

MICHAŁ BZINKOWSKI
Uniwersytet Jagielloński
Kraków

UDC 821.14'02:821.14'16].09

ODYSSEUS AMONG THE ASPHODELS. NECROMANCY AND CONVERSATION WITH THE DEAD IN THE POETRY OF GEORGE SEFERIS.

Abstract: In this paper I raise the issue of the originality of Modern Greek writers in their use of Ancient Greek mythology on the example of one of the most recognized poets of present day Greece, George Seferis (Γιώργος Σεφέρης, 1900-1971). The main aim is to show one aspect of classical references in Seferis' poetry, namely his allusions to the significant episode from the eleventh book of Homer's "Odyssey" known as *nekylia*, especially the motif of conversation with the dead. The necromancy motif, which is, in my opinion, one of the most frequently occurring and meaningful as well as one of the defining ideas in Seferis' poetry, I trace to the period between the collection "Turning Point" (Στροφή, 1931) until the "Logbook II" (Ημερολόγιο Καταστρώματος Β', 1944). To be more specific, I do not only intend to show the places in Seferis' poetry where the necromancy motif appears but to endeavour to explain the possible function of such a motif and to define the meaning of it in modern times.

The Ancient Greek literary motives have been vital for ages in West European tradition. Obviously, they have been modified from Antiquity through the Renaissance, adapted to current trends, altered and reevaluated whenever there was a change of attitude towards the ancient heritage. It is noteworthy that what Western Europe inherited from Greece was not taken directly but through the agency of the Romans who abundantly imitated and drew from their predecessors. The ancient motives rooted in Western European culture had been transmitted through Roman civilization that left a distinct stamp on their perception and interpretation.

The situation of Modern Greece was completely different and thus the influence of their ancient ancestors on tradition was of a different kind. Although the Greek state disappeared from the map of Europe, Greece, thanks to its language, never ceased to exist. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire it was one of the main factors allowing Greeks to keep their identity. Rejected by Christianity during the

Byzantine era, Ancient Greek myths were revived by the Greek intellectual elite in 16th and 17th century due to the influence of European Renaissance¹. Following the war of independence in 1821 it became a sort of fashion or proper etiquette to rediscover the ancient legacy of the newborn country. Although Greek writers inspired by neoclassicist and romantic trends obviously used the ancient mythological motives basing on their western European counterparts, theirs was a completely different starting point. The whole Greece is a mythical place, wherever you go you will find yourself on the ground where Ancient Greek gods and heroes left their traces. Anyone who has even a slightest idea of ancient history and mythology, going to Mycenae, Delphi, Athens will associate these places with well-known stories from antiquity. Thus, Greek writers have something at hand that is inaccessible for west European authors – truly alive Greek landscape alive with mythical reminders and reminiscences².

In this paper I would like to raise the issue of the originality of Modern Greek writers in their use of Ancient Greek mythology on the example of one of the most recognized poets of present day Greece, George Seferis (Γιώργος Σεφέρης, 1900-1971)³. The first Greek to win a Nobel Prize for literature (1963), Seferis turned out to be one of the most original and most influential literary personality not only among the writers belonging to so called “generation of the thirties” (η γενιά του τριάντα)⁴ but, what is more important, one of the most innovative poets of the twentieth century⁵. Often juxtaposed by literary critics with such poets as T.S. Eliot, whose poetry Seferis translated into Greek, or Ezra Pound, the Greek poet is considered as a pioneer who paved the way for the introduction of Modern Greek literature into Europe in the years preceding World War II. The influence of antiquity on Seferis and classical heritage of Modern Greeks in his works is well-

¹ Mackridge 1996: XIII.

² Mackridge 1996: XIV. Beaton 1991: 39f.

³ In some English works devoted to Seferis we come across his name written as “Yorgos”. Seferis is a pseudonym coined by the poet from his real name Seferiadis.

⁴ The term refers to writers that made their debut during the 1930s and published the poems using usually free verse, referring in this way to current European trends. Apart from George Seferis, the most influential poets belonging to this generation are: Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990), Nikiforos Vrettakos (1912-1991), Andreas Embirikos (1901-1975). See Beaton 2004: 152f.

⁵ Number of studies concerning his literary works published during his life and later show that interest in his poetry never ceased to grow. Not long ago one of the most outstanding scholars in the field of Modern Greek literature, Roderick Beaton published a huge poetical biography of George Seferis containing many previously unknown facts about his life – See Beaton 2003.

known and has already been a subject of many papers⁶. However, most of them deal only with possible allusions to Ancient Greek literature and mythology concentrating on the profound Seferis' knowledge of classical authors but not explaining neither the ways of alluding nor the meaning of such references in his poems⁷.

The main aim of the present paper is to show one aspect of classical references in Seferis' poetry, namely his allusions to the significant episode from the eleventh book of Homer's "Odyssey" known as *nekylia*, especially the motif of conversation with the dead, in other words – necromancy (*nekymanteia*). Besides such popular mythical motives as that of Odysseus' companions, journey of Argonauts or allusions to ancient Greek tragedy – the necromancy motif, in my opinion, is one of the most frequently occurring and meaningful starting from the first collection "Turning Point" (Στροφή, 1931) - especially the poem: "Companions in Hades" (Οι σύντροφοι στον Άδη) - until "Thrush" (Η Κίχλη, 1946). I am going to trace the necromancy motif, which I regard as one of the defining ideas in Seferis' poetry, to the period between the collection "Turning Point" until the "Logbook II" (Ημερολόγιο Καταστροφώματος Β', 1944), choosing the poems in which the motif occurs more or less directly, thus omitting those that, due to their obscurity, need more elaborate analysis and interpretation. Intentionally I do not take into account the poem "Thrush" that due to its complexity and veiled symbolical imagery causes difficulties in interpretation and can be analyzed only on the whole. Although it contains some allusions to Odysseus' *nekylia*, especially in part II⁸, the motif of speaking to the dead cannot be understood without taking into consideration the other parts of the poem and would extend the present paper twice or even more⁹. To be more specific, I do not only intend to show the places in Seferis' poetry where the necromancy motif appears but, what is more important for me, to endeavour to explain the possible function of such a motif and to define the meaning of it in modern times.

⁶ See for example: Benedetti 1970; Jouanny 1978; Marcheselli 1966; Simon-don 1977.

⁷ An exception is the book by Nikolau who tries to trace the appearance of Odysseus in whole Seferis' poetry and to show how this mythical person has changed from early poems until one of the last collections, Logbook III – Nikolau 1992.

⁸ Part II of the poem "Thrush", entitled "Sensual Elpenor" (Ο ηδονικός Ελπήνωρ) is a reinterpretation of the episode on the Circe's island in tenth book of the "Odyssey" (Od. 10, 133-574). In Seferis' poem Elpenor has conversation with Circe but the communication between them is completely impossible.

⁹ There is a huge critical literature on this subject, see for example: Stevanoni 2000: 411 – 438; Pontani 1976: 203-265; Daniil 1973: 64-71.

In his early poems Seferis only once alludes directly to the Odysseus' *nekylia*. The poem "Companions in Hades" (Οἱ σύντροφοὶ στὸν Ἄδη) is however by no means a direct recalling of Odysseus' episode in Hades, nor is Odysseus the one who interests Seferis. Unexpectedly the poet concentrates on the forgotten companions of the hero, those who lost their life travelling through the seas. The poem is preceded by the motto taken directly from the *prooemium* of the "Odyssey" which gives an allusion to what is going to be presented:

νήπιοι, οἱ κατὰ βοῦς Ἵπερίονος Ἥελίοιο
 ἦσθιον· αὐτὰρ ὁ τοῖσιν ἀφείλετο νόστιμον ἡμᾶρ.
 Fools, who ate the cattle of Helios Hyperion;
 but he deprived them of the day of their return¹⁰

The whole poem is composed in the form of a monologue. One of Odysseus' companions, undoubtedly now in the underworld, speaks about the stupidity and futility of their behaviour on the island of the Sun:

Since we still had some hardtack
 how stupid of us
 to go ashore and eat
 the Sun's slow cattle,

The person speaking in this poem is conscious of the fact that their deed ultimately stamped the end of their life. Although they still had something to eat on board, they rushed to the island in order to devour the Sun's cows. The *hybris* they committed in Seferis' view was not merely the fact of eating the animals belonging to god. The situation the poet presents differs significantly from the Homeric prototype. Odysseus' companions in Seferis poem were not deprived of food just like in Homer (Od. 12, 327). Thus, what Seferis seems to stress is the act of the excessive appetite of the companions which gave them a sort of a stimulus that resulted in the sacrilege. The following stanza, dense with veiled imagery completely incomprehensible during the first cursory reading is a comparison, where every Sun's cow is juxtaposed with a castle one has to conquer forty years. Unfortunately, the verses of the third and last stanza obscure the picture still further:

On the earth's back we hungered
 but when we'd eaten well

¹⁰ All translations of Seferis' poems are taken from: George Seferis, *Complete Poems*. Translated, edited and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton University Press 1995.

we fell to these lower regions
mindless and satisfied.

The protagonist claims they were hungry indeed and he adds “on the earth’s back” (στης γης την πλάτη) which, according to some interpreters of Seferis’ poems¹¹, turns out to be a Modern Greek paraphrase of the Homeric expression *νῶτα θαλάσσης* (Od. 3, 142) what does not help yet at all in understanding the point, because the ancient phrase is rather used with reference to any wide surface¹². As for the context, the words in the “Odyssey” are spoken by Nestor, who narrates to Telemachos what had become with Achaeans after the fall of Troy. The cited phrase is relevant to Menelaos’ advice to return home at once through the sea. Is that the point of Seferis’ hidden allusion to Homeric expression – the fateful return?

After the feast the companions fell down into Hades, in which the person of the poem is speaking, “satiated” (χορτάτοι) and “mindless” or “unconscious” (ανίδεοι), which could be another, as obscure as before, association with the Ancient Greek epic. For “the unconsciousness” is what characterizes, according to the Homeric depiction, the afterlife existence of human *psyche*. Thus the last verse is without any doubts a purposeful allusion on the part of Seferis to the Homeric belief concerning the afterlife. As the eleventh book of the “Odyssey” shows, the shadows dwelling in the underworld before they drink a drop of blood, not only have no consciousness but even a mere remembrance from their previous life, aimlessly wandering through the meadow of the asphodels¹³.

Undoubtedly the main point of reference in the poem considered is the Homeric story taken directly from the “Odyssey”, namely the episode on the island of the Sun. As we have seen, the second allusion is made by the poet to the situation of the dead and their underground existence which also has its parallel in the eleventh book of the “Odyssey” in which Odysseus talks to the dead. The question that arises is what does the poet allude to and what could the companions represent?

¹¹ Ricks 1989: 123f.

¹² Liddel & Scott 1997: 538.

¹³ Sourvinou-Inwood 1995: 77f writes that it is a very complex task to reconstruct the real Ancient Greek beliefs basing on the Homeric epic. Many eschatological features mentioned in the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey” may be just a poetic concept without the reflection in real convictions of the people living in the archaic period.

According to Vayenas, the situation depicted in “Companions in Hades” expresses the feeling of a collective failure or catastrophe¹⁴. Thus, he interprets the poem as Seferis’ commentary on the so called “Asia Minor Catastrophe” (Μικροασιατική Καταστροφή) in 1922 in which the Greeks living in the Asia Minor were forced to leave their houses and move towards Greece following the Treaty of Lausanne¹⁵. In my opinion scholars dealing with Seferis’ poetry tend to exaggeratedly seek possible political and historical connotations in his poems. In order to properly understand the meaning of “Companions in Hades” one has to take into account Seferis’ statement on that subject. In one of his later essays commenting his most obscure and symbolical poem “Thrush”, Seferis gives a hint shedding some light on the companions motif: „In my opinion, the whole problem is how one will respect the cattle of the Sun; how one will respect the light of every day that God gives one. The companions didn’t respect them, they ate them, the fools and were lost. Now they remain „mindless and satiated” (ανίδεοι και χορτάτοι) for eternity; denied their return (...) scattered, wasted; they can’t any longer face either the sun, nor man”¹⁶.

The poet clearly states that the image of companions speaking in Hades has to be understood on a more general level of human life. For him they are just representatives of those who could not compress their appetites in desiring more and more from life. In their lives they seem to have forgotten about measure, exceeded measure not respecting the Sun, in other words, they closed their eyes and thus landed in Hades.

As for the underground world in which they are speaking, Hades becomes here neither a mythical place nor a metaphorical space of punishment. In my opinion, the world of the dead is used here to depict a state of human soul distracted from the real life and deprived of authentic consciousness of its existence. Although such a state gives “satiation”, at the same time it also makes people unconscious of their being in the real world. I would not see this as pessimistic or satirical as some have described it¹⁷. What is the most important for me here is a very specific poetical tone of reflection on human existence and

¹⁴ Vayenas 1979: 122. Simondon shares a similar view 1977: 288 - “Ne sont-ils pas les réfugiés d’Asie-Mineure qui se sont déversés soudain sur la Grèce, au nombre de plus d’un million, et qui ont cherché d’abord du pain, ensuite du travail?”

¹⁵ Signed in Lausanne in Switzerland on July 24, 1923 as the consequence of the Turkish War of Independence led to the population exchange between Greece and Turkey estimated approximately as the 1.5 million refugees.

¹⁶ Translated by Keeley 1996: 81 – 96.

¹⁷ Savidis 1999: 311.

the place of a man in the modern world. The allusive technique Seferis used in this poem via direct and indirect references to Homeric “Odyssey” will be, as we will see below, a characteristic method of introducing Ancient Greek mythology into his verses.

One of Seferis’ early poems written in 1931 “Reflections on a Foreign Line of Verse” (Πάνω σ’ έναν ξένο στίχο) brings another allusion to Homeric eschatological myth. Although the main inspiration is not drawn directly from the Homeric epic but from the sonnet of French Renaissance poet Joachim du Bellay, whose verse Seferis paraphrased into Greek: “Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage”¹⁸, we can find many hidden allusions to the “Odyssey”. The person speaking in the poem is undoubtedly in a foreign land far from his country. Sitting alone on the seashore, listening to the waves he has a vision of Odysseus appearing in front of him (το φάντασμα του Οδυσσέα). The characteristics Seferis gives to the phantom bring to mind the Homeric prototype. Ghost’s eyes are red from the sea-brine (με μάτια κοκκινισμένα από του κυμάτου την αρμύρα), on his skin you can see the visible traces of the wind, the rain and the snow (με δέρμα δουλεμένο από το ξεροβόρι από την κάψα κι από τα χιόνια). The poet - if we of course can identify the protagonist of the poem with Seferis himself - imagines that Odysseus comes closer to him and gives him some advice trying to console him. After mentioning that his lost companions “pulled down into the elements and scattered” (καταποντισμένους μέσα στα στοιχεία, σκορπισμένους), Odysseus adds:

how strangely you gain strength conversing with the dead when
the living who remain no longer meet your need.

This is the first example in Seferis’ oeuvre of the motif of “conversing with the dead” (μιλώντας με τους πεθαμένους) that will occur later in many of his poems. In a dead end, when the protagonists of his poems can find no help from anyone and it seems to them there is no way out, they turn to the dead to ask them for advice, as we shall see further.

However, in the poem in question the above mentioned situation is not even hinted nor outlined. Actually we do not know if the person really needs any help from the dead. The verses cited above show only Odysseus’ opinion and his reflection on something that had already taken place or it is just happening. We have no allusion either to the

¹⁸ Joachim du Bellay (1552-1560), *Les Regrets*, 1558, sonnet XXXI.

consequences of the fact of speaking to the dead or to the reason for the need of such a contact. The suggestion that the state of the protagonist depicted in the poem could reflect the real situation Seferis found himself during his stay in London at that time, seems to me unconvincing. It is not a biographical poem, although one could find some parallels to Seferis' biography, which of course is inevitable. I disagree also that love is a central point of Seferis' journey in this poem, as Capri – Karka says¹⁹. In fact the protagonist does not travel at all; he stays abroad with a feeling of love that penetrates all his body (*απλωμένη μέσα στο κορμί του*). Odysseus' words cited above show also that the protagonist had already conversed with the dead and now addresses to them only when he needs any help.

Interesting is the way in which Seferis uses the Homeric motif - he does not merely reverse the prototypical situation from the eleventh book of the "Odyssey" for here we have Odysseus' ghost speaking to the living person, namely to the poet. Moreover, in Seferis' poem there are no companions with whom Odysseus came to the far ends of the river Okeanos in the "Odyssey". Sitting on the seashore the protagonist of the poem seems to be rather an exile than a traveler. Without any doubts he spends in that place a lot of time, which is confirmed by the statement in the second stanza: "sometimes, when I sit surrounded by exile." (*κάθομαι κάποτε τριγυρισμένος από την ξενιτιά*). Thus, the only thing that remains from the Homeric story is a mention of the speaking to the dead in order to ask for advice, like Odysseus who traveled to the underworld to ask Teiresias how he could find his way home (Od. 11, 90-152).

Another variation of the necromancy motif we come across in the IX part of the cycle "Mythistorema" (*Μυθιστόρημα*)²⁰. The feeling of loneliness is overwhelming in this poem. The protagonist realizes that he can have no help from anybody because all his friends have already departed (v. 2-5). Although he tries to take an action stroking the rusted cannons and the oars (v. 5), his attempt is doomed to failure because: "The sails give off only the smell/ of salt from other storm" (*Τα παραβόπανα δίνουν μόνο τη μυρωδιά/ του αλατιού της άλλης τρικυμίας*). As he confesses a few lines below, it was solitude that he had waited for:

¹⁹ Capri-Karka 1982: 185.

²⁰ I do not translate the title because of its ambiguity. According to the poet he did not mean the modern usage of the word, namely "novel" but purposely joined two components: *mythos* and *historia*. More on this subject see: Beaton 1987: 135-52; Keeley 1983: 75-77.

(...) what I longed for
 was solitude, not this kind of waiting,
 my soul shattered on the horizon

As Simondon notices, by the image of “soul shattered” or more literary “soul torn to pieces” (κομματιάσμα της ψυχής), Seferis aimed to show the idea of joining the memories in order to gain the whole memory²¹. Anyhow, looking at the night sky the protagonist of the poem reminds the situation of Odysseus:

to his anticipation of the dead among the asphodels.
 When we moored here we hope to find among asphodels
 the gorge that knew the wounded Adonis.

The reality or - perhaps it is better to say – hypothetical real situation is suddenly disturbed by the mention of the asphodels that grow in the place where the person has been waiting so long. Seferis makes an allusion to ancient mythology in such a natural way that the mythological level introduced by the allusion to Odysseus does not seem to be an artificial element. However, the usage of the necromancy motif has changed in comparison with the poems cited above. The poet identified with the protagonist of the poem does not directly address to the dead in order to take any advice from them²². The aim of the journey as we see in the last two lines was not the Underworld itself, despite of the mention of the asphodels, but the place where Adonis had been wounded. What the protagonist looked for was then not any suggestion the dead could have given him. Paradoxically, among the dead he searched a place in which he could be reborn again just like mythical Adonis. His anticipation was then not talking with anybody but gaining strength to move forward, to come out of the state of stagnation he had stuck for such a long time²³.

The whole cycle “Mythistorema” is permeated by the feeling of endless waiting, expectation for the travel that will never start or journey that has no end. Even if we can comprehend the whole poem as a great metaphor of the contemporary history of Greece as some scholars tend to suggest too often²⁴, we must not forget about the broader perspective that is always present in Seferis’ visual poetry. The

²¹ Simondon 1977: 290. I disagree with the opinion shared by author of the paper that for Seferis *nekylia* is a sort of “mnemonic exercise”.

²² Simondon 1977: 290, who says there is no identification between the poet and Odysseus.

²³ Krikos-Davis 1996: 57-58.

²⁴ Vitti 1994: 400.

poet, what sometimes escapes scholars' attention, is not merely a national Greek poet nor is his poetry just a subjective vision of Modern Greece, its history and place in the world. The most important in Seferis' poetry, visible especially in the "Mythistorema", is a deep feeling of the so called human condition in the 20th century, loneliness and stagnation of man that is unable to take any action to move forward, that has lost its roots as well as the sense of wholeness²⁵. Of course we can assume that Seferis talks about a particular generation, namely the above mentioned "generation of the thirties", that he is looking for the true modern Greek identity²⁶. Nevertheless I am not quite convinced if it is impossible to interpret his poems without the Greek context. As for me, the feeling of "Greekness" is not the thing that makes Seferis one of the most original and greatest poets in 20th century European poetry.

We come across the characteristic usage of the necromancy motif in the last part of the cycle "Mythistorema" which starts with the words: "Here end the works of the sea, the works of love" (Εδώ τελειώνουν τα έργα της θάλασσας, τα έργα της αγάπης). The poet speaks about future generations that will come after his death. However he does not address them directly, his words seem to be rather a sort of a wish or a vision of what could happen in the future. In his wish about his descendants he emphasizes the meaning of memory:

let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels,
let them turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus:

We who had nothing will school them in serenity.

Once again in Seferis' poetry returns the Homeric vision of the underworld in which men's soul is merely a shadow deprived of consciousness and wandering aimlessly through the meadow of the asphodels, the flowers growing in the underworld (Od. 11, 539; 11, 572-573; 24, 13-14). The question that arises is the purpose of introducing in the last poem of the "Mythistorema" the Homeric *nekylia* motif and – as it is the last part of the whole cycle - to what extent the cited fragment can be associated with the other parts of the "Mythistorema"?

There is no doubt that the speaking person in the last poem expressing the collective memory – "we who had nothing" (εμείς που τίποτε δεν είχαμε) is the same as in the first one that I am not going

²⁵ Krikos-Davis 1996: 54-55.

²⁶ Beaton 1991: 90-109.

to deal with here: “we waited” (περιμέναμε), “we returned” (γυρίσαμε), “we woke” (ξυπνήσαμε), “we brought back” (φέραμε πίσω). Interesting is also the usage of the past tense in the first part and the future tense in the last one: “we school them” (θα τους διδάξουμε). Taking into account this point we can notice that what really ends the cycle is the feeling of hope appearing in the word “serenity” (γαλήνη)²⁷. Although the worst things had happened to us, we did what we had to do, we had no choice. However “You” in the future can choose and if you look back and meet us, we will teach you the most important thing, “serenity” or - what is more precise in my opinion - “peace”²⁸. Beyond all harassment of the world, far from the war, you will be able to move forward, the possibility that had not been given to us. Remember that we had everything except peace and you will rediscover yourselves²⁹ and the world you live in. This seems to be a probable message emerging from the last part of the “Mythistorema”³⁰.

After many years of his diplomatic career in 1942 Seferis came to Africa. During his stay there he composed some poems that later appeared in the collection “Logbook II” (Ημερολόγιο καταστρώματος Β’). Especially one of them turns out to be important in the context of the necromancy motif in Seferis’ poetry. The poem “Stratis Thalassinos Among the Agapanthi” (Ο Στράτης Θαλασσινός ανάμεσα στους αγαπάνθους) written in January 1942 starts with a confession that makes a distant allusion to the Homeric episode from the eleventh book of the “Odyssey”:

There are no asphodels, violets or hyacinths;
how then can you talk with dead?

The person speaking here is aware of the fact that he is in a foreign land, the land in which there are no flowers he is used to, namely violets and hyacinths. However there is a slight ambiguity in his words because he also refers to asphodels – mentioned above well-known flowers of the land of the dead growing in meadows of the

²⁷ Beaton 1983: 25 suggests that „serenity” in earlier poems was associated rather with sleep and death and thus the poem ends in resignation and failure. In my opinion there are no proofs of such an assumption. If we look for instance at the last line of the above mentioned poem “Reflections on a foreign line of verse” we will find there the usage of “γαλήνη” in quite positive sense.

²⁸ Hartigan 1983: 71; Padel 1985: 93.

²⁹ Compare the fourth part of the “Mythistorema” entitled “Argonauts” and expressed there the idea of Platonic self-knowledge.

³⁰ Beaton 1987: 141 writes that “serenity” is “far from representing a resolution of the quest” and “it too represents only an absence: the absence of striving, the cessation of effort, the suspension of consciousness, perhaps even of life.”

underground³¹. Thus, what he really wants is once again a piece of advice from the dead. It seems impossible yet in a place where grow only *the agapanthi* – African lilies that moreover “order silence” (προστάζουν σιωπή), as we read a few lines below. Since “the dead know the language of flowers only” (οι πεθαμένοι ξέρουν μονάχα τη γλώσσα των λουλουδιών) in consequence they cannot speak and thus:

they travel and keep silent, endure and keep silent,
past the region of dreams, past the region of dreams.

The last line of the cited fragment appears in the poem in original Ancient Greek because it is taken directly from the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*: *παρὰ δῆμον ὄνειρων*³². What in the beginning of the poem seemed just a somewhat veiled allusion now is confirmed by the cited phrase from the “*Odyssey*”. Repeated words, as Kohler³³ suggests, may function as a sort of an incantation and their main aim is to open the gate to the other world and gain access to it. However the dead seem for the speaking person still distant, he is completely helpless. The African land in which he is obliged to stay makes his anticipation more painful, which we can see in subsequent lines:

It’s painful and difficult, the living don’t meet my need
first because they do not speak, and then
because I have to ask the dead
in order to go forward any further.

We come across here the same feeling of stagnation and hopelessness as we have already seen in the poems cited above. The poem’s protagonist is conscious that there is no other way to move from the place he had stuck or, metaphorically, to come out of the state of mind that hampers all his efforts. In spite of this, the situation is not going to change soon. The protagonist is rather involved in an uninterrupted circle that turns around endlessly. This may find confirmation in the next lines which evoke another well-known episode of the “*Odyssey*”, namely the story on the island of Aiolos (Od. X, 1–55):

the moment I fall asleep
the companions cut the silver strings

³¹ See above the analysis of the poem IX belonging to the cycle “*Mythistoréma*”.

³² Cf. Od. 24, 12 where Hermes leads the souls of suitors to Hades: *παρ’ Ἡελίοιο πύλας καὶ δῆμον Ὀνειρών*.

³³ Kohler 1985: 358.

and the pouch of the winds empties.
I fill it and it empties, I fill it and it empties;

What strikes the reader in the passage above is the fact that the ones who hamper the protagonist are Odysseus' companions. Thus, the main obstacle is not only the living as it was said before. In this way from the hypothetical real-life dimension of the situation depicted in the poem – Seferis' stay in Africa, we are transported without any transition to the mythological level in which in a natural way the protagonist meets Odysseus' companions and so turns out to be Odysseus himself. However it is rather difficult if not utterly impossible to discern two personages, the poet and the ancient prototype. Moreover, such a distinction is useless because comprehending the poem that all the time balances between reality and mythology is not the most important challenge. The last part brings, as it seems to me, both the conclusion and the solution of what kind of help the protagonist needed from the dead. In this part love and journey have been identified:

The first thing God made is love
then comes blood
and the thirst for blood (...)
The first thing God made is the long journey

As Capri-Karka suggests, the poet seems to speak here about the dichotomic nature of human beings who have the capacity for love and simultaneously for hatred and doing evil³⁴. Besides, love seems to have two sides – divine power given by God and the strength able to turn everything into evil. Such a pessimistic statement is juxtaposed with the next image appearing after the cited passage:

the house there is waiting
with its blue smoke
with its aged dog
waiting for the homecoming so that it can die.

The situation depicted in the fragment is another example of how Seferis interweaves ancient stories with a real background. The mention of the dog leads us directly to the seventeenth book of the "Odyssey" (v. 290-327) where Odysseus after twenty years comes back to Ithaca and is greeted by his dog Argos that dies immediately after

³⁴ Capri-Karka 1982: 296.

meeting his master³⁵. We can make a suggestion then that the person speaking in the poem is looking for a solution how he could get home. In such circumstances when his companions are only an obstacle for him and the living do not speak, the protagonist heads for the dead:

But the dead must guide me;
it is the *agapanthi* that keep them from speaking

However his actions are ineffective because of the African flowers *agapanthi* that seem to be so exotic for the protagonist that the communication is completely impossible. Surprising in this place is once again the mention of the Odysseus' companions and allusion to the episode on Circe's island:

And the companions stay on in the palaces of Circe:
my dear Elpenor! My poor, foolish Elpenor!
Or don't you see them?

The companions we have already met in "Companions in Hades" in this poem are still under the spell of Circe who had turned them into pigs (Od. 10, 229-243). The protagonist addresses his words to Elpenor, the one who lost his life falling from the roof of Circe's palace. Nobody noticed the absence of the youngest companion and they sailed away not knowing about the accident. His soul is the first one that appears in front of astonished Odysseus in Hades (Od. 11, 51-83). Thus, we could assume that in Seferis' poem the protagonist, metaphorically speaking, has just arrived to the Underworld and is calling the dead. On the one hand, seeing Elpenor no doubts he feels sorry for him, on the other, the word "you fool" (ηλίθιε) suggests that what had happened to him is now meaningless because his companions are still in Circe's palace - which in Seferis' terms means that they are all the time pigs, they could not restrain their instincts. Maybe that is why they hamper the protagonist's endeavours and make him stay in one place without any possibility of getting back home.

So far there is no accurate and convincing explanation not only of the last fragment but of the whole poem, which is one of the most difficult fragments of the collection "Logbook II". In addition the last two verses complicate the matter even more:

³⁵ The same motif we find in earlier Seferis' poem "Reflections on the foreign line of verse", where in fourth stanza we read about Odysseus: "from his ripe longing to see once more the smoke ascending from his warm hearth and the dog grown old waiting by the door."

- “Oh help us!” –
On the blackened ridge of Psara.

The last line (in Greek: Στων Ψαρών την ολόμαυρη ράχη) is a citation taken from the epigraph of the national Greek poet, singer of liberty Dionisios Solomos (1798-1857). The verse comes from Solomos’ “The Destruction of Psara” which recalls the massacre of the inhabitants of the island during the War of Independence (1821-1829). The suggestion made by Capri-Karka that the poet wanted to express the contrast between foolish Odysseus’ companions and the warriors fighting for a noble cause seems to me unjustified³⁶. Significant in this matter is an ironic statement made by Vitti who said that Seferis besides the agapanthi had found another, more difficult obstacle not only to execute *nekyomanteia* but also to finish the poem³⁷. However, a large number of allusions to Ancient Greek myths, references to the modern history of Greece in the poem do not surprise the reader if we realize Seferis’ affinity to poetry of T.S. Eliot who used the same literary technique in his works, especially in “The Waste Land” translated by Seferis into Modern Greek³⁸. In any case the poem “Stratis Thalassinos among the agapanthi” brings an interesting usage of the necromancy motif. Here we can see clearly that Seferis in using ancient mythology tends to use once more an allusion as a literary technique to introduce into the poem ancient elements. However the way he uses it is far from being as clear as we have observed in earlier poems. This an announcement of the imagery Seferis will use in his later poetry, especially in “Thrush”.

All remarks made above show not only the frequency of the necromancy and the motif of speaking to the dead but also the complexity it brings to the reader of Seferis’ poetry. The allusive way Seferis uses the motif demands from the reader a profound knowledge of the Homeric epic. Without it most of the cited fragments would have been incomprehensible. What also attracts our attention is the way Seferis treats the Homeric story. None of the poems mentioned in the present paper brings the exact reflection of the ancient prototype. Seferis uses different techniques to introduce the motif: gives voice only to the companions (“The Companions in Hades”), changes the situation presenting the ghost of Odysseus speaking to the living person (“The Reflections on the Foreign Line of Verses”), reverses the

³⁶ Capri-Karka 1982: 298.

³⁷ Vitti 1994: 166.

³⁸ Keeley 1983: 87-92.

Homeric situation in IX part of the “Mythistorema” directing the travelers to the Underground to gain strength by the allusion to Greek Adonis, or, finally, indicates the lack of communication with the dead because of the lack of the asphodels (“Stratis Thalasinós among the Agapanthi”).

The question of a function and meaning of the necromancy motif is more elaborate and evades an unambiguous explanation. It is obvious that in almost every case the poet uses the motif when protagonists of his poems are in a hopeless situation in which they cannot find any help from the people around. Thus a conversation with the dead seems to be a sort of “the last resort”, last possible solution when circumstances do not allow anything else, when everything fails. Secondly, Seferis uses the motif of *nekyomanteia* when he seeks the way to self-knowledge or “rebirth”, like in the above cited verses of the poems belonging to the cycle “Mythistorema”. The point here is not to die to be reborn but to contact with the dead to gain strength from them to take further actions. Only the first of the analyzed poems can be understood in a different way extending the meaning of the usage of the necromancy motif. The underground world, Hades, and unconscious shadows wandering to and fro like in the “Odyssey” seem to function as a reflection of a modern man state of mind or soul, not aware of the real life, distracted and unable to find the proper solution.

The necromancy motif and allusions to the world of the dead, although rooted and directly inspired in Homer’s “Odyssey”, in Seferis’ poetry, as we have seen, gain a completely new meaning, bringing to the fore the idea of a futile search of authentic, real life by modern man completely lost in the asphodel meadows of his own soul.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beaton R., 1983, *The Poetic Quest of George Seferis*, Labrys 8, pp. 23-34.
 Beaton R., 1987, *From Mythos to Logos: the Poetics of George Seferis*, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 5/2, pp. 135-52.
 Beaton R., 1991, *George Seferis*, Bristol.
 Beaton R., 2003, *Waiting for the Angel*, New Heaven – London.
 Beaton R., 2004, *An Introduction to Modern Greek Literature*, Oxford.
 Benedetti E., 1970, *Poesia e pensiero della Grecia classica nell' opera di Giorgio Seferis in: Ommagio a Seferis*, Università di Padova. Studi Bizantini e Neogreci diretti da Filippo Maria Pontani, Liviana Editrice in Padova, pp. 27-143.
 C. Capri-Karka, 1982, *Love and the Symbolic Journey in the Poetry of Cavafy, Eliot and Seferis. An interpretation with detailed poem-by-poem analysis*, New York.

- Daniil G., 1973, *H «Κίχλη» του Σεφέρη και ο Ezra Pound*, Νεοελληνικός Λόγος, , pp. 64-71.
- Hartigan K., 1983, *Ancient Myth in Modern Greek Poetry: Odysseus' Reappearance in Modern Greek Verse*, The Classical Outlook, March-April, pp. 69-72.
- Jouanny R., 1978, *Séféris et la Grèce antique*, Revue des études grecques, pp. 123-148.
- Keeley E., 1983, *Modern Greek Poetry. Voice and Myth*, Princeton-New Jersey, pp. 75-77.
- Keeley E., 1996, *Nostos and the Poet's Vision in Seferis and Ritsos*, in: *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry. Essays in Memory of C.A. Trypani*, 1996, London, pp. 81–96.
- Kohler D., 1985, *L'aviron d'Ulysse : l'itinéraire poétique de Georges Séféris*, Paris.
- Krikos-Davis K., 1996, *Seferis and the Myth of Adonis*, in: *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry: essays in memory of C.A. Trypanis*, ed. P. Mackridge, London – Portland, pp. 57-58.
- Liddel & Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, 1997, Oxford.
- Mackridge P., 1996, *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry. Essays in memory of C.A. Trypanis*. Edited by Peter Mackridge, London.
- Marcheselli E., 1966, *Echi dei tragici greci nell' opera di Seferis* (Estratto da "Dioniso" Trimestrale di studi sul teatro antico/ Anno 40 fascicolo 1-4-Gennaio-Dicembre 1966) Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico Siracusa.
- Nikolau N., 1992, *Μυθολογία Γ. Σεφέρη, Από τον Οδυσσέα στον Τεύκρο*, Αθήνα.
- Padel R., 1985, *Homer's Reader: A Reading of George Seferis*, Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society, 211, pp. 74-131.
- Pontani F.M., 1976, *Rilievi sul „Tordo”*, in: *Memoria di Seferis. Studi Critici*, Firenze, pp. 203-265.
- Ricks D., 1989, *The Shade of Homer*, Cambridge.
- Savidis G.P., 1999, *Σατίρα και Πολιτική στη Νεότερη Ελλάδα*, in: *Εισαγωγή στην Ποίηση του Σεφέρη*, Ηράκλειο.
- Seferis G., 1995, *Complete Poems*. Translated, edited and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, Princeton University Press.
- Simondon M., 1977, *Themes Odyseens dans la littérature grecque moderne: L' Ulysse de Seferis*, in: *Influence de la Grece et Rome sur l' occident moderne*, Paris, pp. 285 – 297.
- Sourvinou – Inwood Ch., 1995, *“Reading” Greek Death. To the End of Classical Period*, Oxford.
- Stevanoni C., 2000, *Ulisse (o nessuno) di Seferis*, in: *Ulisse da Omero a Pascal Quignard*. Convegno internazionale Verona, (Atti a cura di Anna Maria Babbi e Francesca Zardini), pp. 411 – 438.
- Vayenas N., 1979, *Ο ποιητής και ο χορευτής, Μια εξέταση της ποιητικής και της ποίησης του Σεφέρη*, Αθήνα.
- Vitti M., 1994, *Ιστορία της νεοελληνικής λογοτεχνίας*, Αθήνα.