Sculpture and stones in the poetry of Seferis and Ritsos

Liana Giannakopoulou

This paper concentrates on selected poems by Seferis and Ritsos in which sculptural imagery and references to stones are prominent. Both poets frequently use the symbol of the statue in their work. This is more obvious in the case of Seferis; however, although the importance of the statues has been acknowledged by various scholars, there has been no systematic attempt to discuss their function or symbolism in his poetry.[1] Ritsos's voluminous work makes it more difficult for a single symbol to dominate, but a careful reading shows how important the statues and other relics from antiquity become in his work after the 1950s. The poems discussed here are not an exhaustive list of course, but my aim is to provide, together with some detailed close readings, an analysis of the dialogue between these two poets and, particularly, Ritsos's response to the way ancient Greek tradition is perceived in the work of Seferis.

Statues are a dominant but also a negative symbol in Seferis's poetry. With the exception of "Ερωτικός Λόγος", in which the symbol appears for the first time, and the Cyprus collection, which marks a radically different approach to statues, what we are left with in poems such as *Μυθιστόρημα* (*Mythistorema*) and *"Κίχλη"* are mutilated corpses haunting an already desolate landscape, threatening nightmares which persecute the viewers, masses of inorganic matter implying attrition and death. This is particularly true of *Mythistorema* and the first part of my paper will concentrate on a discussion of the symbol of the statue in specific poems of that "book", as Seferis used to call it.

---

[1] For a detailed discussion of this matter see A. Giannakopoulou, *Ancient Greek sculpture in Modern Greek poetry (1860-1960)* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, King's College London, 2000). The Seferis section of this paper is an important part of Chapter IV of the thesis.

What is different in *Mythistorema*, compared to the previous poems, is the transition from the individual to the collective sphere. Consequently, the symbolism of the statues, which, so far, was more personal and more abstract, now centres on the issue of tradition and the modern poet's relation to it. The statues are transplanted into a realistic landscape which acquires a special dramatic intensity from the recurrent encounters between statues and humans.[2]

I shall argue that these encounters in fact dramatize the modern Greek's confrontation with the past, which no longer leads to spontaneous communication, as it did in the case of Sikelianos. The wars, and particularly the Asia Minor Disaster, put an end to the unconstrained drawing from the well of tradition (compare the imagery of *Mythistorema* 2). The statues are no longer perceived as whole or restored, and their fragmented condition reflects the nature of actual, modern experience. They confirm, and indeed become the symbol of, a lost wholeness, the fall from an original unity and totality.[3] As such, they become a heavy burden for the modern artist intent on deciphering their meaning, as part of his attempt to restore the troubled relationship with the past.

Interestingly, though, *Mythistorema* is more haunted than actually peopled with statues. Indeed, the word άγαλμα itself occurs only three times (5: 16, 20: 9, 21: 2), though other words related to sculpture, such as μάρμαρο (6: 8-9, 15: 21, 23: 3) or κολώνα (6: 9), also appear. More pervasive, and indeed more suggestive of the adverse effects of war, is a sense of amputation, dismemberment or fragmentation conveyed by references to statues but seeming to extend also to human beings. The references to stones seem to supplement the overriding impression of ruin and desolation. As we can see in poem 18, for example, stones define a landscape which is dry and arid. In poem 10, this landscape is described in greater detail: it is a suffocating enclosure,

---

[2] For the affinities between the dramatic character of *Mythistorema* and that of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, see Edmund Keeley, "T. S. Eliot and the poetry of George Seferis", *Comparative Literature* 8.3 (1956) 214-26 (pp. 219-20).

[3] Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces. The fragment as a metaphor of modernity* (London: Thames and Hudson 1994), pp. 7-8.

without water again, a landlocked country whose inhabitants have lost contact with nature and are alienated from the fundamental functions of life: birth, love, marriage and death. In poem 22, finally, the context in which stones appear again reflects a negative experience: the speakers have lost their roots, they have also lost their memory, and struggle to recover something from a life that seems to proceed *in absentia*.

The statues themselves have nothing in common with the ideal and radiant statue of "Ερωτικός Λόγος". We are faced instead with what appears to be a second population of αγάλματα, sexless, clearly fragmented, and standing on the ground. Their sole characteristic – and an important one – is their mysterious smile, aptly described by Karyotakis as "παραπλανητικό", an attribute confirmed, as we shall see, in *Mythistorema* 21.[4] This smile, which tempts us to identify these statues with the archaic *kouroi*, conveys indeed a feeling of exclusion and hostility. In the poem "[Ανδρομέδα]" for example, the "μαύρη γαλήνη" of the dead is associated with "τα χαμόγελα, που δεν προχωρούν, των αγαλμάτων", both signs of despair, of a vanished life fossilized on the surface of the stone and unable to bring solace to the suffering maiden. But this same smile and the absence of bodily characteristics also bring to mind the statues of the Herms showing the way to travellers (like those of *Mythistorema*). However, Hermes was also the god who took the souls to the Underworld but whose statues, as I will argue here, fail to do so. Rather, they create an atmosphere of disorientation, exclusion and despair vividly described in poem 21:

> Εμείς που ξεκινήσαμε για το προσκύνημα τούτο
> κοιτάξαμε τα σπασμένα αγάλματα
> ξεχαστήκαμε και είπαμε πως δε χάνεται η ζωή τόσο εύκολα
> πως έχει ο θάνατος δρόμους ανεξερεύνητους
> και μια δική του δικαιοσύνη·
>
> πως όταν εμείς ορθοί στα πόδια μας πεθαίνουμε
> μέσα στην πέτρα αδερφωμένοι
> ενωμένοι με τη σκληρότητα και την αδυναμία,

[4] "Ο κήπος της αχαριστίας" in: Κ.Γ. Καρυωτάκης, *Ποιήματα και πεζά*, ed. G.P. Savidis (Athens: Ermis 1991), p. 143.

οι παλαιοί νεκροί ξεφύγαν απ' τον κύκλο και αναστήθηκαν
και χαμογελάνε μέσα σε μια παράξενη ησυχία.[5]

We who set out on this pilgrimage
looked at the broken statues
became distracted and said that life is not so easily lost
that death has unexplored paths
and its own particular justice;

that while we, still upright on our feet, are dying,
affiliated in stone
united in hardness and weakness,
the ancient dead have escaped the circle and risen again
and smile in a strange silence.

(tr. Keeley and Sherrard)[6]

The confrontation of humans and statues in this poem is built on a set of oppositions which seem to define the boundaries between them. In the first section, although the statues are broken, they seem to indicate the presence of another life beyond death, where a kind of justice different from human justice applies. The representation of the dead in the form of statues seems indeed to convey some kind of immortality ("ξεφύγαν απ' τον κύκλο και αναστήθηκαν") since statues appear as the traces of a world to which humans aspire. Their smile and their silence seem to prove precisely these points. One might even think here that the silence and inertia of the statues become resting points, giving the viewers relief and a feeling of stability in the ever-changing world they experience during their journey through life. Indeed, the statues may represent, through their solid, permanent forms, the fixed values of tradition in contrast to "the fluid, changeable character of the modern".[7] But the second part

---

[5] Giorgos Seferis, *Ποιήματα*, 16th ed. (Athens: Ikaros 1989), p. 68.

[6] George Seferis, *Complete poems*, translated, edited and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (London: Anvil 1995), p. 25.

[7] Alex Potts, "Male phantasy and modern sculpture", *The Oxford Art Journal* 15.2 (1992) 38-47 (p. 44). In this thought-provoking article, the author discusses the attitudes of Baudelaire and Rilke (among others) towards sculpture. These attitudes reveal, as he says, "an argument char-

of the poem belies such expectations. Looking at the statues has a strangely petrifying effect on the living, who die in a way that strongly suggests that they are becoming statues themselves. This at least is what one understands from images such as "ορθοί στα πόδια μας πεθαίνουμε", as well as the fact that they are united with hardness and weakness or infirmity (the latter alluding to the fact that the statues are broken). The vestiges of the past fail to bring solace to the modern viewers, but rather reflect and confirm their unfortunate condition.

This way of handling the symbol of the statue makes a stark contrast with the very etymology of the word άγαλμα. Barbara Hughes Fowler has given an interesting interpretation of this word with reference to archaic sculpture, and particularly to the *kouroi* and *korai*, in the context of Pindar's poetry.[8] She argues that Pindar may have been aware, when using the word, of its etymological relation with the words αγάλλω, αγλαός and even γελάω. The verb αγάλλω means to honour or to glorify but also to decorate. So the poet's odes resemble statues in that they both bring lasting glory to the victors (the shining ones, αγλαοί – cf. I. 6.62, O. 8.5) as sculptural monuments do, but also because they literally decorate the place in which they are sung (cf. "χώρας άγαλμα" in N. 3.13). What is more, the gleam of the statue as a work of art is associated with the smile it carries on its face, for this too is another way of shining. The distinguished work of art – statue or ode – may bring a smile of pleasure to the face of the one who experiences it; but it also has its own smile – the mysterious archaic smile of the *kouroi* – which betrays, as H. Payne points out, "a look expressive of nothing so much as the plain fact of its own existence"; or, as Fowler explains, "The smile seems to reflect the statue's joy at having been released, a living figure, from the inanimate stone."[9]

---

acteristic of the period about the nature of the modern, and the fate of sculpture within it as the art of a more ancient order of things".

[8] Barbara Hughes Fowler, "The centaur's smile: Pindar and the archaic aesthetic", in: W.G. Moon (ed.), *Ancient Greek art and iconography* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press 1983), pp. 159-70 (pp. 166-8).

[9] Ibid., p. 167. The Payne quotation is cited on the same page.

In Seferis, on the other hand, these values are inverted. The statue is no longer associated with artistic fulfilment, nor with the pleasure of contemplation a work of art offers. The άγαλμα is rather what the word "statue" reveals through its Latin root, a static, inert object which, as we have seen, petrifies the viewer. Looking at the eyes of the statues means that you are turned to stone without actually listening to the voices of the dead who are the bringers of wisdom – note in this context the use of the word ησυχία in this poem in contrast to γαλήνη, the word with which *Mythistorema* ends. One could argue indeed that the statues as they appear, not only here, but also in all of Seferis's poems prior to the Cyprus collection, dramatize Seferis's pre-occupation with the (lost) continuity of Greek tradition and the ensuing difficulties in the assimilation of this tradition by the moderns. And the use of the phrase "παλαιοί νεκροί" to refer to the statues points in that direction. The embarrassment humans feel when encountering the vestiges of the past, as well as the feeling of threat and danger that emanates from otherwise inert and fragmented stones, indicates a lack of familiarity with the past, a shattered memory and consequently the impossibility of communication which leads to fragmentation.

The fact that the statues in *Mythistorema* 21 evoke *kouroi* supports this interpretation. For *kouroi* were widely used in archaic Greece as grave markers; and in Greek tragedy tomb statues (also named είδωλα or κολοσσοί) are an integral part of the ritual of the *nekyia*. Interestingly, the tragedies from which Seferis draws most of his mottoes or quotations are those most preoccupied with the relation between the dead and the living. And it is this dialogue which becomes the central quest of Seferis's own poetry. It is in terms of this communion that Seferis perceives and defines the function of memory in its creative aspect both retrospectively and prospectively. In other words, memory refers both to the artist's own dialogue with the dead and to the wish of the poet to ensure such a dialogue with future generations through the body of his own work.

The use of the word προσκύνημα, in the first line of *Mythistorema* 21, indicates that we may be dealing here with such a *nekyia*, but in this case the goal of the ritual has not been achieved. And the image of petrification Seferis uses to convey this may be compared with the effect of the souls of the dead in

Book 11 of the *Odyssey* – and with other instances of *nekyia* in classical literature. The souls of the dead are associated with sculpture in that they can turn to stone the living who approach them without rituals.[10] According to Vernant, Gorgo's head has become a vigilant watchman who prevents the living from approaching the Underworld, just as Cerberus prevents the dead from leaving it. The use of the verb ξεχαστήκαμε in this context acquires a tragic dimension, since it implies that the statues can be deceptive: with their beauty and stillness they can give the impression of a positive force, whereas in fact they have the power of Medusa's head which imprisons the gaze, charms its victims, and turns them into stone, destroys, that is, their creative powers.

Seferis's attitude can usefully be contrasted with that of Sikelianos. For the older poet the encounter with ancient relics led to their almost instantaneous restoration in his imagination and in his poetry, revealing a spontaneous communication with the past. Sikelianos's confidence is reflected both in his interpretation of the archaic smile (unlike Seferis he understands it as a reconciliation of life and death) and in his use of the *kouros* as a symbol of integrity and wholeness, a projection of his own body which he takes as the only means through which tradition can be restored. In the case of Seferis, however, the encounter with the works of the past (often forced, as we shall see in the following poem) is a source of anxiety; the smile of the *kouros* is no longer here an expression of the artist's satisfaction but becomes (after Karyotakis) παραπλανητικό and προδοτικά αδιάφορο, reflecting his predicament in the face of tradition. This is also reflected in the image of the fragmented body, everywhere present in Seferis's poetry, constituting an inversion of Sikelianos's values.

---

[10] The association of statue and soul is not an arbitrary one, but is confirmed by studies on archaic Greek religion and cult. Vernant explains how the colossus – a term referring to a pillar as much as to a statue – is used in tombs not as an image of the dead but as an indication of the locality to which the soul is bound and in which the living can communicate with it once the proper rituals have taken place; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*, ed. Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991), p. 121.

The ambivalent presence of past relics in the contemporary landscape is a problem encountered not only by Seferis but also by other artists who faced an equally rich tradition in their own country and concentrated on its relation to their work. A comparable case would be that of Giorgio de Chirico, with whose work Seferis was familiar.[11] The painter shares with the poet the same anxiety concerning past relics that can be assimilated only with difficulty, or not at all, in modern life. So, whereas the paintings of de Chirico's metaphysical period include fragments from classical antiquity that co-exist in relative harmony with various elements of modern civilization in the transcendent world of the painting, in certain works between 1919 and 1927 the memories of the past become rather spectral, lose their vitality and express a desperate appeal to the glory of the ancients.[12] Once again, the First World War was responsible for this change of attitude towards classical antiquity, as was de Chirico's own predicament, after his creative years of 1911-18. In those later paintings the relics of the past are no longer a source of solace. As Loizidi points out, "η μνήμη του παρελθόντος αρχίζει να κυριεύει πλέον σαν έμμονη ιδέα ένα χώρο που έχει χάσει την πηγαιότητα και το ευρηματικό σφρίγος του."[13] As we shall see in the case of *Mythistorema* 3, the same weight of memory, in the form of the fragment of a head, haunts the artist and, at this stage, mutilates him:

Μέμνησο λουτρών οίς ενοσφίσθης

Ξύπνησα με το μαρμάρινο τούτο κεφάλι στα χέρια
που μου εξαντλεί τους αγκώνες και δεν ξέρω πού
να τ' ακουμπήσω.
Έπεφτε στο όνειρο καθώς έβγαινα από το όνειρο
έτσι ενώθηκε η ζωή μας και θα είναι πολύ δύσκολο
να ξεχωρίσει.

---

[11] Seferis must have known de Chirico's work from at least 1933, to judge from relevant entries in his diaries. See *Μέρες Β΄ (1931-1934)* (Athens: Ikaros 1975), pp. 136 and 137.

[12] See Niki Loizidi, *Ο Τζιόρτζιο ντε Κίρικο και η σουρεαλιστική επανάσταση* (Athens: Nefeli 1987), p. 194.

[13] Ibid., p. 192.

Κοιτάζω τα μάτια· μήτε ανοιχτά μήτε κλειστά
μιλώ στο στόμα που όλο γυρεύει να μιλήσει
κρατώ τα μάγουλα που ξεπέρασαν το δέρμα.
Δεν έχω άλλη δύναμη·

τα χέρια μου χάνουνται και με πλησιάζουν
ακρωτηριασμένα.[14]

Remember the baths where you were murdered

I woke with this marble head in my hands;
it exhausts my elbows and I don't know where to put it
down.
It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the
dream
so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it
to separate again.

I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed
I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak
I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin.
That's all I'm able to do.

My hands disappear and come towards me
mutilated.[15]

The importance of memory in this poem is stated already in the epigraph, taken from Aeschylus's *Choephori* (491). It is Orestes who speaks these lines, in front of the tomb of Agamemnon. With him is Electra, and together brother and sister attempt to call on the spirit of their father to give them the strength to perform the act of vengeance. The fragmentary words Seferis has chosen to quote are an important key to the understanding of the poem. The imperative μέμνησο gives us a possible explanation for the image of the marble head: the head is indeed the *locus* of memory, and the ritual performed by Orestes and Electra aims at precisely revitalizing the memory of the lost

[14] Seferis, *Ποιήματα*, p. 45.
[15] Seferis, *Complete poems*, p. 5.

father.[16] The verb ενοσφίσθης reminds us of Agamemnon's *μασχαλισμός* by Clytemnestra, but it also underlines the feeling of fragmentation and separation which dominates the poem.

The representation of memory as a statue or a fragment which emerges suddenly from the subconscious with the assistance of a dream is a Freudian one, and Seferis was interested in the function of dreams and their interpretation.[17] For Freud, as indeed for the ancient Greeks, memory was considered as an active constituent of the present, in that it lives, that "stones speak", as Freud put it.[18] Remembering, then, meant the possibility for man to perceive reality in more global terms than usually understood. It was equivalent to seeing all of what we call different dimensions of time as one, to understanding the past as a dynamic presence in the present, the world of the dead as sharing the world of the living. This is an opinion Seferis would probably have shared, except that for him it was not obvious that stones actually speak. Although for Seferis too communication with the past meant communication with the dead, it is precisely this relation he is trying to define in those poems in which the *nekyia* – at least until the Cyprus collection – plays

---

[16] The imagery of the head may also have been inspired by Heinrich Heine's *Die Götter im Exil* (a Greek translation by D. Olympiou is published as *Οι εξόριστοι θεοί*. Athens: Kalvos 1982). In this work the author investigates survivals of ancient myths in his country's legends. Among them is the story of the knight who fell in love with a statue of Aphrodite, and had a dream of actually spending one night with her only to wake up the following morning with the statue's head in his arms. The story alludes, among other things, to the distorting effects of a sterile veneration of the past. It may also indicate that the marble head of Seferis's poem could be a head of Aphrodite. This is also supported by the fact that the search for memory is always associated with love in Seferis's work, as we have already seen in "Ερωτικός Λόγος" and (from a negative point of view) *Η Στέρνα*. Of course, Aphrodite, memory and love will ultimately come together in "Έγκωμη".

[17] We know from the catalogue of Seferis's library compiled by Giannadakis that, as early as 1925, Seferis had carefully read some of Freud's writings in the French translation of Hélène Legros, *Le rêve et son interprétation* (Paris: Gallimard 1925). And Seferis devotes a whole late essay to a discussion of Artemidorus's book on the explanation of dreams.

[18] Peter Gay, *Freud. A life for our time* (New York: Norton 1988), p. 172.

an important part. And as we have seen above, the statues, as symbols of the dead, are also associated with it.

But it is to an equivocal rather than a happy reactivation of memory that Seferis alludes in *Mythistorema* 3. This ambivalent situation is successfully explored through the use of the ancient myth, but also through the poet's significant omission from his epigraph of the last word of the original verse: πάτερ. Orestes is the only means for Agamemnon to take his revenge, the only means the father has to recover something of his lost power. Nevertheless, the very return of the father through his son threatens the latter: after the act of vengeance is fulfilled, Orestes goes mad and is haunted by the Erinyes (compare the imagery in the second section of *"Κίχλη"*). So the missing πάτερ alludes through its very absence to the imminent but also inauspicious presence of the father.[19]

The fact that memory is symbolized in *Mythistorema* 3 by the marble head, a fragment of ancient sculpture, makes it explicit that this father figure is for Seferis ancient tradition, whose menacing authority had dominated the cultural life of Greece ever since the birth of the modern Greek state in the modern world.[20] The adjective μαρμάρινος which Seferis uses here to describe the marble head, is, from this point of view, significant. For Seferis, as for Palamas, the learned provenance of the word (as opposed to μαρμαρένιος) associates it with classical antiquity perceived as a burden, as an unassimilated influence, with tradition as a source of embarrassment and mutilation rather than creative influence. This is indeed confirmed in

---

[19] A detailed parallel between this poem and Aeschylus's *Choephori*, in the context of the burden of the past, is given by Charles Segal, "Orpheus, Agamemnon, and the anxiety of influence: mythic intertexts in Seferis, *Mythistorema* 3", *Classical and Modern Literature* 9.4 (1989) 291-8 (pp. 293-5).

[20] In Vasileiadis's "Ο Παρθενών" (I.25-27) we see that the relation of the moderns to the ancients was indeed perceived in terms of a father-son relationship: "όπου και δούλος ωσεί μεθύων,/ το των προγόνων το μεγαλείον/ βλέπει κ' εμπνέεται ο υιός." What is more, the correspondence of Seferis and Theotokas attests to their feelings of inferiority in relation to the heroic (demoticist, μεγαλοϊδεάτικη) generation of their real fathers. See *Γιώργος Θεοτοκάς και Γιώργος Σεφέρης. Αλληλογραφία (1930-1966)*, ed. G.P. Savidis (Athens: Ermis 1975), pp. 16-17.

the poem, where the speaker is explicit about his relationship with the marble head: it is both random and beyond his control. This piece of sculpture has emerged from a dream. It is clearly a symbol of the artist's subconscious, which, for Seferis as for other modernists, is rooted in the collective subconscious. It has entered the artist's life without his own consent, as line 4 shows. What is more, the forced relationship with it is explicitly stated in line 2: the head is unbearable, the speaker wants to get rid of it, but he does not know how. He has to come to terms with it, just as the travellers of poem 21 have to come to terms with the relics they encounter.

This is indeed confirmed in the lines that follow. The speaker actively engages in communicating with this fragmented head by looking at it, speaking to it and touching it, and although the marble itself seems eager to transmit some sort of message, the whole effort does not yield any results.[21] It seems that, if the modern artist sees his work as the only means through which the voice of the fathers can be heard, Seferis is not as confident as Sikelianos about the impact of the ancient heritage on his own artistic integrity. One could read *Mythistorema* 3, as a possible Greek counterpart to Keats's sonnet "On seeing the Elgin Marbles". Although Keats is stumbling under the weight of a heritage which is all the more overwhelming for not being his own, both poets seem frustrated because they feel that their artistic potency is threatened by the presence of the ancient relics. Seferis takes this struggle a step further by revealing its unfavourable outcome for the modern artist.

The imagery of *Mythistorema* 3 is indeed violent, and we have been prepared for this already with the verb ενοσφίσθης of

---

[21] Interestingly enough, this exhaustive as well as fruitless attempt to appropriate something of the past's legacy in the surviving relics will continue to preoccupy Seferis in relation to ancient statuary, and he will describe it, much later, in his essay "Δελφοί" (1961), with a near-quotation from his own poem: "ένα κεφάλι Σφίγγας με τα μάτια μήτε ανοιχτά μήτε κλειστά. Το χαμόγελο, που λεν αρχαϊκό – αλλά δεν φτάνει – ενός Ηρακλή ή ενός Θησέα. Κάτι τέτοια αποσπάσματα από μια ζωή που ήταν κάποτε ολόκληρη, συγκλονιστικά κομμάτια, πολύ κοντά μας, δικά μας μια στιγμή, κι έπειτα μυστηριώδη και απροσπέλαστα." See *Δοκιμές*, Β΄, 5th ed. (Athens: Ikaros 1984), p. 142.

the epigraph. All hope of communication having failed, the relics of the past are not only useless but harmful, almost aggressive: they burden the artist without imbuing his imagination and creativity with positive forces.[22] *Mythistorema* 3 ends, characteristically, with the speaker's mutilation. The fact that he holds the marble head in his hands and that the hands return to him chopped off implies that it is in the hands that the poet feels the pressure of the past as represented by the statues, because for the poet as for the craftsman – an association that Seferis favoured – the hands are the means through which he realizes his art.[23] In this context the poem may be considered an adaptation by Seferis – with a Freudian colouring – of the myth of Medusa, to reflect his own preoccupations. The severed head which has still the power to turn the viewer into stone symbolizes for Freud the fear of castration.[24] In the case of

---

[22] In "Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης" and especially in section 4 (lines 40-54) the poet's failure to conjure back to life a dead word, and with it a dead world, is also conveyed through sculptural imagery (though it is less violent). Like a modern Niobe, the poet is turned to stone on realising the vanity of his efforts, as Seferis's own words indicate: "εικόνα μορφής που μαρμάρωσε με την απόφαση μιας πίκρας παντοτινής" (line 53).

[23] The poet's lonely struggle with tradition and the dangers lurking in this perilous occupation are conveniently summarized by Seferis himself in 1946, in his essay "Κ.Π. Καβάφης, Θ.Σ. Έλιοτ· παράλληλοι". What is interesting is that he is again using the imagery of *Mythistorema* 3: "Ο Καβάφης ανήκει σε μιαν άλλη παράδοση. Μια παράδοση κολοσσιαία και πιο αλαζονική από την άλλη, την καταφρονεμένη, που ο Σολωμός, σε μια ορισμένη στιγμή, μόνος προσπάθησε να ξαναπιάσει, με τα δυο του χέρια, που λύγισαν." See *Δοκιμές*, Α΄, p. 345.

[24] Charles Segal also mentions the latent fear of castration which is associated in Seferis with artistic creation, but he does not refer to the myth of Medusa. According to him, the severed head may be associated with the head of Orpheus. He argues that: "In the ancient myth the continuing voice of Orpheus' head expresses the notion that the artist's power, for good or ill, cannot be destroyed with his death." The treatment of the myth by Boccaccio in particular inaugurates its modern phase "when he [Boccaccio] takes up Ovid's story of how Apollo rescues the head from the threatening serpent (*Metamorphoses* 11.56-60) and turns the tale into an allegory of the posthumous fame of the artist. The serpent is time; Apollo is fame. The artist's work defeats all-devouring time and lives on after his death. But Seferis's poem takes the point of view of the living

Seferis, this fear is explicitly related to the artist's creative competence which is threatened, according to *Mythistorema* 3, not so much by the overwhelming presence of the forefathers but by the artist's realization of his impotence in bringing something of the forefathers' message to the modern world. As Maronitis has pointed out, this communication with the ancestors is the very definition of memory in Seferis's poetry: "ο ποιητής βλέπει και ακούει προς τα πίσω, ρίχνοντας στο συγκεχυμένο παρόν αυτόν τον διδακτικό ίσκιο του παρελθόντος."[25] It is this didactic shade that Seferis wants to recapture in his work and to transmit it, in turn, to future generations. But this effortless communication seems at this point to be beyond reach; the voice of the past and the voice of the present exist in different spheres separated by what appears to be an unbridgeable gulf.

In *Mythistorema* 3, then, memory or tradition functions more like an unwanted and embarrassing weight which disables the modern artist rather than being a source of inspiration. The question arises, of course, why Seferis should choose ancient statues in order to convey these feelings. I think that the answer goes beyond the commonly accepted view of statues as being among the few things that have survived from classical antiquity. As becomes clear if we examine "Ερωτικός Λόγος" and, especially, *Η Στέρνα,* the "Apollonian" ideal of the eternal being reflected in the statue's inertia and detachment from life does not satisfy Seferis. He is more interested in the "Dionysian" expression of movement and passion rooted in a deeper sense of life as a condition of constant change and becoming which is its essence and truth.

But the statue is not susceptible of the progress which Seferis – and Palamas before him – found in the Greek language. The statue is a form which is dead in the sense that it transcends time passively without, as it were, responding to time's challenges in

---

poet. And here the immortality of the earlier, dead poets is not a consolation, but also something to struggle against." See "Orpheus", pp. 297-8. However, as I argue, it is not so much the immortality of the earlier poet that threatens the speaker here but rather the modern artist's failure to decode the message that the ancestor is trying to transmit.

[25] D.N. Maronitis, "Διδακτικός Σεφέρης", in his: *Διαλέξεις* (Athens: Stigmi 1992), pp. 49-64 (p. 55).

the way that language (and, for an unusually long time, the Greek language) does. The Andromedan image of fixity, reflected both in the girl's being chained to the rock and in the smiles of the statues which "δεν προχωρούν", may well imply this lack of desired change, or progress. Moreover, the statues' perceived detachment, as well as the fact that they have been burdened by a multitude of interpretations, keeps the viewer at a distance, unable as he is to decipher their meaning. And whereas statues bear the marks of time only in that they show signs of wear, words have the power to adapt to new forms and meanings. Keeping the core of their sense unaltered, they have the power to renew themselves and have reached our own time rich from what they have collected on their journey. They bear the living marks of those who have used them over the centuries. Language, then, and particularly the language of poetry, is a repository of living memories rather than a deserted landscape of fossilized corpses; it thus encourages the desired dialogue between the dead and the living.

* * *

Let us now turn to the poetry of Ritsos in order to attempt a comparison between what has been discussed above and the way sculpture and stones appear in certain poems chosen from the period between 1957 and 1969. Two reasons justify this choice: on the one hand, the poems written during this period are widely considered to be among his best and include some very interesting and original aspects of sculpture not encountered in his poetry so far; on the other, various scholars have already talked about a growing and more explicit response by Ritsos to the poetry of Seferis, which culminates when Seferis is awarded the Nobel prize in 1963. The dialogue between the two poets has been discussed in the context of mythological poems, and especially in their use of Homeric motifs.[26] Here I will concentrate on Ritsos's use of stones and statues and I will venture to draw some conclusions which justify the differences.

---

[26] D. Ricks, "Ρίτσος-Όμηρος: ένας ποιητικός διάλογος", *Δωδώνη* 22 (1993) 49-65.

The way through which stones and statues enter the landscape of Ritsos's poetry is defined first of all by the experience of exile. As a communist, Ritsos became a political prisoner, and between 1949 and 1953 was exiled on the deserted islands of Makronnisos and Ai-Stratis. Consequently, his Waste Land is a literal one and not, as in the case of Seferis, the metaphorical rendering of a poetic landscape. The other factor which defines his perception of statues and stones is the poet's extensive travelling in Greece (between 1954 and 1966), and his acquaintance, after his marriage in 1954, with Samos. As Prevelakis has pointed out, the island's countryside and above all its archaeological sites have exerted a strong influence on Ritsos;[27] they have helped him see the burdensome classical past through different eyes, and must have defined his rather different perception of tradition in that context.

Let us look at the first poem, characteristically entitled "Πέτρες":

Έρχονται, φεύγουν οι μέρες, χωρίς σπουδή, χωρίς απρόοπτα.
Οι πέτρες μουσκεύουν στο φως και στη μνήμη.
Ένας βάζει μια πέτρα για προσκέφαλο.
Άλλος, πριν κολυμπήσει, αφήνει τα ρούχα του κάτω από μια πέτρα
μην του τα πάρει ο αέρας. Άλλος έχει μια πέτρα για σκαμνί του
ή για σημάδι στο χωράφι του, στο κοιμητήρι, στο μαντρί, στο δάσος.

Αργά, μετά το λιόγερμα, γυρίζοντας σπίτι σου,
όποια πέτρα απ' τ' ακρογιάλι αν ακουμπήσεις στο τραπέζι σου
είναι ένα αγαλμάτιο — μια μικρή Νίκη ή το σκυλί της Άρτεμης,
κι αυτή, όπου ένας έφηβος το μεσημέρι ακούμπησε τα βρεγμένα του πόδια,
είναι ένας Πάτροκλος με σκιερά, κλεισμένα ματόκλαδα.
(*Μαρτυρίες Α*, 1957-63)[28]

STONES

Days come and go without haste, without surprises.
Stones become drenched with light and memory.

---

[27] P. Prevelakis, *Ο ποιητής Γιάννης Ρίτσος* (Athens: Estia 1992), p. 368.
[28] Giannis Ritsos, *Ποιήματα*, Θ΄ (Athens: Kedros 1989-90), p. 191.

Someone sets a stone for a pillow.
Another, before swimming, leaves his clothes under a stone
so that the wind won't take them. Another uses a stone for a stool
or as a boundary mark on his farm, the cemetery, the sheepfold,
the forest.

Late, after sunset, when you've returned home,
whatever stone from the seashore you place on your table
becomes a statuette – a small Nike or the hound of Artemis,
and this stone, on which a young man at noon leaned his feet,
is a Patroclos, with shadowed, closed eyelashes.

(tr. K. Friar)[29]

The function of the stones in this poem is the complete opposite of what we saw in Seferis. In *Mythistorema* stones have negative connotations, confirming that the landscape of the poem has lost its vitality and its creativity. What Seferis sees in them is inorganic matter reflecting the surrounding aridity, alienation, a disturbance of the biological cycle of life and death (10: 7-11). In "Πέτρες", on the contrary, Ritsos seems to celebrate the transformation of inorganic matter into quasi-organic beings.

The poem is separated into two parts: in the first, stones are presented as functional objects in a predominantly rural setting. They are man's everyday companions and define what appear to be humble, almost insignificant details of everyday life.[30] Importantly, they also function as σήματα, tomb markers, indicating the boundaries between the world of dead and the world of the living. Only that here (unlike *Mythistorema* 21) there seems to be no discord between them. What is more, in a strikingly un-Seferian manner, stones are described as being bathed in light and in memory. Now, this is an important word to highlight: for what makes Seferis's *Mythistorema* a waste land is above all "the decision to forget", Lethe or oblivion, and often this is

---

[29] Yannis Ritsos, *Selected poems 1938-1988*, edited and translated by Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades (Brockport, NY: BOA 1989), p. 125.

[30] This is an important aspect of Ritsos's poetics as revealed in many poems and especially "Οι άσημες λεπτομέρειες" and "Περίπου". For a discussion see D.N. Maronitis, "Η τιμή του χρυσού και η τιμή της πέτρας", in his: *Πίσω μπρος. Προτάσεις και υποθέσεις για τη νεοελληνική ποίηση και πεζογραφία* (Athens: Stigmi 1986), pp. 151-62.

dramatized through references to the waning of love as a creative power (*Myth.* 10: "Κι οι γάμοι μας, τα δροσερά στεφάνια και τα δάχτυλα / γίνουνται αινίγματα ανεξήγητα για την ψυχή μας. / Πώς γεννηθήκαν πώς δυναμώσανε τα παιδιά μας;"), and to the disappearance of the feeling of touch (cf. *Myth.* 3 and 8: "χωρίς αφή"). In Ritsos, on the other hand, touch is already an important component of the first part of "Πέτρες", since all the activities described presuppose some sort of contact with the stones. But in the second part stones are celebrated as the very essence of memory, the agents which include within the forms or shadows of the past (a Victory, Artemis's hound, the face of Patroclus). Here a mere functional object is elevated into a work of art. Stones become now statuettes, precious objects of an almost fetishistic value. The feeling of touch which becomes prominent with the repetition of the verb ακουμπώ twice in the second part of the poem, confirms not only the activation of memory but also the awakening of love (very much in the tradition of Cavafy): the words έφηβος, μεσημέρι and Πάτροκλος recall Cavafy's erotic poems.[31] The same can be said of the fragmented presentation of the body (Ritsos only mentions the wet feet) and the emphasis put on the eyes, which, again, recreate the sensual atmosphere of poems such as "Γκρίζα", "Μέρες του 1903" and "Στου καφενείου την είσοδο". Finally, although "Πέτρες" was written between 1957 and 1963, it echoes the experiences of the poet's years of exile. In a text published for the first time in 1974, Ritsos talks about stones in a way which is strongly reminiscent of the poem discussed here. It is worth reporting a few lines:

> On the deserted islands of exile [...] those quiet objects acquire a voice (or maybe we acquire a deeper hearing), they speak, they tell us what they once were, what they could be, maybe because of this general need of expression that fights wear and loneliness and [...] which, alone, can secure an individual survival in the crowd. And humans, urged by the same need of expression, found the stones, listened to them, used them (for houses and for statues), and worked with them in harmony. In particular the exiles,

[31] Compare with Patroclus as he appears in "Τυανεύς γλύπτης" and "Τα άλογα του Αχιλλέως" for example. Similarly, compare the emotional value of the words έφηβος and μεσημέρι in poems such as "Ένας θεός των", "Ιασή τάφος", "Ζωγραφισμένα" and "Όταν διεγείρονται".

> isolated, forcibly silent, became friends with the stones. And because in those places painting material was forbidden, stones offered themselves, through their smooth surfaces and sculptural cavities, as the basis on which one could draw or highlight what the stone itself dictated.[32]

It becomes clear that, both in the above quotation and in the poem discussed, stones seem to liberate the creative drive of the artist, his desire for expression and communication and, above all, his wish "to remain", as Cavafy would have put it.

The poems that follow confirm the appropriation of stones and sculpture in the above-discussed manner. Although we can recognise some of the ingredients of Seferis's poetry, Ritsos inverts their value, attaching to them positive attributes. Take for example the poems "Προοπτική" and "Συνέχεια". The point Ritsos is trying to make in them is, I think, obvious: past and present co-exist harmoniously. The past becomes the necessary foundation for the present (compare θεμέλια in "Προοπτική", line 2), and the present almost literally springs out of the seeds of the past, forming its natural extension. This appears to be an organic and certainly unforced relationship. We saw in *Mythistorema* (and poem 22 is a good example) that people have clearly lost their roots and are wandering and searching in vain for some clue that will establish the shattered communication with the past. In the poems by Ritsos, on the other hand, it is the existence of these very roots that is celebrated, using sculptural imagery in a rather different way.

ΠΡΟΟΠΤΙΚΗ

Τα σπίτια μας είναι χτισμένα πάνω σ' άλλα σπίτια ευθύγραμμα, μαρμάρινα,
κι εκείνα πάνω σε άλλα. Τα θεμέλιά τους
κρατιούνται πάνω στα κεφάλια όρθιων αγαλμάτων, δίχως χέρια.
Έτσι, όσο χαμηλά, στον κάμπο, κάτω απ' τις ελιές, κι αν απαγκιάζουν τα καλύβια μας,
μικρά, καπνισμένα, με μια στάμνα μονάχα πλάι στην πόρτα,
θαρρείς πως μένεις στα ψηλά, και σου φέγγει ολοτρόγυρα ο αγέρας

---

[32] Giannis Ritsos, "Πέτρες, κόκκαλα, ρίζες", *Αντί*, Περίοδος Β΄, 23 (1975). My translation.

ή κάποτε θαρρείς πως είσαι έξω απ' τα σπίτια, πως δεν έχεις
κανένα σπίτι, και πορεύεσαι ολόγυμνος,
μονάχος κάτω από 'ναν ουρανό τρομαχτικά γαλάζιο ή άσπρο,
κι ένα άγαλμα, καμιά φορά, ακουμπά ελαφρά το χέρι του στον ώμο σου.

(*Μαρτυρίες Α*, 1957-63)[33]

PERSPECTIVE

Our houses are built on other, straightlined houses, made of marble,
and these on other houses. Their foundations
are supported on the heads of upright armless statues.
And so, no matter how much lower our huts roost in the fields under the olive trees,
small, grimy with smoke, with only a water pitcher by the door,
you imagine you are living high up, that all about you the air shines,
or at times you imagine you are outside the houses, that you have
no house at all, that you are walking naked,
alone, under a sky startlingly azure or white,
and a statue, now and then, leans its hand lightly on your shoulder.

(tr. K. Friar)[34]

As we can see, this poem makes of marble and statues the very foundation of today's world. The imagery related to the statues is comparable to that of *Mythistorema* 21, discussed above, since we find in this poem too fragmented statues which are standing, only that here they are underground. Just as in *Mythistorema* 3, it is the hands which are missing here too, but in spite of that the statues are holding the world on their heads. But in *Mythistorema* 21 the encounter with the statues and stones dramatized a rather perfidious alliance – remember that the phrase "affiliated in stone" had disastrous consequences for the travellers: they become petrified and die, whereas the statues are standing aloof, enclosed in their own ivory tower. In Ritsos's poem, on the other hand, this encounter becomes a humanizing one, since meeting statues does not imply petrification and death.

---

[33] Ritsos, *Ποιήματα*, Θ΄, p. 190.
[34] Ritsos, *Selected poems*, p. 117.

There appears to be a transition from the functional and humble dimension of everyday life (lines 4-5, especially "χαμηλά, στον κάμπο") to an aesthetic perception of it (lines 7-10 and especially "μένεις στα ψηλά"). This uplifting experience, which is certainly due to the presence of the ancient relics, is presented as a process of purification: the humans remain ολόγυμνοι, acquiring in other words statuesque characteristics associated with beauty and the ideal in art; and the landscape shifts from the earth, with the dominant silver-green of its olive groves and the black of the smoke, to the sky, with its pure colours, blue or white.

It is worth comparing at this point the first eight lines of *Mythistorema* 10, because the differences between the two poets are vividly depicted in their handling of a comparable landscape described in these poems:

> Ο τόπος μας είναι κλειστός, όλο βουνά
> που έχουν σκεπή το χαμηλό ουρανό μέρα και νύχτα.
> Δεν έχουμε ποτάμια δεν έχουμε πηγάδια δεν έχουμε πηγές,
> μονάχα λίγες στέρνες, άδειες κι αυτές, που ηχούν και που τις προσκυνούμε.
> Ήχος στεκάμενος κούφιος, ίδιος με τη μοναξιά μας
> ίδιος με την αγάπη μας, ίδιος με τα σώματά μας.
> Μας φαίνεται παράξενο που κάποτε μπορέσαμε να χτίσουμε
> τα σπίτια τα καλύβια και τις στάνες μας.
>
> Our country is closed in, all mountains
> that day and night have the low sky as their roof.
> We have no rivers, we have no wells, we have no springs,
> only a few cisterns – and these empty – that echo, and that we worship.
> A stagnant hollow sound, the same as our loneliness
> the same as our love, the same as our bodies.
> We find it strange that once we were able to build
> our houses, huts and sheep-folds.
>
> (tr. Keeley and Sherrard)[35]

[35] Seferis, *Complete poems*, p. 14.

This is a landlocked country in which the sky is felt as a burden: it reinforces the feeling of enclosure that is born out of the surrounding mountains. This is not the case in the Ritsos poem discussed above. There the humble speakers seem to partake in an impulsive way in the deep historical perspective offered by their tradition, which seems to elevate them above their unfavourable geographical position. Above all, as mentioned above, they acquire an aesthetic perspective as well, for which the landscape and tradition seem to be equally responsible. Indeed, the landscape is transformed into a new home for the speakers (lines 6-9), and, threatening as this transition may be (cf. τρομαχτικά γαλάζιο), the statues are a source of solace and support. Quite unlike Seferis's poems, the last line of "Προοπτική" describes an image of solidarity: statues are not deceitful, but there seems to be a real, impulsive comradeship confirmed by the surrealistic image of the statue touching the human's shoulder.

The poem "Συνέχεια" makes a similar point:

> Αυτά τα χώματα τα ξέρουμε καλά, – το πώς δουλεύονται, τι δίνουν –
> στάρι, σταφύλι, ελιά, καπνό, μπαμπάκι, λεμονάνθι, δάφνη·
> κι η πέτρα δίνει τον ασβέστη για τα σπίτια μας. Πότε πότε, τυχαίνει
> εκεί που σκάβουμε τη γης, για να καταχωνιάσουμε έναν γέροντα,
> να βρίσκουμε ένα πέτρινο γυμνό κορίτσι ή κάποιον άγγελο
> γυμνό κι αυτόν, δίχως φτερούγες. Τότες αγναντεύουμε πιο κάτω
> τη φοινικιά της Αγια-Πελαγίας ν' αγεροπαίζει τα κλαδιά της
> και ξέρουμε πως είναι τα φτερά που λείπουν απ' τους ώμους
> εκείνου του αγγέλου.
>
> (*Επαναλήψεις Α*, Σάμος 28.7.64)[36]

CONTINUITY

> We know this soil well, how it works, what it offers:
> wheat, grapes, olive trees, tobacco, cotton, lemon blossoms, laurel;
> and stone offers lime for our houses. Every now and then,
> while digging up the ground to bury some old man,
> we happen to find a stone girl, naked, or else an angel,
> also naked, without wings. And then, from a distance, we see
> Saint Pelagia's palm tree fluttering its branches

[36] Ritsos, *Ποιήματα*, Γ', p. 20.

and we know that to be the wings missing from that angel's shoulders.

(tr. Keeley)[37]

Historical roots are defined and confirmed through archaeology. Yet, again, we are no longer here in front of the science Seferis condemns in poems such as "Έγκωμη", for example, a learned, mechanical and impassive way of discovering one's roots.[38] In Ritsos, archaeology is represented by the digging of the earth as a spontaneous activity, practised not by the scholars but by the folk, unconsciously, as part of their everyday activities such as the burial of the dead or, in "Ενα άσπρο άλογο", the search for a well:

Λίγο πιο πάνω απ' τ' αμπέλια, ήταν το κίτρινο χωράφι. Εκεί,
κάτω απ' τους τρεις ευκάλυπτους, ένα άλογο κατάλευκο
ατένιζε, μεσ' από την κλειστή λευκότητά του, απόμακρα
κάτι λευκό, αναγκαίο, αόρατο. Στο καμένο απ' τον ήλιο χορτάρι
η σκιά του αλόγου ήταν γαλάζια, τόσο που οι φωνές των τρυγητών
έπαιρναν μια γαλάζια απόχρωση με χρυσά στίγματα.
Τον άλλο χρόνο, καλοκαίρι πάλι, στο ίδιο σημείο,
σκάβοντας για ν' ανοίξουνε πηγάδι βρήκαν τρία αγάλματα
το ίδιο λευκά σαν κείνο το άλογο που εξαφανίστηκε μια νύχτα.

(*Επαναλήψεις Α*, Σάμος 6.8.63)[39]

A WHITE HORSE

Uphill, beyond the vines was a yellow field. There,
under the three eucalyptus trees, a horse, snow white,
was staring remotely, from within its inscrutable whiteness,
at something white, essential, invisible. On the sun-scorched grass

---

[37] Yannis Ritsos, *Repetitions, Testimonies, Parentheses*, trans. Edmund Keeley (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1991), p. 7.

[38] "Η ανατομία μιας ξοδεμένης δύναμης κάτω από το μάτι/ του αρχαιολόγου του ναρκοδότη ή του χειρούργου" (lines 12-3); or again: "είχανε παζευτεί πολλοί, μερμήγκια,/ και τη χτυπούσαν με κοντάρια και δεν τη λαβώναν" (lines 39-40). Compare also with what Seferis writes in his essay "Δελφοί" (1961): "Έχουμε δουλέψει σαν τα μυρμήγκια και σαν τις μέλισσες πάνω σ' αυτά τ' απομεινάρια. Πόσο την έχουμε προσεγγίσει την ψυχή που τα έπλασε;" *Δοκιμές*, Β΄, pp.136-52 (p. 143).

[39] Ritsos, *Ποιήματα*, Γ΄, p. 12.

the horse's shadow was azure, so much so that the voices of the harvesters
took on a tint of azure with golden speckles.
The following year, in the summer again, at the same spot,
digging for a well, they found three statues
as white as that horse which disappeared one night.
(my translation)

In this latter example, especially, the use of the word πηγάδι is crucial because it operates, I think, on two levels. On a first level, it refers literally to a practice very popular in Greece, particularly in the countryside. Unlike Seferis, once again, where the aridity and desolation of the earth was suggested through the dryness of wells and rivers, the landscape here is a fertile one cultivated by the peasants who seem to live in harmony with it. On another level, of course, the meaning of the digging becomes rather symbolic. For it is not water that the people discover, but three statues. In a predominantly surrealistic ambience, the horse seems to be an apparition from a transcendent world, or again some sort of στοιχειό (the magic number three reinforces the connection of this poem with folk tales) that permeates the place. The peasants are part of that spellbound landscape, although, as it appears from the poem, they are unaware of it. The point here is that there is an unmediated communication between the people and the relics of the past which helps them draw spontaneously from the well of tradition. They seem to experience effortlessly what Seferis (and before him Palamas) struggled hard to achieve: the bridging of the gap between past and present.

The folk element seems indeed to play a crucial role in Ritsos's handling of the theme of tradition as symbolized by the statues. In all the poems discussed, the protagonists are "the people", who live in rural areas, cultivate the land and keep it fertile. Note here again how the Seferian values are inverted: the people in Ritsos preserve the features of the ancient, archaic and above all "organic" societies the travellers of *Mythistorema* 10 are longing for. In Ritsos's poems life is not the unsolved mystery of a learned élite, which is nevertheless cut off from its revitalizing roots. Simplicity and naivety reflect the character of the people, who can still see with the eyes of their soul and

for whom life is still natural and unaffected. Even that heavy burden of *Mythistorema*, the classical tradition symbolized by the statues, has become in Ritsos a positive presence, as we have seen.

This is above all alluded to in line 3 of "Συνέχεια". The word stone also means marble, and the practice of making lime out of marble described here reminds one of pre-Revolutionary Greece, when the relics of the past were used as building materials.[40] Interestingly, Seferis expressed his approval of such procedures in his diaries. For him, they represented very vividly what he understood by unconstrained and constructive use of the past and tradition. It included the idea of building up something new out of the old. See, for example, what he noted in late November 1936, when he visited the Kerameikos Museum, in which a small equestrian statue attracted his attention:

> Από τη μεριά που το βλέπω, το πλευρό του είναι κομμένο ίσια κάθετα, θα 'λεγες επίτηδες. Ο φύλακας μου λέει πως βρέθηκε στα θεμέλια των Μακρών Τειχών. Το είχαν χρησιμοποιήσει σαν ένα κοινό αγκωνάρι. Μια τέτοια πράξη μ' αρέσει. Είναι τόσο αντίθετη με τη μανία που έχουμε να συντηρούμε τα πιο ασήμαντα πράγματα.[41]
>
> From the point where I stand, its flank is cut vertically, as if on purpose. The museum attendant tells me that it was found in the foundations of the Long Walls. They had used it as an ordinary corner-stone. I like this. It is so unlike our craze for preserving the most insignificant things.
>
> (my translation)

Ritsos's folk have preserved these features. They share many characteristics of the people as encountered in Politis's *Παραδόσεις*, in which the landscape is sometimes under the benevolent spell of a statue or some other marble monument (cf.

---

[40] For examples see Angeliki Kokkou, *Η μέριμνα για τις αρχαιότητες στην Ελλάδα και τα πρώτα μουσεία* (Athens: Ermis 1977), pp. 23-5.
[41] Seferis, *Μέρες Γ΄ (1934-1940)* (Athens: Ikaros 1977), p. 148.

"Ένα άσπρο άλογο").[42] This dimension is confirmed in the poem "Συνέχεια": the very words which describe the discovered statues, κορίτσι and άγγελος, echo the words of General Makrygiannis "μια γυναίκα κι ένα βασιλόπουλο", for whom Greeks should fight;[43] they also recall the terms used by the λαός in Politis's *Παραδόσεις* to refer to ancient statues.[44] They reveal both the naivety of the speakers – perceived as a quality here – and, devoid as they are of ideological constraints and the burden of a nationalistic discourse on ancestors, their ability to experience the unity of tradition, the undisturbed continuity between past and present. This continuity is confirmed in "Συνέχεια" in the domain of the natural environment which assimilates and recreates what has been lost through the centuries: the leaves of the palm-tree are the wings that transform the ancient statue into an angel. It is also confirmed in the domain of religion, if one considers the confusion around the iconographical identity of the statue: what used to be the statue of a youth is perceived in the modern set of values as an angel. Such a naïve confusion is not unique. At the beginning of the twentieth century, one of Ritsos's "fathers", Kostis Palamas, attempts a similar representation of the survival of the ancient world into the modern. The grave stele of Dexileos, in the ancient cemetery of Kerameikos, is interpreted by a mother and her child as a depiction of Saint Dimitrios.[45]

* * *

---

[42] See in N.G. Politis, *Μελέται περί του βίου και της γλώσσης του ελληνικού λαού. Παραδόσεις* (Athens: Sakellariou 1904), ch. 7 "Αρχαία κτίρια και μάρμαρα" and ch. 21 "Στοιχειά και στοιχειωμένοι τόποι".

[43] Reported by Seferis in "Ένας Έλληνας – ο Μακρυγιάννης", *Δοκιμές*, Α΄, 5th ed. (Athens: Ikaros 1992), pp. 228-63 (p. 240).

[44] The Karyatids, for example, are referred to as "οι κόραις του Κάστρου" in tale no. 136. See Politis, *Παραδόσεις*, p. 72.

[45] "– Ποιος είναι αυτός, παιδάκι μου; – Μαννούλα, ο Άη Δημήτρης. – / Κ' είσουν εσύ, Δεξίλεε, λεβέντη καβαλλάρη,/ αμάραντο ασπρολούλουδο της αθηναίας Τέχνης!" This is voice 53 from "Εκατό φωνές" in *Η ασάλευτη ζωή* (1904). See *Άπαντα*, III (Athens: Biris n.d.), p. 160.

To conclude: statues and stones in the poetry of Seferis and Ritsos dramatize the relation of the modern Greek to the ancient tradition. In the case of Seferis it is a negative one, because the experience of war, and particularly the Asia Minor Disaster, no longer allows unconstrained and effortless communication with the past. What is more, another alienating factor associated exclusively with Seferis's experience of Greece, is the blind veneration of the ancestors which created a national rhetoric that subverted the aesthetic values of the statues and prevented the modern poets from finding their own voice. What caused a radical change in Seferis's attitude towards sculpture is his visits to Ephesus and Cyprus, after which he will use the symbol of the statue in a positive way, comparable to what we have seen in the poetry of Ritsos. Cyprus offered Seferis a different outlook on ancient Greek tradition which turned the (poetic) landscape into a fertile one, human society into an organic entity, and gave the statues the aesthetic qualities required by their etymology. This shift is achieved among other things thanks to Seferis's acquaintance with the people of Cyprus. It is not accidental that the popular wisdom of Makrygiannis is heard along with the voices of Aeschylus or Heraclitus. Similarly, it is not accidental that for the first time in his poetry Seferis defines his art as craftsmanship, comparing it to the old local folk practice of decorating a κολόκα.[46]

The wound of the Helladic experience which accompanies Seferis from *Mythistorema* up to *Ημερολόγιο Καταστρώματος Γ΄* (*Logbook III*) does not seem to have affected Ritsos. One important reason for that must have been his ideological orientation. As Beaton notes, while other poets of the Generation of the '30s struggled to cope with the chaos that followed Asia Minor by attempting to build a new conceptual order which would replace the Great Idea, those committed to the Left already possessed such a framework against which to interpret the world around them.[47] Ritsos's pessimism of the early years is related to the drama of a fallen bourgeoisie to which he himself belonged and

---

[46] In the poem "Λεπτομέρειες στην Κύπρο" (1955). See Seferis, *Ποιήματα* (Athens: Ikaros 1989), p. 235.

[47] R. Beaton, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994), p. 131.

was not connected at all with "the burden of the past". It is not surprising, then, that we do not find many references to statues in the years before the early '50s.

As I have argued in this paper, it is Ritsos's own experience of the Greek landscape – either in exile or during his travels – as well as his response to Seferis, that brings on stage statues, stones, and, in other poems, ancient temples and archaeological sites. The island of Samos must have exerted on him an influence comparable to that of Cyprus on Seferis. Its landscape offered a different perspective on the Greek tradition (cf. "Προοπτική"), defined mainly by the beauty of nature, the friendliness and simplicity of its people, and the abundance of archaeological relics. And I believe that the affinity with the people is something Ritsos, as a Marxist poet, feels that he possesses almost by definition. In any case, Greek tradition in the poems discussed is devoid of the nationalistic propaganda of the years of exile (especially Makronissos) or of the learned outlook of a scholar working in the library.

It is worth noting that it is precisely the ideological exploitation of the ancestors that will mark a shift in Ritsos's handling of sculpture after 1967. Sculptural imagery, and above all the symbol of the statue, will be used again then, only to underline the nightmarish experience of dictatorship and the growing existential preoccupations of the poet.

King's College London