολωμοῦ ἀπό τόν Καλοσγοῦρο, ἔχει ἐκδοθεῖ *Ὁ Τάφος* τοῦ Παλαμᾶ, ἔπειτα ὡς prose *Τά ταξίδια* τοῦ Γαβριηλίδη πρώτης τάξεως, ξέρεις, ὁ Γαβριηλίδης θεωρεῖται ἡ καλύτερη πένα τῆς Ἑλλάδος, ἔπειτα *Ἐκλεκτές Σελίδες* τοῦ Ἐφταλιώτη (ἔχουν μαζευθεῖ μετά τόν θάνατό του). Ὡς διήγημα Καρκαβίτσας (ἔχεις διαβάσει;) εἶναι ἀπό τούς πιό καλούς. Ἐπειτα τά 32 *διηγήματα* τοῦ Βουτυρά, ὅπως καί *Ζωή ἀρρωστημένη* τοῦ ἴδιου. Μυθιστόρημα Θεοτόκης *Ὁ Κατάδικος καί [H] Ζωή καί [ὁ] θάνατος τοῦ Καραβέλα* – αὐτά τά δύο εἶναι τά || καλύτερά του. Ὁ Ξενόπουλος δέν ξέρω ἂν σ' ἀρέσει, ἔχει ἐκδώσει τελευταῖα *Τό Ζακυνθινό μαντίλι* (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 245-246).

It can be seen that the young woman did not only inform her brother about the new works which were being published, but also gave her personal opinion on them and made recommendations. It should be noted in this regard that like her brother, Ioanna was an avid reader and despite her youth, had strong judgement and a sharp critical mind. The poet himself had enormous confidence in his sister's judgement: «Ἐχω πιότερη

⁶ This refers to the journalist and poet Thanasis Kyriazis (1887-1950).

⁷ This is Nikolaos Petimezas (1873-1952), poet, prose writer and soldier known by the pseudonym of 'Lavras'. He published the poetry collections *Ἀπλά λόγια* (1920), *Σιγαλές Φωνές* (1925) and *Εγκόλπια* (1925).

πεποιθήση στή γνώμη σου από τή γνώμη όλων τῶν κριτικῶν τοῦ κόσμου» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 245-246) he wrote to her, on sending her one of the poems he had written.

It should also be noted that Ioanna was not only familiar with the Greek literary scene, but also knew personally some of the poets and intellectuals in vogue at the time, such as Miltiadis Malakasis, Lambros Porfyra and Romos Filyras. She became friends with them and they formed part of the intellectual circle she moved in. Through her letters we can witness the moment she met some of them personally. On 6th February 1920, Ioanna wrote to her brother with the most delightful news: «Τό πιά εὐτυχισμένο γεγονός αὐτῆς τουλάχιστον τῆς βδομάδας εἶναι πού γνώρισα τόν Μαλακάση» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 112), about which a little later she stated: «Εἴμαστε σχεδόν φίλοι» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 132). Just one month later, on 7th March 1920, she wrote to him again, this time to tell him she had met Lambros Porfyra, to comment on her perception of the poet's personality and to send him one of his poems:

Προχτές γνώρισα τόν Πορφύρα τόν ποιητή. Εἶναι περίεργος τύπος, φοβερὰ timide, δέν μπορεί νά πεῖ δυό λέξεις καί ἄν πει τίποτα τό λέει τόσο σιγά πού σχεδόν δέν ἀκοῦς. Τόν λένε πώς εἶναι ἀπό τούς καλούς. Σοῦ στέλνω τό «Lacrimae Rerum» του, ἓνα ἀπό τά πιά γνωστά του (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 120).

As is shown in Ioanna's letters, Miltiadis Malakasis and Lambros Porfyra were two leading poets in the Greek literary scene of the time, hence Ioanna's enthusiasm about meeting them. This was not the case with Romos Filyras who, although he had published several poetic works, was perhaps better known for his work as a society journalist than for his poetry. This can be seen in the way Ioanna referred to him for the first time:

Ἄς τ' ἀφήσωμε αὐτά. Προχτές γνώρισα τόν Ῥώμο Φιλύρα, κάποιον ποιητή πού, γιά νά εἶμαι ἀληθινή, δέν εἶχα διαβάσει τίποτα δικό του. [...] Τό βράδυ μοῦφερε τά ἔργα του, [ὑπο]θέτω νά μήν εἶναι μέγας, ἔχει λίγο talent, ἓνα προπάντων μ' ἀρέσει ἀπ' ὅσα διάβασα genre λίγο Ruffian-Moréas. Θά σοῦ τό ἀντιγράψω (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 148-149).

From Ioanna's words, it is clear that Filyras did not make a very good impression on her, since she questions his poetic talent from the beginning. This impression, far from changing as she gets to know Filyras better, is only corroborated in successive letters, which perhaps predisposed Seferis to criticize some of his poems, as will be considered later.

All this shows that Ioanna was in a position to properly inform her brother about the Greek literary scene, since she was aware of the latest news, knew the literature of the time and had forged her own opinions on it. Many of the names which were part of the Greek literary scene of the moment march through Ioanna's letters, whether acclaimed poets such as Kostís Palamás, Pavlos Nirvanas, Ioannis Damvergis, Polibios Dimi-trakopoulos, Kostas Krystalis, Kleon Paraschos, Ioannis Griparis or Georgios Souris, or others who were beginning their literary career, such as Nikos Hayer Bufidis or Skypis. Nevertheless, it should be noted that some important omissions can be observed, since there are some important names of the Greek literary scene of the time who are not mentioned, such as Napoleon Lapaziotis, Anastasios Drivas, and Kostas Uranis, who were then publishing their first works in different literary journals. Perhaps the most striking omission is Kostas Karyiotakis, who is not referred to even once, although he had already published his two first poetry collections: *Ὁ Πόνος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τῶν πραγμάτων* (1919) and *Νηπενθῆ* (1921).

As a result of these omissions, some questions arise which we have not yet been able to answer. Is it possible that Ioanna, so attentive to the Greek philological movement, was unaware these works had been published? Did the authors belong to a different circle from the one she moved in? Could this have any impact on the fact that they do not appear in the letters? Did she hide them from her brother maybe? And if so, why? These are questions we cannot address here, but which we hope to be able to answer in future papers.

We mentioned previously that one advantage of these letters is that they allow us to discover first-hand the views of young Seferis on the Greek literature of the time. Sometimes the poet's preferences can be seen indirectly. At one point, for example, some Greek friends who were in Paris asked him to teach them to recite and brought with them a poem of a patriotic nature, 'Λιποτάκτης' by Ioannis Polemis. The recitation master did not like this piece at all, and instead gave them 'Lacrimae rerum' by Porfyras and 'Παραμύθι' by Malakasis to learn. It must be understood that these were his preferred poems, whilst the work of Polemis did not particularly interest him.

However, on other occasions, his opinions are expressed very directly. In the example of the aforementioned poems by Filyras, we have already mentioned that Ioanna met the poet personally in September 1920. When he met her, he wrote her a poem which she in turn sent to her brother. This is Seferis' opinion, also in verse, of Filyras' poem:

Μ' ἄρεσεν ὑπερβολικά τό ποίημα τοῦ Φιλύρα,
ρίμες καλές, στίχοι ὁμορφοί καί μ' αἴσθημα πλημμύρα,

βολές, βολές τά λόγια του στέκονται σάν κερένια
 μά κάποτες οί στίχοι του κυλᾶνε χωρίς ἔννοια
 θά μ' ἀρέσαν περισσότερο ἄν ἦταν δουλεμένοι
 πιότερο, πιό συναισθητοί καί πιό καλοδεμένοι (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021,
 157).

Although this rhymed reply begins with praise for Filyras' poem, which is perhaps no more than a mere rhetorical device, the critique becomes harsher as the verses progress, in order to end by emphasising that they are not well crafted. In Filyras' defence, it should be noted that the poem Seferis was judging was written for Ioanna a few minutes after meeting her in the Hotel Minerva café, which means it was an improvised piece. In the same letter, however, Ioanna included one of the poems from the poetry collection *Ρόδα στὸν Ἀφρό* which Filyras published in 1911, 'Ο Γόης', a composition which Seferis did not show much more benevolence towards:

Μοῦ γράφεις γιά τόν Φιλύρα, τοῦ ὁποίου μοῦ στέλνεις κι ἓνα ποίημα «Οἱ ἐρχόμενες». Εἶναι τρομερό πόσο εἶμαστε ἐπιτόλαιοι ἐμεῖς οἱ Ῥωμιοί, ὁ Φιλύρας μοῦ ἄρεσε πολύ στό «Ἐγώ εἶμαι ὁ πλανερὸς ἀζάπης», ἄν καί τό τέλος του δέν ἀξίζει τήν ἀρχή, ὥστε βλέπεις πὼς δέν ἔχω κακές προδιαθέσεις μά τίς «Ἐρχόμενες» πρῶτα, δέν κατάλαβα τί θέλει νά πεῖ. Αὐτό δέν ἔχει σημασία, ὁ ποιητής δέ μετριέται μέ τή στενοκεφαλιά τοῦ πρώτου τυχόντος πού τόν διαβάζει, μά ἄς πάρουμε τή μορφή· λέει στό δεῦτερο τετράστιχο «...γελοῦν καί φαντάζουν πρὸς τή ματιά μας καί στ' ὄνειρο καί μέ πανέρια στὸν ὦμο». Ἐκεῖνο τό «πρός», τί θέλει τό γέλιο; Ἡ τό φάντασμα πάει πρὸς τή μα[τιά] ἢ ἡ μα- || τιά πρὸς τό γέλιο ἢ τό φάντασμα... Ἐπειτα ἐκεῖνο τό «καί μέ πανέρια» τό «καί» τί θέλει; Τί θέση ἔχει; Ἐπειτα στό τέταρτο καί πέμπτο τετράστιχο, γιατί ἐκεῖνη ἢ ἐπανάληψη τοῦ γλυκοῦ πέντε φορές; Θέλει νά ἐκφράσει γλυκά, ναί, στίς τέσσερες πρῶτες φορές τό καταλαβαίνω, ἄν καί ἄτυχο μέσο, μά τήν πέμπτη φορά δέν καταλαβαίνω τίποτα. Τέλος, ἀφήνω τά ὑπόλοιπα καί μερικές ὁμοιοκαταληξίες πού δέν τίς κάνει μωρό παιδί (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 183-184).

Beyond his severe criticism of the quality of Filyras' verses, the indignation which pours forth in his exclamation: «Εἶναι τρομερὸ πόσο εἶμαστε ἐπιτόλαιοι ἐμεῖς οἱ Ῥωμιοί» is interesting, since it extrapolates that which inspired Filyras' poem to all Greek literature. From this exclamation it can be deduced that his annoyance does not come just from these poems in particular, but instead in general from the poetry which was being written in Greece at the time.

Something similar happens when he gave his opinion of one of the works his sister had spoken to him about in a letter, *Στιγμές πὸν ζῶ* by

Thanasis Kyriazis (1921), which the poet had read in the *Noumas* journal. Kyriazis is an author who does not seem to be to young Seferis' liking either, partly due to the fact that he involved his political and social convictions in the process of creating poetry:

Είδα μία κριτική τῶν *Στιγμῶν πού ζῶ*4 στον *Νουμᾶ*. Ἐκεῖ διάβασα καί μερικέσ ἀπ' αὐτέσ τίς στιγμέσ. Ξέρεισ τί κάνει; Τόν μπολσεβίκο, οὔτε παραπάνω οὔτε λιγότερο, κι ὁ κριτήσ τόν ἐκθειάζει, δέ θέλω νά πῶ πῶσ εἶμαι ἀντιμπολσεβίκοσ, δέν μ' ἐνδιαφέρει ἀπλῶσ –μά ἀκόμα μποροῦμε οἱ Ῥωμοῖ ἐμεῖσ νά γράφωμ' ἔτσι– καί τί καινούριο δίνομε στή φιλολογία, βάζοντασ σέ στίχοσ τούσ σταλινικόσ λόγουσ τοῦ ἄλφα ἢ τοῦ βῆτα; Ὡστε δέ θά γιαιτρευτοῦμε ποτέσ ἀπό τόν βουλευτισμό; Εἶναι τρομερό νά σκεπτόμαστ' ἔτσι (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 143).

Once more the sorry opinion he had of Kyriazis' poetry is extrapolated to the general panorama of contemporary literature, about which he exclaimed: «μά ἀκόμα μποροῦμε οἱ Ῥωμοῖ ἐμεῖσ νά γράφωμ' ἔτσι». The poet goes from the specific to the general and in this way his perception with regard to specific works is extended to all works collectively, as happens with *Numas*, the most important literary magazine of the time, about which he affirmed: «Μοῦρχεται τώρα ὁ *Νουμᾶσ* σχεδόν τακτικά· ἀηδιάζω μέ τίς ἀηδίες πού γράφοντασ τώρα στήν Ἑλλάδα. Δέν καταλαβαίνω τί εὐχαρίστηση βρίσκουν νά εἶναι ἠλίθιοι καί νά γράφουν σάν τέτοιοι» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 265).

Why was he not satisfied with Greek literature? What is it missing, in his opinion? To begin with, the poet understood that, with a few exceptions such as Kostis Palmas, Greek literature found itself in a time of stagnation. One of the issues which most bothered the young poet is how Greek authors imitated outdated models from French literature. Admittedly, the literary trends of the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century arrived in Greece relatively late, which caused a lack of originality and lent an outdated character to literary production. Seferis, living in Paris in the mid-1920s and being well acquainted with French literature, is fully aware of this difference, which led him to experience a feeling of helplessness and indignation regarding his country's literature:

Τώρα, ξέρεισ τί κάνουν στήν Ἑλλάδα κοντά στήν πλατιά τουσ ποίηση; Ἀρχίζον νά ξυπνοῦν καί νά γράφουν ὅπωσ ἔγραφαν πρὶν 40 χρόνια στή Γαλλία ἢ σχεδόν. Ξαναπαίρνουν τίς θεωρίες τοῦ Mallarmé σάν νά μπορούσαμε νά γράφωμε στή γλῶσσα μασ ἔτσι. Κι ἡ γλῶσσα μασ μᾶσ τό ἐπιτρέπει κι οἱ ξένοι πού θά μᾶσ διαβάσουν τί θά ποῦν ἅμα τούσ ξανασερβίρωμε τά κουρέλια πού πέταξαν πρὶν χρόνια; [...] Ὡστε πρέπει νά

συνηθίσωμε νά σερνούμαστε πίσω από τούς Φράγκους καί νά μήν τρέχωμε μπρός; (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 271-272)

This opinion from Seferis on contemporary Greek literature is supported by Ioanna herself, who, as we have noted, also had an overall vision of the literary scene and well-founded judgement. In January 1922, she wrote to her brother in the same complaining tone he used, regretting the apathy and lack of interest of contemporary literary figures, but also their limited willingness to innovate:

Όσο βλέπω τούς δικούς μας ποιητάς, οί πióτεροι εκδίδουν ένα βιβλίο πρós τό τέλος κι αυτό είναι όλο τό έργο τής ζωής τους. Τούς λείπει ή προσπάθεια. Βλέπω τόν Μαλακάση, καί ξέρεις πόσο μοῦ ήταν συμπαθητικός (καί μοῦ είναι ακόμα) καί τί ένθουσιασμό σάν τόν γνώρισα, μ' άρεσε, είχε έμπνευση, σέ μερικά του λοιπόν, νά δεῖς τή ζωή πού κάνει. Σκοτώνει τόν καιρό του, δέν κάνει τίποτα, παίζει χαρτιά. Ένας άνθρωπος έξυπνος πού θά είχε πραγματικό ένδιαφέρον άν μπορούσε νά άνανεώνεται λίγο, άν έτεινε κάπου. Καί πόσοι άλλοι είναι έτσι στην Ελλάδα (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 325).

Therefore, both siblings agreed when pointing out the stagnation, laxity and lack of innovation from the poets who made up the Greek literary scene. But in addition to all this, there is another element which at this time entailed a problem for young Seferis: language. At the beginning of this study, we saw how the poet was profoundly interested in demotic language. In addition, we have witnessed the beginnings of his linguistic research through literature written in demotic language which ranges from the beginnings of Modern Greek literature to the present time, and also through linguistic essays and studies. It is no coincidence that in these letters he defined himself as «μαλλιάρός» in a passage where he asserted his position with pride: «Πές τής μαμας, άν τήν ξαναρωτήσει ό Γουδής3 ά[πό] πότε γέννηκα μαλλιάρός, νά πεῖ πώς γεννήθηκα έτσι» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 306). His rejection of Katharevousa came at the beginnings of his poetic formation and similarly, from there derived his rejection of literature composed in this type of language, to which he attributed the loss of Ioannis Papadiamantópoulos for Greek literature: «ή Ελλάδα έχασε τόν Μορέας χάρη στην ψεύτικη της γλώσσα του Παπαρρηγόπουλου, Βασιλειάδη» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 212) he stated categorically.

However, demotic language posed some problems at that time and he did not manage to see it as an appropriate vehicle for poetry. On many occasions, he regretted the poverty of his language: «Κι ή γλώσσα μας τόσο φτωχή καί τόσο άκαλλιέργητη» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 334) he exclaimed. In some of his letters we witness the difficulties he experienced

when expressing himself in his native language. Thus, for example, regarding the conference about Jean Moréas which the poet gave in 1921 and which he wrote in demotic language, he confessed to his sister: «Καί ξέρεις τί δύσκολο νά γράφεις ἑλληνικά (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 216). It is well-known that he was perfectly fluent in French (Vagenas 1979, 100; Solá 1997, 39-50) and he considered it a rich language, capable of expressing the finest poetic nuances: «Πότε θά τίς νιώσωμε κάτω στήν Ἑλλάδα τέτοιες λεπτότητες» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 281), he wondered in relation to a poem by Jean Moréas. Certain passages from his letters reveal that Seferis was more comfortable writing in French, that he encountered serious difficulties of expression in Greek and this made his research into literary sources in the demotic language necessary in order to be able to write in Greek as he would like: «γιά νά γράψω καλά μοῦ χρειάζεται μελέτη» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 142), he wrote to Ioanna.

These difficulties of expression are reflected in some of his poems from that time, some of which were written directly in French. This is the case with the poem he wrote for the young Norwegian Kirsten, which he asserted he could not translate into Greek: «Ἐνα ποίημα πού θέλω νά κάνω ἑλληνικά καί πού δέν μπορῶ νά γράψω ὅπως θέλω τώρα» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 200). On another occasion, regarding a project he has in mind which he would like to write in Greek, he confessed that he could only envisage the title in French «ὄνειρεύομαι [...] καί κάτι ἄλλο, τοῦ ὁποίου δέ βρῆκα ἀκόμα τόν ἑλληνικό τίτλο, γαλλικά θά τῶλεγα ‘Variations sur le suicide» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 316).

For all these reasons, living in Paris in the 1920s, in full contact with the French language and literature and with a model such as Jean Moréas, who he considered to be the best French symbolist poet, it is no wonder that the young man felt the temptation to write in French, as he confessed to Ioanna in the summer of 1921:

Γαλλικά θά μποροῦσα ἴσως νά γράψω, μά δέ θέλω, γιατί ἀγαπῶ τήν Ἑλλάδα. Ἑλληνικά μοῦ εἶναι ἀδύνατο νά πῶ ὅ,τι θέλω γιατί δέν ἔχομε γλῶσσα, γιά νά τό πιστέψεις πάρε ἕνα ὁποιοδήποτε γαλλικό βιβλίο καί προσπάθησε νά τό μεταφράσεις ἑλληνικά, θά πεισθεῖς πώς εἶναι ἀδύνατον. Στήν ἑλληνική ἐκτός ἀπό αἰσθήματα βουνίσια ἢ χωριανέικα δέν μποροῦμε νά ποῦμε τίποτα γιά τήν ὥρα, γι’ αὐτό καί τά πό πολιτισμένα ποιήματα πού ἔχουν γραφεῖ στήν ἑλληνική μυρίζουν μυτζίθρα (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 199-200).

In this passage, it can clearly be seen how the poet fought with himself. On one hand, he felt the temptation to write in French, a language he felt comfortable in and where he seemed to have found his poetic expression, with a strong symbolist influence, while on the other hand, his love for his

country and native language weighed on his conscience. The categorical assertion «δὲν ἔχομε γλώσσα» is striking and reveals once more his difficulties of expression in Greek. We are in a time when the poet has not yet found his means of expression in the demotic Greek language and he finds himself, in the words of Nasos Vagenas (1979, 110), «σε μία εκφραστική σύγχυση».

It should be noted, however, that despite all these difficulties, the youth's desire to become a Greek poet was much stronger than the temptation to write in French. Although at the time he considered the Greek language a poor tool, little adapted to literary expression, he deeply loved his language, which inspired in him deep affection from an emotional perspective, even though from the poetic perspective it did not offer him the same richness which he believed the French language offered him. This can be observed in the very language he uses to write these letters, a simple language, purely demotic, with many elements which speak of Asia Minor, which allows him to express the affection he feels for his sister:

Πρὶν μιά βδομάδα, μπεμπούλα μου, σάν καί σήμερα εἶχα τελειώσει ἕνα γράμμα σ' ἐσένα γαλλικά. Πήγαινα μέ τήν ιδέα πὼς θά μᾶς ἐξασκοῦσε καί τούς δυό ἄν κάναμε τήν ἀλληλογραφία μας γαλλικά. Δέ βαριέσαι, σάν τό ξαναδιάβασα τό βρῆκα τόσο κρύο, πού τό ξέσκισα. Ἔπειτα, ἀγαπῶ τόσο πολύ τή γλυκιά μας γλῶσσα πού μοῦ θυμίζει τήν ἀγαπημένη μου πατρίδα καί μόνο μ' ἐσένα ἔχω τήν εὐκαιρία νά τή γράφω ὅπως μ' ἀρέσει (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 82).

In this way, although French offers him some poetic resources based on the long experience of its literary tradition, it is Greek which stimulates his way of expression from the emotional perspective. This is what leads Seferis to engage in earnest with the study of the popular Greek language. The search for his own poetic expression involved great effort, but at the same time stimulated him and gave him the push he needed to become the poet he wants to be. Despite all the temptations and his flirtation with the French language, Seferis never wanted to be another Moréas, he wanted to become a Greek poet and not just any Greek poet, but the best: «Γυρεύω, γυρεύω τόν δρόμο τόν ἀπάτητο καί θά τόν βρῶ, γιατί πρέπει καί ἅμα θά γράφω θά εἶμαι ὁ καλύτερος» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 243). This sentence reveals his firm intention to be original and seek new expressive paths which would make him stand out and change course from the static tendency literature followed at that time. This is the idea Seferis conceives a collection of poems with, which he intended to «νά τaráξουν τά αἵματα τῶν ἀκαδημαϊκῶν γερούτων καί τῶν Μπωδελερικῶν νέων μας» (Seferis – Seferiadi 2021, 343).

All these circumstances struggling in the interior of the young poet constituted the foundations of his character formation and would consolidate the base of his poetic expression in Greek. They are elements which would continue to develop throughout the years of his formation and which will be reflected in his first poetry collection, not without reason titled *Στροφή*.

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