Between tradition and appropriation: mythical method and politics in the poetry of George Seferis and Yannis Ritsos

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Venerating the past in the form of tradition and adapting or appropriating it for modern purposes could be seen as two modes of engagement with antiquity, involving a certain hierarchy, either privileging the authority of the past or assigning priority to the present in radically recasting the ancient material. This article will explore whether in the interstices between tradition and appropriation it is possible to position/locate a third approach which would not involve a reverence for the past or radical revisioning of the classical material but could generate a dialogue between source and adaptation, with the aim of encouraging their mutual illumination. It will consider the extent to which this dialogic or interactive mode of classical reception has proved more appealing to modern Greek poets dealing with conceptions of history, time and politics and explore its epistemological implications by focusing on 'mythological' poems by George Seferis and Yannis Ritsos that allude to the political developments of the period in which they were written and engage with the past in different ways.

A number of studies have been published in recent years about the uses of the classical past in modern Greece. Most of them focus on issues of identity, nation-building or the politics of archaeology and the past (Hamilakis 2007; Damaskos and Plantzos 2008; Güthenke 2008; and Tziovas 2014). Though in other cultures one can identify postcolonial, feminist, psychoanalytic or postmodernist approaches to the classical world, in Greek literature it is often difficult to determine the perspective from which a poet engages with antiquity.[1] Therefore, more research is needed to analyse and theorize the ways modern Greek poets engage with Greek antiquity and their handling of classical material. Engaging with concepts and methodologies developed in the field of classical reception, this article will focus on some 'mythological' poems by George Seferis (1900–71) and Yannis Ritsos (1909–90), which

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1 For example, though Efi Spentzou's essay on 'Defying History: The Legacy of Helen in Modern Greek Poetry' (2006) is included in a volume with a feminist focus, her approach is more historical (offering an overview) than feminist.

allude to political developments in the period in which they were written.[2] It will mainly explore how myth, history and politics interact in those poems and problematize the epistemological implications of the dialogue between antiquity and modernity.

The emergence of classical reception studies has led to the reconceptualization of the entire field and the identification of the different tropes used by authors, artists, intellectuals, politicians, or popular culture to exploit the classical past. The dominant taxonomy to date has involved classical legacy/heritage/tradition on the one hand and classical reception on the other. Terms such as 'tradition' and 'heritage' imply value and continuity, which 'reception' does not necessarily invoke (Goldhill 2010: 58; Silk, Gildenhard and Barrow 2014). Tradition is used here not just in the sense of past cultural achievements but, in contrast to the relativistic spirit of reception, it represents the importance of the past as an archetypal template in which the timeless overwhelmingly inhabits the temporal or in Eliot's historical sense the 'present moment of the past'. This might present tradition as an evolving or living continuum, but it does not weaken the authority or the solidity of the past it represents. In a way 'tradition' and 'reception' replicate the contrasting terms 'fidelity' and 'freedom', used in film adaptation or translation studies to denote the relationship between the final version and the source text.[3] Like fidelity, the use of the concept tradition tends to be essentialist, assuming that the ancient text 'contains' an inherent and extractable essence to be venerated, recovered, and transmitted indefinitely. On the other hand, it has been argued that 'reception' suggests a passive role and therefore 'appropriation' is considered a more active term (Goldhill 2002: 297; Hall 2004: 61; Harloe 2010: 18–19). Hence it will be useful to make a distinction between 'appropriation' — meaning the revisionist and more ideologically driven category — and 'reception' — meaning the more text- or media-based term —, as will be shown below. Reception is often seen as an aesthetic encounter between

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2 I am focusing here on the shorter poems by Ritsos (primarily from the *Testimonies* and *Repetitions*) and not on the dramatic monologues of *The Fourth Dimension* (for a discussion of two of these monologues, 'Orestes' and 'Philoctetes', see Tziovas 1996, 2014).

3 In 'The Task of the Translator', Walter Benjamin points out that 'fidelity and freedom in translation have traditionally been regarded as conflicting tendencies' (Benjamin 1979: 79). In his Introduction to *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*, Stephen Harrison succinctly outlines an earlier and a more recent mode of classical reception: 'Contemporary poets now turn to ancient material not so much in a spirit of homage as in a spirit of appropriation. The modern "deconsecration" of great poetic figures such as Homer and Virgil, in the sense of removing their cultural centrality as canonical and immutable texts generally known and read in their original languages, allows contemporary poets such as Derek Walcott or Seamus Heaney to create new classic works using classical material and a sophisticated intertextual approach, just as Virgil and Horace created Latin works through the substantial and subtle reuse of Greek models in a Roman context. Poets can now safely appropriate what they need for their own work and their own contemporary concerns' (Harrison 2009: 15).

equals, while appropriation highlights the ideological superiority of the modern context (see the debate of Goldhill 2010 and Martindale 2010).

However, some will dispute this and insist that reception is a more general, and all-encompassing term. As a kind of 'dialogics of adaptation', to use Robert Stam's term (2000), reception is always a form of appropriation, referencing the film *Troy* (2004) as a case in point. Though its director Wolfgang Petersen paid homage to the *Iliad* as the source of all grand stories in the Western tradition, many reviewers and classicists alike criticized *Troy* for its changes to the *Iliad* and its retelling of the entire Trojan war story (Winkler 2007: 9; Nisbet 2008: 78–86). Similarly, Simon Armitage's retelling of *The Odyssey* (2015) plunders the source text to create a timely modern political drama, interweaving Homeric myth with references to contemporary issues such as xenophobia and migration. A review of the play concluded: 'Less politics from Armitage and more poetry from Homer might have done the trick' (Allfree 2015). Both reception and appropriation presuppose different degrees of freedom but appropriation seems to me a more suitable term than reception for the ideological or political popularization of antiquity. It usually takes different forms, involving the reculturalization, revision, or remaking of the material from a particular perspective or angle.[4]

Venerating or appropriating the past involves a certain hierarchy, either privileging the authority of the past or assigning priority to the present by radically recasting the ancient material.[5] In the interstices between tradition and appropriation, it is possible to place what is currently called 'classical reception' and defined as an 'acknowledgment that the past and present are always implicated in each other' (Martindale 2006: 12; 2010: 79–80). This approach would not involve a radical revisioning of the classical material but could generate a dialogue between source and adaptation, with the aim of encouraging their mutual illumination, treating their relationship as interactive or antagonistic. It has been argued that appropriation 'downplays the possibility of dialogue, the capacity of the text to resist our attempts to master it, its capacity to modify our sensibility' (Martindale 2007: 300). Therefore, the middle ground between 'tradition' and 'appropriation' entails a dialogic juxtaposition between antiquity and modernity, which in turn aspires to the dynamic and dialogic character of reading. This dialogic mode, which comes closer to the 'reception-aesthetics' of Hans-Robert Jauss (1982) or Bakhtin's dialogism (1981), refers to open-ended possibilities of intertextual

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4 Appropriation has been defined as 'taking an ancient image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices (explicitly or implicitly)' (Hardwick 2003: 9). It should be noted that the term 'appropriation' is also used for the political uses and abuses of antiquity (Fleming 2006). Julie Sanders points out that 'appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain' while 'adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original' (2006: 26).

5 In textual or narrative terms such a hierarchy can be illustrated by the terms 'hypotext' and 'hypertext'.

transformation or intermedia adaptation and an endless process of cross-referencing between the source material and its adaptation, recycling and transmutation. Theoretically, this position neither venerates the originary material (past) nor does it claim that the adaptation (present) is cut off from its source by its alterity, but encourages turning to the past to understand the present or vice versa. It tends to celebrate the 'trace' of the past rather than erase it in the encounter between modern reader and classical text and, in the words of Charles Martindale, represents 'a two-way process of understanding, backwards and forwards, which illuminates antiquity as much as modernity' (Martindale 2013: 171).[6]

When texts or visual art forms are involved, a space for an ongoing dialogic process might be carved out between tradition and appropriation. Yet what happens when we look beyond poems, novels, and films to wider cultural discourses, historical perspectives, and political uses of antiquity? A genuine dialogue between past and present or a sustained interaction between myth and history might not be maintained without veering towards either tradition or appropriation. The dialectics of reception is unlikely to be extended beyond intertextual or intermedia relations without either antiquity or modernity getting the upper hand. Perhaps the more important question is whether classical reception should be defined as a form of appropriation and refiguring of classical texts or as a two-way relationship between source text or culture and the new work and receiving culture (Hardwick 2003: 4).[7] In this article, it is assumed that reception is more of a two-way relationship and thus a more pertinent term for textual or visual uses, while appropriation is more of a one-way process and therefore a more appropriate term for ideological or political uses of antiquity. In discussing the political poems of Seferis and Ritsos, I will consider the extent to which terms such as 'tradition', 'appropriation' and 'reception' and their corresponding perceptions of the past are helpful in analysing their textual and ideological aspects.

Though these three modes of using the classical past (tradition, appropriation, and reception/interaction)[8] are often treated as fluid and overlapping, they could

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6 In the same vein T. S. Eliot wrote: 'the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' (Eliot 1976: 14). It is worth bearing in mind that Baudelaire defined 'modernity' in 'The Painter of Modern Life' as a combination of the ephemeral and the eternal, arguing that the 'relative and circumstantial' can be appreciated in tandem with the invariable elements (Baudelaire 1966).

7 Charles Martindale consistently defines reception as 'a two-way process, backward as well as forward, in which the present and past are in dialogue with each other' (Martindale 2007: 298; cf. Martindale 2013: 171). William W. Batstone argues 'that the point of reception is the ephemeral interface of the text; it occurs where the text and the reader meet and is simultaneously constitutive of both' (Batstone 2006: 17).

8 D. N. Maronitis suggests a more or less similar distinction using the terms: $\tau\alpha\upsilon\tau\text{o}\sigma\eta\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (respecting the original source), $\varepsilon\tau\varepsilon\rho\text{o}\sigma\eta\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (intentional diversion from or revision of the original source), and $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\sigma\eta\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (an in-between position) (2013: 48). He claims that Ritsos' Homeric poems utilize the subversive $\varepsilon\tau\varepsilon\rho\text{o}\sigma\eta\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$; elsewhere he argues that Seferis seems to prefer using $\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\sigma\eta\mu\acute{\iota}\alpha$ (Maronitis 2008: 190).

also be seen as corresponding to historicism (priority given to the past), presentism (emphasis on the present), and dialogism (dialogic friction between different historical moments) respectively.[9] It could be argued that the first mode reveres antiquity by maintaining its distance from modernity, the second radically transforms antiquity by remaking it, and the third experiences or engages with antiquity by trying to bring it closer to or into dialogue with modernity.[10] Adopting a Jaussian model, Charles Martindale defines reception as a form of dialogism, which provides 'one intellectually coherent way of avoiding both crude presentism ("the reading that too peremptorily assimilates a text to contemporary concerns") and crude historicism. Antiquity and modernity, present and past, are always implicated in each other, always in dialogue – to understand either one, you need to think in terms of the other' (2006: 5–6).[11] Having outlined the different modes of engagement with the classical past, I shall proceed by discussing how these can be useful in exploring the conceptualizations of the past in the poetry of Seferis and Ritsos.

Both Greek poets seem to practise the third mode, involving a dialogic interaction between antiquity and modernity. This often entails a kind of demythologization highlighting unheroic ancient figures (e.g. Elpenor) or the ordinary and human aspects of antiquity, thus trying to fuse the legendary and the modern. Though humanization (and in turn demythologization) could be read as foregrounding both the unchanging human condition and the current circumstances determining human behaviour, it could also be seen as the middle ground between outdated heroism and wholesale modernization. For example, in Ritsos' poem 'Achilles after Dying' (1968) Achilles does not care about past glory and is divested of heroism (Ritsos 1991: 89).[12] The poet relies on a post-Homeric myth that says Achilles' mother transported him after his death to the island of Leuce, where, though he was still pursued by new admirers, Achilles was alone at last 'peaceful,/no pretension,/no duties or tight armor, most of all without the humble hypocrisy of

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9 The emphasis on the present goes back to Walter Pater's idea of history, i.e. that 'the past cannot be divorced from the present: the meaning of Greece is always created in the present' (Evangelista 2009: 4).

10 This third approach echoes Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion (*Wahrheit und Methode* (Truth and Method [1960]) of 'fusion of horizons', involving the merging of the horizon of the present (informed by the past) and the horizon of the past (which has to be recovered in that present formed by the past).

11 Reception as a dialogic interaction situated between 'presentism' and 'historicism' could be seen as a hybrid form of historicism. These three modes (historicism, presentism, and dialogism) could also be associated with old humanism, anti-humanism and a new humanism, which involves the recognition of the relevance of the past for us and the implication of the historical and the transhistorical (Martindale 2013: 179).

12 Henceforth, all references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated. The Greek texts of the poems discussed in this article can be found in Ritsos, vol. 9 (1989a) and vol. 10 (1989b).

heroism'. This anti-heroic approach is also more empathetic, trying to involve the reader in the ordinary lives of mythical characters who appear human and unassuming.

A modern landscape often facilitates the interaction of past and present and becomes the terrain of their dialogue, as ancient figures make their appearance in contemporary settings or ancient ruins acquire new significance or use. The physical landscape serves as a link between the ancient and the modern world in the poetry of George Seferis and this idea recurs in the speech he gave when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963: 'we have always lived in the same country and have seen the same mountains slope into the sea' (Séféris 1964: 40).[13] The role of a familiar space to which gods and heroes once belonged is pointed out by his translators who argue that before taking the reader to the level of myth, Seferis earns his/her sympathy and trust by convincingly representing a contemporary Greek reality sustaining this myth. In this way, 'the ancient and modern worlds meet in a metaphor without strain or contrivance as we find the legendary figures moving anachronistically onto the contemporary stage that the poet has set before our eyes' (Keeley and Sherrard 1995: xiv).

Given that the focus on 'tradition' is considered a rather dated perception of the past[14] and 'appropriation', as a 'deconsecration' of the classical material, is rather challenging for a Greek audience imbued with the notion of cultural continuity, the dialogic or interactive mode of classical reception has proved more appealing to modern Greek poets.[15] Based, as it is, on the communication, contrast, or fusion of the ancient past and present, the humanization of ancient figures or their transposition into modern settings, this mode might suit Greek poets best in dealing with conceptions of history, time, and politics. The question, however, which will be addressed in this article is whether this dialogue between past and present, myth and history will be balanced or inevitably lopsided. The latter eventuality in turn undermines the dialogics of reception, resulting either in the historicism of tradition or the presentism of appropriation and challenges the dialogic mode as a distinct

13 Also available in English translation at http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1963/seferis-lecture-fr.html and in Greek translation '*Λίγα για τη νεότερη ελληνική παράδοση*' (Seferis 1992: 370).

14 Reverence for the classical past does not survive so much now in Greek poetry as in heritage culture and in the reception of performances of ancient drama. It caused considerable debate, for example, when Greek archaeological sites were hired out for exhibitions, advertisements and banquets or popular artists were allowed to perform in ancient theatres (e.g. Epidaurus, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus). Similarly, spectators and critics have reacted vociferously to contemporary performances of ancient Greek drama that introduced modern elements (e.g. smoking).

15 This dialogic mode occasionally becomes explicit, as in the poems of Titos Patrikios '*Κουβεντιάζοντας με τον Αρχίλοχο*' (Conversing with Archilochus) and '*Κουβεντιάζοντας με τον Πίνδαρο*' (Conversing with Pindar) from his poetry collection *Συγκατοίκηση με το Παρόν* (Cohabitation with the Present) (2011).

trope of classical reception as far as issues that go beyond the textual context are concerned.

Here I aim to explore the various manifestations of this dialogic, communicative or transposition mode and its epistemological implications by focusing first on Seferis' mythological poems and try to tackle the following questions: Does Seferis propose a dialogic model in which ancient and modern illuminate one another? Does he incline towards historicism or presentism? It has been claimed that 'through parallels and contrasts between different periods of history, [. . .] Seferis most often refers, indirectly, to recent and contemporary experience' (Beaton 1991: 53). What is the purpose of these parallels and contrasts? Just to make the poem aesthetically subtle or to point to the importance of the past or the present?

Seferis and the mythical method

Seferis' relationship to antiquity has often been seen through the perspective of the 'mythical method', a term introduced by T. S. Eliot in his review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Eliot 1923: 483). Though Eliot never used this term again in his criticism and it has never become established in the international critical vocabulary, the 'mythical method' has proved a convenient term for allowing Greek critics not to engage in a wider discussion and exploration of the other parameters involved in the reception of antiquity by Greek poets.[16] Leaving aside the question of whether Seferis' mythical method is indebted to Eliot's *The Waste Land* and to what extent *Mythistorema* 'is not a poem written with the mythical method but one that also includes the mythical method' (Vayenas 1979: 154), the method itself — first applied to Seferis' poetry by Edmund Keeley (1956) — is not clearly defined.[17] So it seems best to deal separately with the existing definitions of the method, its aims and effects and then finally its epistemological implications.

Edmund Keeley appears to define it either as a continuous parallel between past and present, antiquity and contemporaneity, or as a synthesis of past and present through the agency of myth (Keeley 1983a: 74–75; 89–90). He also contrasts Eliot's eclectic method of poetic collage and fragmented mythology with Seferis' use of a single mythology (namely ancient Greek), a single voice, and a single style in *Mythistorema* and sees the development of the method in the transition from the symbolic, mythic and generalized landscape of *Mythistorema* to a more particular and literal one, which first appears in Seferis' poetry in the poem 'The King of Asini'. Nasos Vayenas takes another approach and argues, following Eliot, that 'in

16 Eliot's review anticipated the way later 'critics used Homer's mythic dimensions to promote an ahistorical vision of modernist writing that suited the rising tide of formalism and New Criticism' (Flack 2015: 8). See the discussion below.

17 Michalis Pieris (2008) also makes reference to 'mythical method' in his comparative reading of Ritsos and Seferis. Vangelis Athanasopoulos (1992) employs the term 'mythical method' as a narrative tactic involving projecting history to a mythical level. For the relationship of myth and history in Kazantzakis see Beaton (2009: 45–65).

the mythical method the myth is used as a structural element, as a kind of diagram that helps the poet to express his experience more objectively' (Vayenas 1979: 151–2). He argues that, in employing the mythical method, poets use myth in an allusive way, often with anachronisms and historical references. Myth in this case works as a mode of expression, a metaphor, developing the sense of 'a crucial identification of present and past' (Vayenas 1994: 61). The mythical method does not rely so much on the narrative or thematic dominance of the myth as on its discreet and allusive deployment. Though by the 'mythical method' T. S. Eliot is referring to a structural device adopted by Joyce in his novel *Ulysses* and contrasting it with the 'narrative method' used in realistic novels, he also defines it as a strategy of controlling the anarchy of contemporary history. Therefore, scholars continuing to deploy the concept or debating its definition should be reminded that the question of whether it is simply a modernist technique or whether it also implies a certain conceptualization of the historical process remains unanswered.

However one defines the mythical method, it points to a fundamental feature of Seferis' poetry involving the interplay between myth and history, past and present, memory and experience. What is important here is not arriving at a narrow definition of the mythical method or settling for a broader one, but understanding its aims and effects and the historical vision it implies.[18] But there is no consensus as regards the aims and effects (aesthetic and non-aesthetic) of the so-called mythical method either. What is the role of myth in Seferis' poetry? To enlist its authority and give 'a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' (Eliot 1923: 483)? To universalize a deeply felt personal experience or insight? To act as a structural element of a poem or as a way of ordering the progress and controlling the (aesthetic) effect of a mythological poem? To facilitate the dialogue between past and present by implicating the historical in the transhistorical or even identifying the mythical with contemporary reality?

Regardless of its definition, the mythical method could be seen as emblematic of the role of myth and the ancient past in Seferis' poetry and their relevance to the present. Some claim that reference to myth is a means of better expressing a sense of historical change (Vayenas 1979: 148), while others see myth as a common denominator giving meaning to contemporary experience (Beaton 1991: 44). In both these claims, myth is assigned priority and as a result the most fundamental question about the mythical method is the status of its constituent elements: myth and history, past and present, memory and experience. Are they treated as equal partners in this interactive relationship? Furthermore, what are the wider implications of the interplay between myth and history or past and present? Does the mythical method suggest a kind of mythologization of history? And, if so, does this mythologization

18 Hayden White has pointed out that 'literary modernism is supposed to have abandoned what T.S. Eliot called "the narrative method" for what he also called "the mythic method" which is supposed to grasp reality in its abiding 'essence' rather than in its temporally articulated "historicity"' (2014: 77–78).

help the reader understand a historical event better or help place it in the context of other similar events over time and thus highlight a constantly recurring pattern?

In Seferis' poetry we can find in the same poem, in addition to the references to myth, allusions to more modern sources: post-classical texts (*Erotokritos* in 'Reflections upon a foreign line of verse', Makryiannis in 'Salamis in Cyprus'), historical events (Parga in 'Blind', see below), or even paintings in churches (Asinou in 'Helen') (Seferis 1995).[19] Indeed we encounter a network of mythical or textual allusions, 'a chain of more and more distant references which, if followed through, can enrich enormously the significance of the poem and the reader's re-sponse to it' (Beaton 1991: 31). The question is whether this chain points forward or backward by placing the emphasis on the past and inviting the reader to understand present developments by revisiting antiquity. Thus, all these allusions invite us to reflect on the blending of mythical and historical material, the temporal dislocations and the blurring of ontological levels or the boundaries of past and present. No matter whether you call it the mythical method or the allusive method (Beaton 1991: 30-35), what is crucial here is not simply how the past converses with the present but the notion of history behind this conversation. It could be argued that the 'mythical method' is a strategy, which aspires to overcome the temporal distinction between 'present' and 'past' made in the act of reception.

Mythologizing history in Seferis' poetry suggests eternalizing it, downgrading in effect any contextual or time-specific parameters. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Seferis 'reenacts that struggle between transience and durability' (Martindale 1995–96: 133). His poems are set in history yet they also transcend history. The use of contemporary reality as a starting point in some mythological poems is rather mis-leading, because the poems end up reconfirming the universal message of the past. The contemporary setting might be 'deceptively' foregrounded in the poems, giving a sense that past and present are engaging in a dialogue, but what is really conveyed by means of the so-called mythical method is the perennial desire to communicate with the past, the existential quest for patterns and archetypes.[20] A characteristic example is the poem 'Helen', which has been treated as one of the best examples of Seferis' use of the mythical method. For Seferis it marks the transition from Odysseus to Teucer, from adventurous travel and nostalgia for a lost homeland to the experience and painful acceptance of a new country. The poem is based on Euripides' *Helen* and an alternative version of the myth in which the real Helen goes to Egypt, and only her phantom image is taken to Troy, thus suggesting that the Trojan War was fought over an illusion.[21] As Matthew Gumpert argues, the story of

19 Apart from 'Blind', all the poems discussed in this article can be found in this edition. The Greek text of the poems can be found in Seferis (2014).

20 On the relationship of tradition, modernity and archetypal Greekness in Seferis and others of his generation see Tziovas (2011: 321–62) and (2008: 287–98).

21 For various readings and commentaries on the poem see Papazoglou (2002: 161–74); Pieris (2004); Tambakaki (2011: 231–48).

Helen demonstrates 'how the West labored to make Helen belong or make the past at home in the present' (2001: xi).

Though the poem, set in Cyprus, has been linked to the disillusionment felt by Cypriots and Greeks in the 1950s because 'those who fought in World War II for freedom, democratic ideals and the right of self-determination had been betrayed since the Cypriots were denied this right' (Krikos-Davis 1994: 50), a number of details in the poem itself lead to a reading which takes us from the particular to the universal rather than the other way round. The ways in which Helen and Teucer (the speaker in the poem and the mythological alter ego of the poet) are represented in the poem do not seem to point to the Cypriot struggle for independence. Helen, presented as the innocent victim and not the lonely figure of Homer's *Iliad* or the cunning woman depicted by Euripides, does not play a crucial role in the poem's development. And, in contrast to the Euripidean version, Teucer does not take sides, being sympathetic to both Greeks and Trojans. His life, like that of Odysseus, symbolic of wanderings and wars, achieves, in the words of Katerina Krikos-Davis, 'universal resonance', by combining a number of elements 'to make him an atemporal figure'. Similarly the figures of Ajax, Priam, and Hecuba are 'elevated to universal types' through the use of the indefinite pronoun (Krikos-Davis 1994: 47–49). The poem may highlight the contemporary context (e.g. a reference to the modern Cypriot mountain resort of Platres, summer residence of the British colonial governor and from the mid-1950s British administrative and military headquarters) and allude to the poet's personal experience, but its aim is to emphasize the trans-historicity of human suffering.

The notion of the futility of war through the ages transcends the poem's Cypriot context and the particularity of historical experience, thus neutralizing its uniqueness.[22] As Seferis himself noted, 'Helen' offered him a model through which to express archetypal predicaments and perennial deceptions, rather than engaging with specific conflicts: '"the new Helen" gave me what I might call a mathematical formula for the futility and deception of wars'.[23] The idea of fighting for a phantom Helen could apply not only to World War II, but equally to the Cypriot struggle for self-determination or other 'just' wars.[24] Is the focus of the poem on contemporary events and the plight of Cyprus in the 1950s or on the re-enactment of the past and the futility of the Trojan war? The way the poem develops and concludes points to the latter rather than the former. A specific case, such as the justice of the Cypriot struggle and the unrealized ideals of the Cypriot people, cannot be easily reconciled with the transhistorical notion, which seems to be implied in the poem, that since the

22 Matthew Gumpert argues that 'we can read Seferis's poem, if we want, as an argument against war' (Gumpert 2001: 249).

23 "Η καινούργια Ελένη' μου έδωσε ένα μαθηματικό τύπο, θα έλεγα, της ματαιότητας και του εμπαιγμού των πολέμων' (Seferis 1992: 178).

24 Relying on earlier drafts of the poem, Kastrinaki (2009) links the poem to the Greek Civil War and its aftermath.

age of Troy wars have been fought for deceptive causes. The weight given to the transhistorical as opposed to the historical might suggest that all wars are futile and thus lead to divergent readings of the poem (summed up by the following lines from the poem: What is god? What is not god? And what is there in between them?). The ambiguity here is due to the fact that the ancient past has been made to serve as a modern paradigm.[25] I am not arguing that Seferis is an antiquarian, delving nostalgically into the past in order to escape the afflictions of modern life. But, in trying to articulate a more universalizing sensibility or a general metaphor about human existence based on contemporary history and politics, he needs to rely more on past paradigms than on the present. As Keeley and Sherrard have put it: 'the past is always there to shape and illuminate an image of the present' (1995: xv), thus evoking Eliot's notion of tradition and his historical sense 'not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence' (Eliot 1976 (1919): 14).

Though throughout his life (and particularly during the period of the junta) Seferis resisted getting involved in politics and remained sceptical about public pronouncements, the possibility of a political reading of some of his poems and the existence of his 'political voice', to use Keeley's term (1983b), cannot be denied. The point here is not that Seferis did not engage with the politics of his time, particularly after the World War II, but that he did this by mythologizing history and dehistoricizing politics. Some verses from 'Last Stop', another 'political poem', dated October 1944, seem relevant here: 'And if I talk to you in fables and parables/ it's because it's more gentle for you that way' (Seferis 1995: 156). Even in 'Helen' he makes reference to a fable ($\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\mu\acute{\upsilon}\theta\iota$): 'I moored alone with this fable,/if it's true that it is a fable' (Seferis 1995: 179). For Seferis the search for truth and the exploration of political reality involves recourse to the perennial wisdom of fables and myths.[26]

The same can be said about another of Seferis' political poems, 'On Aspalathoi . . .', written under the junta (1967–74) and dated 31 March 1971.[27] The poet describes a day-trip to Sounion and how the word 'aspalathoi' (gorse) triggered recall of a passage from Plato's *Republic* in which the tyrant Ardiaeus is punished in the

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25 This reading of the poem is not intended to impugn Seferis' support for the Cypriot struggle against the British during the 1950s, but only aims to explore how the past informs and weighs on the present. For Seferis' relationship with Cyprus and its people see Georgis (1991), Pavlou (2000) and Beaton (2003).

26 In his study on the 'prophetic voice' in Seferis' poetry, Peter Mackridge points out that in the 'poetry of his maturity an earlier text is revived, reactivated and given new meaning in the present in order to become a living voice' (2008: 403). It is also noted that people in the present should be guided by the voices of the past as Odysseus is in the poem 'Reflections upon a foreign line of verse'.

27 For details about the writing of the poem see Beaton (2003: 402–3) and Krikos Davis (1983–4). Fowler (2014) examines Seferis' recourse to Plato in this poem alongside Seamus Heaney's rejoinder 'To George Seferis in the Underworld' in the light of his essay *The Redress of Poetry* (1995).

underworld. The continued existence of the plant and its Greek name develops a parallel between now and then in the minds of readers, thus suggesting that the punishment for tyrants should be the same in both the ancient and the modern world. This poem raises the question as to whether the emphasis is on the implicit condemnation of the junta as a form of tyranny or, through the reference to Plato and the placement of the word 'tyrant' at the end of the poem, on the punishment of tyrants throughout the ages. The ethical issues of justice and punishment broaden the universal relevance of the poem and weaken the link to the political situation in Greece under the junta. The poem could be seen as a departure from the topical and the political to the ethics of allusion and the abstractification of justice. Seferis is interested in foregrounding the transhistorical and unearthing the archetypal through the interplay between antiquity and modernity. It could be argued that the historical sense in Seferis undermines its historicity.

The way Seferis has mythologized the events of the Greek Civil War in his poetry has recently been discussed and it has been argued that, by invoking Greek antiquity, 'the poems zoom out to provide a wide view, thereby detaching current events from their immediate context and re-inscribing them in the much larger framework of human history, thought, and culture' (Liapis 2014: 78). It is also pointed out that in the poems of the 1940s, 'Blind', 'Oedipal, '48' and 'Thrush', contemporary history is invested with the archetypal qualities of tragic myth. It is not clear, however, what this involves or means. Some sort of mythical order imposed on the chaos of contemporary history, as is often implied by scholars of his poetry, based on Seferis' preoccupation with the Aeschylean notion of order? The poet himself in an entry in his diary seeks the transhistorical in Greek tragedy thus: 'Even if you feel that you yourself are ephemeral, you know that this [i.e. Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*] is not ephemeral, you know that what part of yourself lies in there is not ephemeral' (Seferis 1977: 33, entry for 1 March 1941).

The classical allusions of the poem 'Blind' (December 1945) have been highlighted together with the implicit references to the Athenian defeat at Syracuse in 413 BC, which resulted in Athenian prisoners being held in stone quarries, to Byzantine iconoclasm and the selling of Parga by the British to the Albanian ruler Ali Pasha of Ioannina in 1817 (Seferis 2014: 380–1). Does this poem tell us something specific about the Greek Civil War or does it place the event in a transhistorical chain of dislocation and internecine conflict? This allusive method or the amalgamation of events from Greek history with mythical references have been singled out by a number of scholars, but their epistemological implications and Seferis' attitude towards history have not been analysed. Do we witness in his poetry a dialogue of events and texts across history or just a confirmation that these allusions are manifestations of a never changing and foundational historical essence? Does the mythologization of an event such as the Greek Civil War suggest an escape from historicity and a resort to the transhistorical, as has been highlighted in the case of 'Helen'? Modern and contemporary history seem to be viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* and Seferis stands, as it were, at an Archimedean point 'outside' or 'above' the historical process. It has been claimed that 'the modern poem is illuminated by ancient myth

but also causes us to reinterpret the myth it appropriates' (Liapis 2014: 93), though no explanation is given as to how this reinterpretation is effected. The mythologization of events from different periods in Seferis' poems might point to different contexts but ultimately what is sought is the uncovering of a transhistorical essence and the identification of human commonalities as pre-existent qualities rather than ones that emerge out of a historical process. A mythological poem is like a palimpsest. The question is whether it is the lower layer (past) or the upper (present) that is more important or dominant.[28]

It has been suggested that by grafting his poems on the template of ancient myth Seferis 'invites his readers to dissociate his work from its contemporary time-frame and to imbue it with a temporal depth it might otherwise have lacked' (Liapis 2014: 93). Thus time present and time past are intertwined. Such claims, however, raise the following questions: What is this temporal depth? Do time present and time past interpenetrate and contain each other or does the past simply end up eternalized and transhistoricized? The claim that the timeless and the temporal co-exist without any tension in Seferis' poetry undermines the customary perception of myth in his poetry as an agent which 'can impose shape on the chaos of developing events and [. . .] offer the comfort of an underlying structure behind what appears as disorder and unpredictability' (Liapis 2014: 94). You cannot, on the one hand, treat the timelessness of myth and the temporality of history as equal agents in a mutual dialogue and, on the other hand, see myth imposing order on the chaos of history. The relationship between myth and history in Seferis' poetry has not been properly problematized and theorized. Does myth lay bare the mechanism of history? To what extent does it lead to the renegotiation of contemporary history by mythologizing it? Does myth aestheticize the past?

Seferis does not reshape, revise, or re-energize the myth or the past as his use of the mythical or allusive method might suggest. In effect he is demonstrating through his poetry that an archetypal foundation or a perennial condition can be traced back to a mythical or remote past which is subsequently manifested in superficially different, but essentially same forms. In this way, myth controls history and historical contingency cannot escape the inevitability of myth. The past for Seferis becomes a burden because it determines modernity.[29] In turn, the latter cannot escape the shaping force of the past, its inevitable recurrence and its continuous presence

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28 In this respect, Seferis can be compared to the Irish poet Michael Longley who uses Homer to refer both to his own personal life and to comment on the Irish troubles (e.g. the poems 'The Butchers' from *Gorse Fires* (London: Secker & Warburg 1991) and 'Ceasefire' from *The Ghost Orchid* (London: Jonathan Cape 1995)). In Longley's Homeric poems there is no attempt to generalize or universalize the political message of the poems through the references to the ancient past, as is the case with some of Seferis' poems discussed in this article. On Longley's Homeric poems see Longley (2009) and Hardwick (2004, 2011).

29 See the line from his poem 'Mythistorema' (3) 'I woke up with this marble head in my hands' (Seferis 1995: 5).

(tradition), a process illustrated by the metaphor likening a poem to a plant, of interest not just for its fruit but also its root (Seferis 1974b: 163).

Seferis' mythologization of the past can be compared to Freud's Oedipalization of modernity and his remarks on Oedipus from *The Interpretation of Dreams*: 'His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before our birth as upon him' (Freud 1953: 4. 262). As Miriam Leonard points out, 'When Freud says that Oedipus' fate is the "fate of all of us", he is not so much denying the role of the past in the present as revealing its insurmountable power. Oedipus' fate is the trace of the past which structures each life in the present. History is an uncanny presence which like the oracle lays a "curse upon us before our birth"' (Leonard 2007: 842). Freud, like Seferis, might suggest the fusion of horizons between past and present, but in this fusion the horizon of history seems to be effaced. Or in classical reception terms the dialogics of reception seem to give way to archetypal tradition.

The art of Seferis lies in the fact that he skilfully juxtaposed different historical periods in his poetry in order to undermine their historicity by emphasizing a recurring historical pattern (e.g. Section 4 (Argonauts) of *Mythistorema*). The various historical references in the poems help to reinforce the eternal power of the transhistorical. He often tried to turn the personal experience of antiquity into a universal and transhistorical one. In Seferis a chain of allusions seems to lead from the present to the past, linking them but at the same time confirming the transhistorical role of the past. Talking about Cavafy's poetry in relation to that of T. S. Eliot, Seferis points to his use of history in the poem 'Those Who Fought on Behalf of the Achaean League' and the way he 'identifies the past with the present and makes them simultaneous' (Seferis 1974a: 334–5). To what kind of conceptualization of history does this bridging or cancelling of the gap between past and present point? Seferis claims that this use of history is different to the one deployed by Romantic and Parnassian poets and quotes Eliot's lines from 'Burnt Norton':

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future
> And time future contained in time past.

The reactivation of the past or the reworking of an archetype might work in language, literature, or culture, but not in history. The sense of historical reactivation or political recurrence cancels historical specificity. Like existential historians (e.g. Dilthey, Croce, and Collingwood), Seferis suggests that history exists only in the present, as a product of his own consciousness, and relies on the audience's powers of empathy and intuition.[30] With reference to T. S. Eliot, Seferis argues that

30 The term 'existential historicism' was introduced by Jameson (1979). See also Longenbach (1987) and Schwartz (1985: 138–41). In relation to Seferis, see my paper 'Ο υπαρξιακός ιστορισμός του Σεφέρη' ('Seferis' existential historicism') in Tziovas (2005).

for him 'history is not what is dead but what is still alive' (Seferis 1974a: 40). By claiming that history is 'alive, present and contemporary' in *The Waste Land*, Seferis refers to his own conception of history as a form of survivalism. How can history be alive? Here history seems to be equated with tradition, treated as a residue of the past. The notion of the reactivation of the past in cultural terms might come closer to the concept of reception but the idea of 'history that is alive' is associated with the idea of tradition as a survival of the past. It could be argued that it is the latter and not the former, which determines Seferis' historical sense. The view that in his poetry Seferis updates the myth or reactivates the past does not tally with the suggestion that his notion of time is circular and that he sees history as a recurrence.[31]

Myth in earlier cultures offered something recognizably shared, solid and reassuring, whereas the modern world for Seferis is 'a world falling apart, sick and drugged in which the senses evaporate and lose their reality in a welter of impressions; when someone tries to recover these senses there is no solid ground to rely on, only the self'.[32] The nostalgia for a shared myth, anxiety over human destiny and the search for some form of transhistorical justice appear more important than contemporary vicissitudes.

Seferis sees the relationship between past and present in terms of organic spontaneity and artificiality, spirit and letter, though this opposition recedes somewhat in his last two collections of poetry, *Logbook III* (1955) and *Three Secret Poems* (1966) from which myths and statues largely disappear. He seeks 'the other life beyond the statues' which seem to represent for him the negative heritage of the past and its lifeless burden. Organic vitality originates in the past not the present, which simply carries forward the living essence of the past. Contemporary problems are seen by Seferis as a consequence of forgetting past experience. Memory may be painful ('. . . memory hurts wherever you touch it'), but provides the vital link with the remote past: 'And this rich memory is not, I think, restricted to the memory of one man only, it is the memory of many others before him, a profound memory . . .' (Seferis 1974b: 246). Memory surpasses individual experience or personal recollection and 'cuts through time', paving the way that leads from history to myth and from individuality to collectivity. Seferis, in effect, questions Gadamer's fusion of horizons between past and present, since his poems imply that the meaning of a myth or the message of the past is simply waiting to be drawn out rather than being shaped by its historical context.

31 Roderick Beaton claims that 'time for Seferis is not straight but circular. History, therefore, repeats itself; and the devastations of the past are likely, indeed bound, to be repeated either in the present or the future, again and again' (1991: 85).
32 'Κόσμος διαλυμένος, άρρωστος και ναρκωμένος, όπου οι αισθήσεις εξατμίζονται και χάνουν την πραγματικότητά τους, μέσα στο χάος των εντυπώσεων · όπου ο άνθρωπος που θα προσπαθήσει να συντάξει τις αισθήσεις αυτές, δε βρίσκει πουθενά στερεό έδαφος να πατήσει παρά στον εαυτό του' (Seferis 1974a: 34–35).

The different approaches Seferis and Ritsos take to the past can be illustrated by comparing Seferis' poem 'The King of Asini' (1938–40) and Ritsos' 'Not Even Mythology' (1968). Both poems start from the present, looking for an elusive and deeper meaning. And both poems refer to a void. In his quest for the Homeric King of Asini Seferis is searching for a lost centre and for a meaningful communication with the past. He concludes this poem of existential angst cautiously optimistic, hoping that we can communicate or even recover the past:

> Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring,
> and from the depths of the cave a startled bat
> hit the light as an arrow hits a shield:
> '*Ἀσίνην τε ... Ἀσίνην τε ...*'. If only that could be the king
>   of Asini
> we've been searching for so carefully on this acropolis
> sometimes touching with our fingers his touch upon the
> stones. (Seferis 1995: 136)

In his poem, Ritsos starts by describing the end of a lovely day and the transition from twilight to night. As evening falls there is a movement from outside to inside, which is like gliding from the present to the past. But in Ritsos this retreat is rather disappointing:

> We went inside and again returned to Mythology,
> searching
> for some deeper correlation, some distant, general
> allegory
> to soothe the narrowness of the personal void. We found
> nothing. (Ritsos 1991: 46)

The past in the form of mythology cannot offer solace and meaning. The poem concludes with a reference to Persephone and the fact that she spent a third of her time in the Underworld, having been being tricked by Hades into eating pomegranate seeds. However, even this myth of annual rebirth or re-emergence from the dark seems cheap 'in view of the night approaching heavily and the total absence'. There is not even a glimmer of hope here unlike in 'The King of Asini'.

The fact that the starting point of 'The King of Asini' are two words (*Ἀσίνην τε*) from the *Iliad* implies that the past is textually mediated (through quotations or allusions to ancient or modern texts) in Seferis' mythological poems. In contrast, in Ritsos, quotations from ancient texts are rather thin on the ground (see, for example, the poems 'Themistocles' and 'The Disjunctive Conjunction "Or"').[33] The

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33 Perhaps this is due to the fact that Ritsos did not rely so much on ancient sources as on the book by Jean Richepin (1849–1926) *Nouvelle mythologie illustrée* (1920) which was translated into Greek by Nikolaos Tetenes and published in 1953–54. See Ritsos (1991: 228–9) and Yatromanolakis (2008).

mythical method in Ritsos' poetry has been defined as the conflation of past and present (Kokkoris 2009: ιη, ιθ, 297), but it is not clear how this conflation comes about or how past and present work together in a balanced way. It seems that the concept of the 'mythical method' has been employed rather superficially by a number of Greek critics to talk about the relationship between myth and history, past and present without elaborating on the epistemological implications of this relationship. Although they valued the modernist allusiveness of the mythical method, they hardly ever tackled issues of temporality and historicity.

Myth and politics in Ritsos' poetry

In Ritsos there is a contrast between the greatness of the past and the quotidian and humble present, which leads to a re-reading of the past; its material integration in the present or the ideological and allegorical projection of the past into the present. Unlike in Seferis, the past is not a transhistorical archetype, reactivated in different forms or periods. It is something that can be humanized, demythologized and used according to contemporary needs and interests; an ironic interplay of recurrence and difference and a mirage of nuances, illustrated by these lines from Ritsos' poem 'Talos' (1968):

> Repetitions, he says, repetitions without end – good God,
> what weariness;
> the changes all in nuances only – Jason, Odysseus,
> Colchis, Troy,
> Minotaur, Talos – and in these very nuances
> all the deception and, along with it, the beauty: our
> work. (Ritsos 1991: 87)

While Seferis hopes that communication with or a recovery of the past is still possible, in Ritsos the past cannot offer consolation or a correlation, being nothing but a deceptive repetition.[34] The dialogue with the past in Seferis involves reflection on major issues: exile, war, existence, or tyranny. Ritsos, on the other hand, tends to emphasize the material presence of the past and its ordinariness.

In his 1950s poem 'In the Ruins of an Ancient Temple', Ritsos points to a silent cultural intimacy with the ancient past being grafted onto the lives of ordinary people (Ritsos 1979: 86–87).[35] Sheep graze among the marble ruins, a woman has 'spread her husband's underpants on Hera's shoulders' and Athena's veil is turned into curtains and tablecloths. The ancient procession in honour of a goddess gives way to fishermen passing by with their baskets full of fish. The glorious past and the

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34 'Repetition' is a key word in Ritsos' mythological poems and features in the title of one his collections (Ritsos 1991).

35 It should be noted that Ritsos' collection 'Parentheses, 1950-61', to which the poem 'In the Ruins of an Ancient Temple' belongs, has not to date been published in Greece. The Greek poems together with their English translation are included in *Ritsos in Parentheses*.

banal present seem to co-exist harmoniously in this poem, though one can argue that here we have a form of material appropriation of the past in the same way *spolia* from ancient temples have been reused in building churches in the past. Poised between mock pastoral and sacrilegious irony, the poem treats the ancient gods casually and seems to prepare the ground for new beginnings.

In Ritsos, a sense that the past can be modernized is fostered by the humanization of the ancient figures. In the early 1960s, a number of his poems focused on the human and quotidian aspects of characters from the *Odyssey*. In addition to the poem 'Non-hero' (1964–65), which refers to Elpenor with sympathy but without naming him, another characteristic example is the poem 'Forgiveness' (1964–65), where the human nature and hunger of Odysseus' companions is highlighted: 'For once in their lives they went out with a full belly–/who can blame them?'.[36] The process of humanizing Homeric figures in Ritsos' poetry involves bringing them down to earth through unexpected emphasis, like in 'Return II' (1964–65), which ends with Odysseus squatting and relieving himself like a dog, or in 'Penelope's Despair' (1968) where the problem is not only recognition but adjustment to a new reality, with Penelope getting used to her husband being absent for twenty years and coming to terms with her frustrations and dead desires (Keeley 1991; Ricks 1993; Keeley 1996: 93). Anti-heroism is not just a modern feature but also a perspective adopted by the poet to read the past. The anti-heroic reading of the past and the modern anti-elitist trends, as displayed in Ritsos' poems, seem to doubly undermine the status of the past as a source of authority and a guiding principle.

Though in some of Ritsos' poems the past is contrasted to the present, the latter seems to be accepted as anti-heroic and ordinary, divested of the grandeur of antiquity. The present seems to demythologize or be indifferent to the past, as suggested by Ritsos' poem 'In Vain' (1968), in which the dead wait in vain by their tombstones and their solitude becomes unbearable. Of his group only Vangelis takes off his shoes and deposits them devoutly 'on an invisible tomb – maybe that of Orestes or Electra' (an allusion to the terracotta shoes that were a common grave offering in the eighth century BC). Vangelis' piety appears to be an isolated case in the context of the general forgetting of the dead and lack of respect for the past. The preference for the present is also highlighted in another poem with an ancient theme and references to memory and forgetfulness called tellingly 'The Present' (1968).

> The present
> was preferable, however meagre and insignificant. (Ritsos 1991: 64)

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36 This poem can be associated with Seferis' earlier poem 'The Companions in Hades', which Ritsos might have read.

By demythologizing the past, is Ritsos calling for some sort of (re)action or is he indirectly expressing his own disillusionment with an anti-heroic age?[37] Is he calling for more human and prosaic readings of the past? In poems like 'Trivial Details' (1964–65), the emphasis on human nature may highlight the transhistorical nature of humanity, but it also undermines the distinction between past and present.

There is occasionally a mocking irony in Ritsos' poems as, for example, in the way he depicts modernity as reconstructing the past by sticking fragments of marble together with cement ('Evening Procession' (from *The Wall in the Mirror* (1966–71)) while in the poem 'Niobe' (from *Repetitions 2* (1968)) the present is introduced as functional and mechanistic in contrast to the past, which is symbolized by the wonderful statue of Niobe, knocked down 'simply for the pleasure of discovering the clever mechanism of the thing'. Gods are treated casually by turning them into familiar, domestic figures ('Incense' (Ritsos 1979: 86–87)[38]), while the simplification of myth is suggested in poems such as 'The Apples of the Hesperides I' (1968):

> We didn't like the demigodly, the godly, the
> superhuman. The myth
> was very complicated, with many versions – we didn't
> know what it meant. (Ritsos 1991: 78)

In this poem, Ritsos tries to modernize the myth of Atlas and emphasize its human aspect by referring to the trick of Heracles with the pillow and giving it 'intimate lighting' and 'aesthetic radiance':

> This little bit of
> cunning,
> so human, which had overcome the malevolence of
> Atlas,
> brought the whole myth down to our measure, giving it
> at the same time
> a certain indefinite and intimate lighting, an almost
> aesthetic radiance. (Ritsos 1991: 78)

How useful is the past in helping people cope with the challenges (particularly the political ones) of the present? Ritsos shows some ambivalence here, which could be related to contemporary political conditions, if we take into account that most of the poems discussed here were written during the years of the military junta (1967–74).

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37 Sometimes demythologization goes hand in hand with representing ancient figures as lower-class citizens. Commenting on the film adaptations of the *Odyssey*, Edith Hall points out that 'almost all the films that over the last 15 years have transplanted its plot to nineteenth- or twentieth-century contexts have made the Odysseus figure lower class, and his travelogue an exploration of the social underbelly of society' (Hall 2008: 136).

38 This poem is also found in the collection 'Parentheses, 1950-61' (see note 35).

On the one hand, the poems of the late 1960s display nostalgia for the lost support offered by the gods and the heroes of the past and, on the other, they acknowledge the realization that present needs are different since the certainties of the past have gone and myths are no longer attractive. Ritsos oscillates between decline and change, despair and hope, forgetfulness of the past and its adaptation to modernity.

What survives from antiquity and what is forgotten preoccupies Ritsos while the interplay of remembering and forgetting is suggested by Theseus' new dance. On his way back to Athens, Theseus stopped at Delos and danced a surprising new dance with his young companions:

> And later we completely forgot
> about
> Minotaurs and Pasiphaes and Labyrinths, even hapless
> Ariadne
> abandoned on Naxos to die all alone. Still, the dance
> quickly spread abroad and lasted. We still dance it today. ('The New Dance'
> (1968) (Ritsos 1991: 82))

The occasional recovery of the past seems fragmentary and elusive as in 'Metamorphoses' (1968). This poem evokes the story of Pelops who was cut into pieces, boiled, and served up to the gods by his father Tantalus. Apart from Demeter, who inadvertently ate Pelops' left shoulder, the other gods sensed what had happened and held off from eating Pelops' body. They saved him and managed to restore the rest of his body. Pausanias (5.13.4ff) tells the story that the soothsayers warned the Greeks that they would never capture Troy without Pelops' shoulder blade. This was to be brought from Pisa but on the return voyage the ship carrying the bone was wrecked off Euboea. Many years after the fall of Troy, Damarmeus, a fisherman from Eretria, recovered it when he let down his net into the sea. After keeping it hidden in the sand for a while he came to Delphi to ask what he should do with it.

The characters in the poem, confined behind rusty barbed wire (which alludes to the modern Greek policy of internal exile and the use of barren islands for the imprisonment of political prisoners), 'are waiting uncertainly' for the fisherman from Eretria to pass by again 'carrying in his nets the huge shoulder blade of Pelops'. The recovery of a fragment of the past might suggest an uncertain promise or a recurrence of something at a time when heroes were no longer fashionable:

> Now,
> the heroes are in decline, they've gone out of fashion.
> Nobody
> invokes them any more or commemorates them
> Everybody wants antiheroes ('Metamorphoses' (Ritsos 1991: 68))

The poem (written under the dictatorship in March 1968) points to the demytho-logization of the past and the posthumous transformation of the heroes by making

reference to Protesilaos the vine keeper and Hippolytos the hunter. The heroic past recedes, transformed into something ordinary, almost anonymous, while the emphasis on the present is conveyed with words such as 'now' 'today' (twice) and the contrast between modern daffodils and ancient asphodels.

Can this poem be read as a statement of Ritsos' disillusionment with an anti-heroic present that has no memory? Does such a reading fit with the representation of the ancient figures as ordinary humans in Ritsos' other poems of this period? Accepting that the point of the poem is the contrast between the heroic past and the anti-heroic present, what is the role of the metamorphoses that are highlighted even in the title of the poem? Perhaps the last section of the poem implies some sort of reconciliation with an anti-heroic contemporary condition, which offers uncertain hope. While Seferis is resolutely anti-heroic, Ritsos seems ambivalent as to whether he should follow the modern trend of anti-heroism or lament the absence of heroes in politically difficult times.

The emphasis on the ordinary and human aspects of the myth has been associated with Ritsos' Marxist ideology, but in the poems written under the junta this emphasis acquires more explicit political tones. A characteristic example is the poem 'Heracles and Us' (1968), where the mythical hero is presented as the privileged child of a god, taught by a number of teachers, in contrast to the anonymous children of mortals, who did not enjoy his privileges and whose diplomas came from three exile islands: Makronisos, Yiaros, and Leros. Here the mighty, heroic and aristocratic past is contrasted with the present of ordinary people, full of determination and suffering. The priority given to the present is suggested by a preference for the unadorned and bare style of the 'clumsy' verses written in exile, which is projected onto antiquity by comparing the dry Thucydides to the elaborate Xenophon. The poem suggests that Ritsos tends to read the past through the lens of the present and that this simply becomes more apparent here due to the fact that a stylistic choice is involved. Past and present are not conflated, let alone identified, but contrasted. Yet this poem has been considered unsuccessful because past and present are linked in an unsophisticated and rather obvious way.[39]

The contrast between the privileged and the unprivileged not only involves the past and the present, but it could provide a perspective for re-reading the past as can be seen in the poem 'Eurylochus' (1964–65). The companion of Odysseus is not named in the body of the poem itself but is seen as a representative of a group who have not been favoured by the gods nor 'have gone into baths, to be soaped by the maidservants, rubbed down with oil'. Here the focus on under-privileged ancient figures is likely to have had an ideological incentive, but it also contributes to the overall anti-heroic tone in Ritsos' poems from the 1960s (Kokkoris 2003: 35; 2009: 301).[40] By focusing more on the ordinary world of the *Odyssey* and less on the *Iliad*,

39 Even the poet himself was not happy with this poem according to a letter sent to Chrysa Prokopaki in 1972, see Kotti (1996: 206–7).
40 For a reading of this poem that relates it to Seferis see Savvides (1990).

his Homeric poems tend to confirm the characterization of the *Odyssey* as the 'epic of the dispossessed'.

Antiquity is not only used to make reference to social privilege but also to allude to communist party politics and issues of ideological conformity. In some poems written in 1968, Ritsos uses antiquity allegorically to refer to the break-up of the Greek Communist Party during its Twelfth Plenary Session in February 1968. The division of the Greek Communist Party into two (one based in Eastern Europe and the other in Greece) and the bickering and infighting among party members is paralleled with disagreements among ancient Greek cities in a poem 'After the Treaty between the Athenians and the Lacedaemonians Was Broken' (4 April 1968)[41], which has the subtitle 'After Thucydides':

> Corinth, Argos, Sparta, Athens, Sicyon, and other (how
> many?) smaller cities –
> the Greeks have become a thousand fragments; the great
> treaty has been broken;
> everyone is enraged with everyone else: new meetings,
> meetings and more meetings, conferences;
> yesterday's friends and neighbors no longer greet each
> other in the street,
> old grudges have come between them again; new
> alliances,
> entirely opposite to earlier ones, are being sounded out,
> prepared. (Ritsos 1991: 80)

The splitting up of the Greek Communist Party was followed in August 1968 by the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. Ritsos becomes increasingly critical of the role of the party and its authority, once again employing metaphors from the ancient world in his poem 'The End of Dodona I' (6 October 1968):

> We had our altars, churches, oracles. [. . .]
> We too had someplace to consult
> for advice, to question
> about our sheep, our children, the pomegranate tree, the
> one-eyed cow,
> about the donkey, the melon patch, the clay pot. And the
> answer always

41 This is the treaty between Athens and Sparta signed in 421 BC after the Battle of Amphipolis. Other poems from *Repetitions* (1968–69), which implicitly refer to the internal disputes of the Greek Communist Party, include: 'The New Oracle', 'After the Defeat', 'The End of Dodona II', all written in 1968. Another poem of 1968, 'Between Ionians and Dorians', has similar allegorical undertones. The allegorical tone of these poems could also be attributed to the poet's attempts to avoid censorship under the junta.

> (however much it might change every time, each time in
> the same tone)
> sure, strong, imperative, irrevocable. We were somehow
> reassured
> others were responsible for the decision that would bring
> success or failure. We
> had only to submit and perform, with eyes lowered.
> Now,
> they've turned everything upside down – altars,
> churches, graveyards. (Ritsos 1991: 92)

In this poem, altars and oracles can be seen as standing for the ancient past as well as for the communist party. Ancient deities are no longer reassuring and the past can no longer act as a spiritual or ideological authority. Here Ritsos tends to compare the assurances offered by religion and myth in the past with the role of the Communist party and its ideology ('the sacred oak' in the poem). For this reason, the reversals and challenges outlined in the last lines, quoted above, might refer allegorically not only to the revision of the past but also to internal disputes in the Greek Communist Party in the late 1960s.

Ritsos also used the land of the Hyperboreans, an imaginary land far to the north, to allude to the Soviet Union. Though Herodotus (4.32ff) expressed doubt about the existence of these people, it was believed that Apollo spent his winter in their land before returning to Greece, invoked by songs and paeans from Delphi. The imaginary Phipaean mountain range, mentioned in the poem and located by geographers west of the Urals, contributes to the identification of the imaginary land of the Hyperboreans with the real land of socialism, which was purported to be the Soviet Union. In this poem written in June 1969, disillusionment is mixed with hope:

> Still, we go on composing the half-finished paean
> leaving a blank space for the honored name in case
> a new one is found and we can include it at the last
> moment
> afraid each time that the number of its syllables,
> whether less or more, might ruin the meter.
> ('The Lost Land of the Hyperboreans' (Ritsos 1991: 105))

In the poems written in the late 1960s, Ritsos uses ancient myth to comment on the political situation in Greece and Eastern Europe and make demands for freedom and egalitarianism. Past and present are at odds in Ritsos' poetry since the nobility or the certainties associated with the former can no longer survive or be endorsed in the modern era. Thus, the past can neither offer unqualified guidance nor can it be transhistoricized or eternalized as in Seferis.

Conclusion

To conclude our comparative reading of the two poets, we need at this point to draw a distinction between attitudes to and uses of the past. In Seferis, it is his attitude to the past that more or less determines its use in his poetry. He uses the past to avoid direct engagement with current politics and have recourse to the perennial wisdom of myth. In Ritsos, attitude and use are not always clearly related. Ritsos uses the past to engage with politics allegorically while his attitude to the past is often uncertain (indicated by the extensive use of *ἴσως*[42]) or even critical (from an ideological or social perspective e.g. 'Heracles and Us').[43] In his mythological poems, he develops a more sceptical attitude to the past than that found in the optimistic celebration of it in his long political poem *Romiosini* (1945–7 published in 1954) and its sequel *Eighteen Short Songs of the Bitter Motherland* (1968). Though both poets are often compared on the basis of their modernism, without exploring in detail their different approaches, one could also debate the extent to which their attitudes to the past could be seen in modernist and postmodernist terms respectively.[44] Engaging directly with the ancient sources, as he did, Seferis was in a better position to maintain a close relationship with antiquity and deploy allusive modernist strategies. Ritsos, on the other hand, appropriated antiquity primarily through secondary sources, which could foster anti-elitism, demythologizing distance or even postmodern irony.

In Seferis, the past, in the form of a mythical archetype, continues to determine the present, and his attitude to the past is shaped by a conceptualization of history that sees it as constantly recurring and bringing him closer to modernism.[45] In this respect, it could be argued that his mythical method is also a historical method. For him the present (history) represents a decline while the past (myth or tradition) retains its solidity and organic integrity, constituting an unbearable burden but also a potential source of consolation for modern people. In Ritsos the past, especially

42 In a radio talk '*Σαν εισαγωγή στις Μαρτυρίες*' Ritsos explained that the frequent use of 'perhaps' in his later poetry was not an evasion, but expressed his own doubts and need for answers (Ritsos 1974: 101). See also Prokopaki (1981: 51–52).

43 In a way political allegories can also confirm that nothing in human nature has changed since antiquity. By making an implicit connection between George W. Bush's power politics and those of Agamemnon, Petersen tried to demonstrate in his film *Troy* how important the past (Homer) still is today. This, of course, entails an act of recognition on the viewer's or reader's part.

44 Scholars have attempted comparative readings of the two poets focusing on modernism and exile. See Spentzou (2014), Athanassopoulou (2009), and Beaton (2008).

45 Since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment the most common pattern of history was that of progress. In opposition to progressive notions, 'British literary Modernists found a belief in historical cycles to be realistic and optimistic alternative to their deep disillusionment with the contemporary world and their pessimism about the possibility of improving it' (Williams 2002: 13). Seferis' modernist poems seem to convey similar views.

antiquity to which he does not seem to attach any particular value, is mutilated, neutralized, accommodated and ultimately appropriated for ideological or political purposes. It is primarily the context, and particularly the political and the post-war context that informs his attitude to antiquity. For Ritsos, past and present lead inexorably to decay and frustrated expectations, and are therefore interchangeable, rather than being in a hierarchical relationship. This interchangeability explains the frequent anachronisms (particularly in *The Fourth Dimension*).

Though both poets acknowledge the passing of time, Seferis seems ultimately to deny it by mythologizing the past and transhistoricizing the political. Ritsos, on the other hand, is eager to bridge the gap between antiquity and modernity by humanizing and allegorizing the past in search of the historical and in response to the political. In both poets, past and present, and antiquity and modernity enter into some kind of dialogue, yet this dialogue cannot be maintained without leaning either towards the past or the present. Seferis seems to come closer to tradition/historicism by classicizing or historicizing the present and Ritsos to appropriation/presentism by modernizing and domesticating the past.

This analysis of Seferis' and Ritsos' political poems suggests that we need to revisit the boundaries and the range of concepts such as 'tradition', 'reception', and 'appropriation'. As an interactive/dialogic mode, reception is most useful in analysing intertextual or intermedia relations and reader responses, but when it comes to historical perceptions, political appropriations or ideological commitments, the other two concepts need to be brought into play in order to establish whether a poet privileges the past or the present, thus revealing the consequent notions of history underlying his/her literary uses of antiquity. Hence, though the poems discussed here seem to suggest a kind of interaction between myth and history, and antiquity and modernity on a textual level, the same cannot be said about conceptions of history or the political uses of myth. At this level, the dialogic/interactive approach seems to have reached its limits and its position as a distinct trope between tradition and appropriation has to be negotiated. In turn, this insight suggests that reception and appropriation cannot be conflated, as tends to happen in classical reception studies.

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