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THE CLASSICAL TRADITION IN G. SEFERIS'
MYTHISTOREMA

In respect of the creative interpretation of the classical tradition G. Seferis is among the most distinguished writers not only in Greek literature but in the XX century world literature as well. Considering the reflection of classical antiquity, Seferis' *Mythistorema* is regarded as one of the most remarkable poems. It suffices to look through his poem to notice richness of ancient images and contextual elements. *Mythistorema* is more concerned with ancient world than with the cultural heritage and symbolics of medieval and modern Europe.¹ Seferis himself called the above-mentioned work (which can be pertained to the genre of modern poem) "Odyssey but vice versa".² Of course, scholars have more than once paid attention to the creative interpretation of the classical tradition in Seferis' poetry.³ But the extent of the influence of the classical tradition as an informational system on Seferis' above-mentioned work have not yet been thoroughly studied. In fact, the poem takes the most relevant impulses exactly from classical antiquity. Let's begin with the poem's title. Seferis himself comments on it as follows: "*Mythistorema* – it is two components that made me choose the title of this work: *mythos*, because I have used, clearly enough, a certain mythology; *istoria* (both history and story) because I have tried to express, with some coherence, circumstances that are

¹ We use the term *classical antiquity* to refer not only to the Classical period but to every aspect connected with Greek and Roman Civilization (mythology, literature, philosophy etc.).

² Γ. Σεφέρης, *Μέρες Α'*, Αθήνα, 1975, 15.

³ Π. Μαστροδημήτρης, *Η αρχαία παραδόσις εις την ποιησιν του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*, Αθήνα, 1964. Ε. Κύλη, *Μύθος και Φωνή στη σύγχρονη ελληνική ποίηση*, Αθήνα, 1987. Δ. Μαρωνήτης, *Η ποίηση του Γιώργου Σεφέρη, Μελέτες και Μαθήματα*, Αθήνα 1989. Δ. Μαρωνήτης, *Διαλέξεις*, Αθήνα, 1992. D. Ricks, *Η σκιά του Ομήρου*, Αθήνα, 1993, etc.

as independent from myself as the characters in a novel".⁴ So, the title unites two meanings – mythos and history. Mythos – as the world of eternal symbols of the past and history – as the real events endured by the mankind.

The poem is divided into 24 parts, which reminds us of Homeric tradition to divide epics into 24 books.⁵ We may say that the work as a whole is a remarkable synthesis of certain elements of *Odyssey*, *Argonautica* and Greek tragedy. As it is known, Aristotle traced a number of drama details in Homeric epics and considered Homer one of the stimuli of the drama formation.⁶

Mythistorema begins with the clear statement: "The angel/three years we waited for him .../so that the age-old drama could begin again".⁷ This reminds us of the prologue to Greek tragedies. With respect to the majority of Greek tragedies, especially those by Euripides, we may draw a parallel with the messenger who declares the most crucial and tragic episode.⁸ In the same way, the ending of *Mythistorema* bears an interesting resemblance to the majority of *exodoi* which in Greek tragedies sum up past events and make a certain generalization: "Here end the works of the sea, the works of love". And still, the beginning and the ending of Seferis' poem resemble not only tragedies but also the principle of the beginning and the ending of Homeric poems. The starting point is the statement of the principle motive or theme, as for the ending, it is not the ending in the general meaning of the word as it implies a further continuation of the action.⁹

⁴ George Seferis, *Complete Poems*, Translated, edited and introduced by Edmund Keely and Philip Sherrard, London, 1995, 277.

⁵ see: A. Αργυρίου, *Δεκαεπτά κείμενα για τον Γιώργο Σεφέρη*, Αθήνα, 1990, 124.

⁶ see: Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1448^b36..., for interpretation of the Aristotle's text, see: Aristotle, *Poetics*, Introduction, commentary and appendix by D.W. Lucas, Oxford, 1978, 77, 92 etc.

⁷ In the article we use Keely-Sherrards' translations of Seferis' poems. Different translators translate the Greek word "ἄγγελος" in different ways. Keely-Sherard's English translation offers the word "angel". Ch. Enzensberger's German translation has it as "Bote", which corresponds to English "messenger". Rex Warner also translates it as "messenger". To our mind, "messenger" is more appropriate here as afterwords the author calls our attention to "age-old drama". see also: A. Αργυρίου, *Δεκαεπτά κείμενα*, 130. As for the "three years" it is considered to be an interim period between *Eroticos logos* and *Mythistorema*, see: Mario Vitti, *Φθορά και Λόγος*, Εισαγωγή στην ποίηση του Γ. Σεφέρη, Αθήνα, 1989, 70.

⁸ see: A. Lesky, *Die Tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen, 1972; A. Brown, *A New Companion to Greek Tragedy*, London and Canberra, 1983, 125.

⁹ It is admitted that the action in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* tends to go on even after the formal ending of the epics, see: P. Гордезиани, *Проблемы гомеровского эпоса*, Тбилиси, 1978. As for the termination of the action in *Mythistorema* see: Mario Vitti, *Φθορά και Λόγος*, 72.

The principle theme, that runs through out the poem is a voyage with an interesting synthesis of the pathos of *Argonautica* and *Odyssey*. As it is known, classical philology admits that a probable epic on Argonauts which has not survived to our times influenced *Odyssey*. The latter, in its turn, had an influence on *Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius.¹⁰ Thus, *Odyssey* and *Argonautica* linked to each other already in ancient Greece. They are united by what the travellers had experienced, what might have been most exciting and encouraging. But the most remarkable is that, as in case of *Odyssey*, the travellers better felt the insignificance of the border between death and life, hope and despair. We may say that this pathos is fully reflected in *Mythistorema*, but in the latter the voyage is carried rather in chronological than in geographical area.

In the first poem (A') the above-mentioned lines destroy the distance in time: the past and the present actually converge and all what happened within the frameworks of "the age-old drama" is old in essence and, at the same time, goes on up to the present. The following lines point out the travel and the roaming, so familiar to Hellenic world starting with *Argonautica* and *Odyssey*. There are no exact time indications for the voyage. It seems to be a travel started in the past and still going on.

The following lines attract our attention: "...strangers /plunged into mist by the immaculate wings of swans that /wounded us". A debate was held among the poet and the scholars about these lines.¹¹ To our mind, the phrase "the immaculate wings of swans that /wounded us" provokes associations with the Stymphalian birds which, shot out their feathers, tipped with steel so as to resemble arrows, at strangers.¹²

The poem B' is saturated with ritual spirit. It presents quite an old symbol that of a "well" and a "cave" which indicated the gates to the under-world. As we know, "caves" are mentioned several times in *Argonautica* as well in *Odyssey*. Thus, the usage of these symbols may be called a certain poetic ritual as they help to abolish distance in time and link the present and the past.

The epigraph to the poem (Γ') "Μέμνησο λουτρῶν οἷς ἐνοσφίσθης" is a quotation from the Aeschylus' tragedy *The Libation Bearers*, 491 where

¹⁰ The issue of the correlation between *Odyssey* and *Argonautica* is specified in K. Meuli *Odyssee und Argonautica*, Berlin, 1921.

¹¹ Some scholars admit that the line "the immaculate wings of swans" is consciously or unconsciously determined by Herodotus IV, 31-32 and presents a poetic image of snow, see: Π. Μαστροδημήτρης, *Η αρχαία παραδόσεις εις την ποιησιν του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*, Αθήνα, 1964, 10-11. But Seferis himself did not agree with such an interpretation.

¹² Ap. Rhod. II, 1020...

Orestes in his speech at Agamemnon's tomb reminds his father of the bath where he had been killed by his wife Clytemnestra.¹³ The address "πάτερ" is omitted from the quotation on purpose. The epigraph is organically related to the text of the poem. Here the poet speaks about the feelings of the narrator who is presented "with the marble head in ... hands". The phrases "I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed /I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak /I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin" arouse associations with the sufferings of murdered Agamemnon: his mouth could never say what he wanted to, his eyes could never see the children who came here to revenge. But the narrator can change nothing about it: "That's all I'm able to do".

This poem can provoke different associations. We may identify the narrator with the Greek nation itself, which restored its links with its roots comparatively late because of its endless capture. After the liberation, "awaking" the nation found itself with its vigorous past – "with the marble head in my hands" which exhausts ("it exhausts my elbows...") and puzzles him ("...I don't know where to put it down"). A modern Greek wants to hear a voice of his great ancestor, the voice he was unable to hear: "I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak".

The ancient spirit is fully introduced in the poem *Argonauts* (Δ'). In the very first line the author originally attempts to insert in the structure of his poem Plato's prosaic text without any changes using an interesting principle of deviding Plato's sentences into lines. However, in this case we are more interested in the function of these lines in this concrete poem and in *Mythistorema* as a whole than in the way of transforming Plato's prosaic text into a poetic one. The quotation is from Plato, *Alcibiades*, 133b, where it is discussed how to interpret the famous exhortation carved on the Delphian temple "Know thyself" ("γνώθι σεαυτόν").¹⁴ Here Plato states through Socrates' words: "καὶ ψυχὴ εἰ μέλλει γνῶσεσθαι αὐτὴν εἰς ψυχὴν αὐτῇ βλεπτέον...". We think this is the key phrase for the whole poem, because *Odyssey* as well as *Argonautica* can be considered a travel maintained for self-knowledge. In this case it may refer to the most concrete (Argonauts, Odysseus, the poet himself), more general (the Greek nation) as well as the most general (the mankind). In our opinion, this way of starting the poem unambiguously points out the principle pathos of *Mythistorema*. After the quotation from Plato's *Alcibiades* there comes a very interesting line: "the stranger and enemy, we've seen

¹³ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 315.

¹⁴ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 315.

him in the mirror".¹⁵ Here, we believe, Seferis means that it's impossible to know yourself unless you know your opposition – "the stranger and enemy". After the above-mentioned lines the narration is carried on in Seferis' way of synthesizing concrete and general. Seferis speaks about companions who "...didn't complain /about the work or the thirst or the frost /they had the bearing of trees and waves... they sweated at the oars with lowered eyes /breathing in rhythm /and their blood reddened a submissive skin". These lines are exactly nurtured by classical world and echo *Argonautica* and *Odyssey*, but they also may express the Greek people's striving. The following lines show that the poet seems to be beyond the chronological frameworks: "Sometimes disconsolate women wept /lamenting their lost children /and others frantic sought Alexander the Great /and glories buried in the depths of Asia". Here, as it is generally admitted, the Asia Minor catastrophe is reflected.¹⁶ Alexander the Great is the symbol of what the Greeks wanted to achieve and what brought them to the catastrophe. Our attention was attracted by an interesting gradation: at first, the theme of *Argonautica* is more conspicuous in the poem, then there is a synthesis of the themes of *Argonautica* and *Odyssey*, and in the end *Odyssey's* spirit prevails. It is a common knowledge that the phrases "The companions died one by one, /with lowered eyes. Their oars /mark the place where they sleep on the shore" corresponds with *Odyssey* (XI,75-78).¹⁷ The shadow of Elpenor asks Odysseus to plant his oar on his grave to perpetuate his memory. To our mind, the poem *Argonauts* reflects the main body of the whole poem, because there is a beginning of an endless voyage, a definite aim, the voyage full of danger and the inevitable end: "Their oars /mark the place where they sleep on the shore." The poem ends with the poet's remark: "No one remembers them. Justice".¹⁸

There is no reference to antiquity in the fifth poem (E'), but it comes to be a certain continuation of the last line of the poem Δ': "No one remembers them. Justice". This is, chiefly, a hesitation, whether they really knew their friends or not, whether it was all hopes or reality. This hesitation is well represented by the opposition of the lines: "We didn't know them", "we'd known them since early childhood".

¹⁵ It is interesting that the "mirror" is a relevant detail in *Alcibiades* respective passages: 132e, 133a.

¹⁶ Δ. Μαρωνήτης, Η ποίηση του Γιώργου Σεφέρη, Φιλέταιρος Οδυσσέας, 60-62.

¹⁷ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 316

¹⁸ for the interpretation of the last line of *Argonauts* see: Δ. Μαρωνήτης, Φιλέταιρος Οδυσσέας, 61, Mario Vitti, Φθορά και Λόγος, 84-85

The next poem (ΣΤ') comes to be an interlude. The initials M.R. are those of Maurice Ravel.¹⁹ The poem represents a brilliant impressionistic inset, where only the line "...the broken /statues and the tragic columns" reminds us of the ancient world.

Considering the reflection of the classical tradition, *South wind* (Ζ') seems to imply no direct reference to classical antiquity. Everything depicted here concerns the narrators themselves, but the poem seems to be quite a natural, integral part of *Argonautica* and *Odyssey*. The title *South wind* itself speaks to the same, as it implies clear indications for the sailors.

In the poem Η' Seferis once again comes back to the theme of searching souls: "What are they after, our souls, travelling /on the decks of decayed ships". He most interestingly introduces a tragic picture of misery of women and children refugees. And, though there is no answer to the question what the souls seek, there is an obvious striving for search. It leads us to what is combined with pain. The poem raises a number of associations. We may consider it the reflection of the catastrophe of the "Great Idea", the criticism of a vain striving for the "... country that is no longer ours /nor yours. "

The theme of the narrator's loneliness beautifully links the poem Θ' to classical antiquity. Some remarkable symbols enter in the poem. On the one hand, it is the image of Odysseus, which emerges in the narrator's consciousness along with the night's stars ("The night's stars take me back to Odysseus"). He is alone like Odysseus "among the asphodels" facing the souls of the dead (*Odyssey*, XI, 539). On the other hand, the following lines refer to another ancient image. Now the narrator's aim is "...to find among the asphodels /the gorge that knew the wounded Adonis".

The following poem (Ι') carries on the theme of loneliness, aloofness, but the loneliness of a man transforms into the limits of a place, topos. Seferis introduces a mythopoetic image of "black Symplegades", evidently taken from Euripides *Medea* (1-2).²⁰ Though there is an obvious correspondence with Euripides, we should say, that the image of black Symplegades is typical of ancient sources. Sometimes they are referred to by a synonym "Κυάνας".²¹ Here the image of black Symplegades, on the one hand, revives the theme of *Argonautica* and, on the other hand, ac-

¹⁹ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 316.

²⁰ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 317.

²¹ W. Pape, Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen, Bd. II, 1911³, Braunschweig, 1458.

quires a new function, as Seferis presents them as the limits of the place or the country.

After the brilliant surrealistic poem IA', which has a function of an interlude, the poet comes back to the theme of the poem I'. In the IB' (*Bottle in the sea*) the travellers' intention to "moor the ship" and "splice the...oars" as well as the phrase "the youngest", who "won it and disappeared" take us back to the world of *Odyssey* and *Argonautica*. It is generally admitted that the word "the youngest" refers to Elpenor (Homer uses the epithet "νεώτατος" for Elpenor, *Odyssey*, X, 552).²² To our mind, there is a very interesting synthesis of the information of *Odyssey* and *Argonautica*. The phrase "Here we moored the ship to splice the broken oars, / to drink water and to sleep" reminds us of the episode from *Argonautica*, when Heracles broke his oar and the Argonauts had to land to splice a new one and the phrase "The youngest won it and disappeared" provokes associations with Hyllas, who was sent to bring water, was pulled down by the water-nymph into the pool and was never seen again.²³

The poem *Hydra* (II') arouses associations with the events relating to the battles for the independence of Greece. It is a common knowledge that the island substantially contributed to naval forces that helped to win independence for Greece.²⁴ The only thing that connects the poem with the theme of voyage are the following lines: "White sails and sunlight and wet oars / struck with a rhythm of drums on stilled waves".

After the poem *Hydra* there comes a four-line poem (IA') which can also be considered an interlude, if there is no symbolics in the phrase "Three red pigeons". It can be associated with ancient literature only if we see in these words a certain reflection of the pigeon, let free by Argonauts in Symplegades.²⁵

The epigraph to the poem IE' – *Quid πλατανών opacissimus?* is from Pliny, *Letters*, 1.3, where he asks his friend "What about that shadiest of plane trees?"²⁶ But Seferis makes one interesting alteration: the word "platanon" that entered in Latin from Greek, is presented in its original Greek form πλατανών.²⁷ The author seems to refer to the Greek origin of the Latin word which was quite rarely used even in ancient Greek lan-

²² Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 317.

²³ Ap. Rhod. I, 1207-1208, I, 1257-1260.

²⁴ George Seferis, *Complete Poems*, 278.

²⁵ Ap. Rhod. II, 561-562.

²⁶ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 317.

²⁷ Δ. Δημητράκης, *Μέγα Λεξικόν όλης της Ελληνικής Γλώσσας*, τ. Ζ, Αθήνα, 1964, 5857

guage. Its widely used form was πλάτανος or πλατάνιστος. What unites the epigraph and the poem itself? We believe the poem, which at first sight can be considered a love poem, has a bit more to express than a mere striving for an imaginary object, here a woman. As we had no opportunity to get acquainted with the comments on the point, we shall try to present some of our observations. To our opinion, the most noteworthy detail is the plane tree, which recurrently appears and can be duly considered a key element of the poem. If we come back to Pliny's letter, we shall see that Pliny calls upon his addressee to give up everyday routine, ask somebody else to take care of it and create something that will immortalize his name. Seferis underlines two aspects: 1) serenity brought by sleep, some sort of uncertainty and 2) ephemerality, oblivion, failure of dreams. In fact, the poem expresses dissatisfaction not of a concrete man, but the whole generation of mortals. Does it not resemble the opposition presented in Pliny's letter, the opposition of everyday routine and the creative heritage of a man that perpetuates his name, what Pliny's addressee failed to accomplish.

In the poem ΙΣΤ' there is an attempt to fully transformate the passage from Sophocles' *Electra*.²⁸ The aged servant of Orestes' tells Clytemnestra the fabricated story of Orestes' death. He begins his story with the description of Orestes' glorious victory in the chariot-races at Delphi: Ἀργεῖος μὲν ἀνακαλούμενος, ὄνομα δ' Ὀρέστης, τοῦ τὸ κλεινὸν Ἑλλάδος Ἀγαμέμνονος στρατεύμ' ἀγείραντός ποτε (693-696). The very formula ὄνομα δ' Ὀρέστης is used as an epigraph to Seferis' poem, which presents Orestes' monologue: Orestes describes the competition, but unlike Sophocles, the pathos of this poem is not a demonstration of joy caused by a victory. It expresses the pain, torture, feeling of helplessness experienced by the "first" man: "and I feel my knees give way over the axle/ over the wheels, over the wild track/ knees buckle easily when the gods so will it...". It is remarkable that what in Sophocles' tragedy is supposed to be fabricated (Orestes' participation in the competition), Seferis presents as a real story making Orestes his contemporary character.²⁹ In the end of the poem Seferis introduces one more mythical image – the Eumenides – which is organically linked to the myth about Orestes. Seferis applies the epithet "black" to the Eumenides, i.e. former Erinyes transformed by Goddess Athena, though it hardly fits the Eumenides any more.³⁰ This

²⁸ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 317.

²⁹ Δ. Μαρωνήτης, Η ποίηση του Γιώργου Σεφέρη, Γραφή και Ανάγνωση, 78.

³⁰ for the interpretation of Aeschylus *Eumenides* see: A. Lesky, *Die Tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen 1972, 126-134.

may lead us to the thought that to Seferis' mind the essence of the Erinyes never changes, and even their transformation into the Eumenides did not help.

The poem called *Astyanax* (IZ'), where a proper name appears only in the title, presents quite an interesting symbol of a child which becomes a victim of warriors, lustful of battles. As it is known, Astyanax, a naive child, son of Hector and Andromache, was killed by Achaeans after the fall of Troy.³¹ The poem consists of three parts. The first one (1-6) arises associations with the Trojan war. The symbol of the plane tree again appears here. In our opinion, it may allude to the plane-tree, by which the Achaeans were warned about Gods' oracles on the date of terminance and the outcome of the Trojan war. (*Iliad*, II 284...). Seferis finds an interesting way of relating this event to the birth of the boy. "The boy who saw the light under that plane tree, /one day when trumpets resounded and weapons shone /and the sweating horses /bent to the trough to touch with wet nostrils /the green surface of the water". It is interesting that Calchas' oracle at Homer is based on the horrible image of the Dragon eating a newly born nestling (νήπια τέκνα) from the plane tree (*Iliad*, II 311...). The second part of the poem (7-11), to our mind, is the generalization of the lamentations and wars that sacrificed the generations of ancestors and, on the other hand, caused so much joy and so many supplications. The third part is a certain warning for other children to avoid Astyanax's lot. Let's consider the poet's words: "take with you the boy who saw the light /under the leaves of that plane tree /and teach him to study the trees".

The poem IH' has a double function: on the one hand, it refers to the theme of destruction (which we may associate with the destruction started with Troy and ended with the Asia Minor catastrophe) – "Whatever I loved vanished with the houses /that were new last summer /and crumbled in the winds of autumn", on the other hand, it is a certain intermedium to precede an extremely lyric poem (IΘ'). In the latter it is difficult to see any concrete allusion to classical antiquity. Though the last phrase "they're a burden for us/ the friends who no longer know how to die" may be considered a repercussion of the theme of the "companions", "friends", developed in previous poems.

The poem K' [Andromeda] without any nomination introduces the image of Andromeda, who, according to the myth of Perseus, was res-

³¹ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 318.

cued by the hero from terrible tortures.³² If we consider the myth, we may easily connect the lines with the pain experienced by a sacrificed woman. The quotation from Aeschylus *Agamemnon* (958) "The sea, the sea, who will be able to drain it dry?" from the speech of Clytemnestra justifying Agamemnon's treading on the purple carpet leading into palace, also attracts attention.³³ The function of this quotation in the poem is particularly interesting. As it is known, the image of the inexhaustible sea in *Agamemnon* is used by Clytemnestra to illustrate the wealth of their palace. As for Seferis' poem, in our opinion, the quotation has two planes: on the one hand, it may refer to the emotions of a man chained to the seaside cliff and facing the violent sea, and on the other hand, the quotation may serve to generalize the idea of inexhaustible pain, lamentation, grief. It is remarkable that Seferis presents Andromeda's mythical image only when she is being tormented and says nothing about her rescue or even her hope. The impression is that counter to the traditional myth about Perseus, Seferis emphasizes the inexhaustibility of her grief.

The theme of the following poem (KA') is "death", "silence", "smile", which seem so incongruous with each other. The poem presents an integral link between the past and the present, the death and those alive.

The poem (KB'), in our opinion, beautifully illustrates difficulties in the formation of self-awareness among the Greek (or generally in the mankind) as viewed from the present. The phrases: "wandering among broken stones, three or six thousand years / searching in collapsed buildings that might have been our homes / trying to remember dates and heroic deeds" obviously point out that long is the period and numerous are the events and symbols which should be perceived if one wishes to know oneself.

The next to the last poem (KΓ') is a certain approach to the ending, which, according to this poem, tends to be "optimistic": "a little farther, / let us rise a little higher."

The last poem (KΔ') is the exodus of this truly great drama of *Argonautica* and *Odyssey*. The past and the present are again united, the image of asphodels, the idea of perpetuating the past is again introduced as an eternal circulation. There is even a certain wish, a will for those who are bound to come in future: "let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodeles". And, in the end, the poet calls for serenity: "We who had nothing will school them in serenity".

³² Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 318.

³³ Ποιήματα, Σημειώσεις, 318.

The brief comments presented above unambiguously testify that the influence of the classical tradition prevails in Seferis' poem. We may say that, if the composite *Μυθιστόρημα* is split into its constituents "μύθος" and "ιστορία", in terms of a concrete orientation the privilege is definitely given to mythos. With respect to the classical tradition Seferis reveals an unusual depth, in its creative interpretation the poet demonstrates rare colourfulness and exalted attitude towards classical antiquity (so uncommon with the European literature of the same age). To make the above-mentioned more evident, we shall make an attempt to sum up the intensity of reflecting the classical tradition from different aspects. Let us start with the ratio of the terms related to the classical tradition that occur in the poem (proper names, certain notions, etc). Eight proper names out of the ten used in the poem are connected with the classical world ('Αργοναῦτες, Μεγαλέξανδρος, 'Οδυσσεάς, 'Αδωνις, 'Ορέστης, 'Αστυάναξ, [Ἄνδρομέδα], Εὐμενίδες). As for geographic names, they are scarcely specified in the poem. All the four mentioned geographic names ('Ασία, Συμπληγάδες, Ὑδρα, Μαραθῶνας) are more or less related to the ancient tradition and two of them directly aim at reflecting classical antiquity (Συμπληγάδες, Μαραθῶνας). The same is true about the level of notions. In our opinion, the notions that enter into the poem from antiquity are: ἄγγελος, πανάρχαιο δράμα, ἀσφοδίλια, ἔρεβος, πλάτανος etc. The choice of epigraphs is also interesting. Below their poetic function will be discussed in detail. Here we shall only state, that there are four epigraphs in *Mythistorema*, three of which are borrowed from ancient sources (Μέμνησο λουτρῶν οἷς ἐνοσφίσθης, Quid πλατανῶν ορακισσimus?, ὄνομα δ' 'Ορέστης). But the citation of ancient authors goes further. Seferis quotes Plato's *Alcibiades* (133 b), he also presents a free interpretation of line 958 from Aeschylus *Agamemnon* in modern Greek. The paraphrases of the information from ancient sources are typical of Seferis. As mentioned above, there are two implicit allusions to Elpenor (Δ', IB'), we also believe the same is true about Stymphalian birds (A'), the plane tree, by which the Achaeans were warned about the oracle of Gods (IZ'), and Hyllas, who went out for some water and disappeared (IB').

Of course, while dwelling our attention on the classical tradition, we should bear in mind that ancient names, symbols and notions embrace quite a long epoch starting with so called Age of Heroes up to the Late Antiquity. While reflecting the classical tradition, it is interesting to find out the period Seferis concerns himself with. It is obvious that in *Mythistorema* Seferis refers to the Mythological epoch. The majority of the characters and nominated events is related to the themes of mythology.

Another point of interest is the emphasis on the mythological past at the level of heroes in the poem dedicated not only to mythology but to history as well. To our mind, two aspects are of special relevance: first, the most vivid images of sea roaming and travel are *Argonautica* and *Odyssey* and, secondly, it is very important for Seferis to raise his images to many-sided symbols. Evidently, the poet attached much more importance to mythos than to concrete historical personalities or events.

Which cycles of myths or local legends prevail in the poem? As we know, the author uses the cycle of Argonauts, the Trojan cycle and Andromeda's episode from the myth about Perseus. What attracts our attention is the total absence of the Theban cycle, so productive in the modern European literature. On the other hand, there is certain reanimation of Elpenor's image, which after Homer was not considered a relevant status-symbol for the interpretation of the classical tradition neither in the ancient nor the following period.

The selection of quotations from classical sources requires special attention. The author chooses the quotations which had caused no special interest in the European literature. In the poem they serve to render quite a concrete poetic conception. We are by no means mistaken to say that the epigram of the third poem "Μέμνησο λουτρῶν οἷς ἔνοσφίσθης" became no source of inspiration either in the ancient or the following period. In this phrase Seferis saw much more than a mere meaning of the sentence. In *The Libation Bearers* the function of this phrase is to remind the reader of the murder of Agamemnon in the bath. In this case the quotation itself acquires a symbolic meaning in the poem. It may refer to the tragic lot of Agamemnon (the noblest King of the Heroic epoch of Greece) as well as of his fatherland.

The way of quoting Plato is also very interesting. Seferis does not paraphrase the quotation to fit his poem. He inserts the exact phrase from Plato's prose into the structure of his poem. So far we have not come across any other author who would pay so much attention to the mentioned phrase from Plato's *Alcibiades*.³⁴ However, Seferis chose a truly suitable quotation to express the spirit felt throughout *Mythistorema*.

In this respect the epigram of the poem IE' is also noteworthy. It is a citation from Pliny which in the original bears no other function than that of a mere greeting formula. Seferis charged this seemingly ordinary phrase with the meaning of a phrase-symbol (especially by means of replacing the Latin "platanon" with the Greek πλατανῶν). His "shadiest of plane

³⁴ Of course, with the exception of Plato's commentators.

trees" might be a symbol very close to the understanding of a plane tree in the old Greek world, where it was considered a tree of sorrow and grief.³⁵

The epigram of poem $\text{I}\Sigma\text{T}' - \delta\nu\omicron\mu\alpha \delta' \text{'}\text{O}\rho\acute{\epsilon}\sigma\tau\eta\varsigma$ – originates from Sophokle's *Electra*. The phrase in *Electra* is used in rather an ordinary context. In our opinion, Seferis created quite an interesting symbol out of this phrase. We may call it the symbol of a winner, the first man. The pathos of the poem is determined by musing over his lot and actual abilities.

There is another case of citation in the poem *Andromeda*. As mentioned above, the author cites a phrase from Aeschylus *Agamemnon*. If we consider the aphoristic nature of this phrase in *Agamemnon*, it will be interesting to observe to what extent the initial meaning of the phrase is preserved after the citation. In our opinion, Seferis definitely altered the purpose of the phrase. In *Agamemnon* the sea is a general image of inexhaustibility, which Seferis skilfully fitted to a concrete situation depicted in *Andromeda*. The poet preserved the meaning of inexhaustibility of the sea, but denied it its function to refer to endless wealth. We believe Seferis attached to it a more general meaning and made it closely related to the actual context.

With respect to Seferis' creative interpretation of the classical tradition, the most remarkable, to our mind, is his using the ancient information as a subtext for his poem. Subtext underlies the whole poem *Mythistorema*, but there are cases when each part of the poem has its own subtext.

If we consider the poem as a whole, the subtext of its carcass is obviously the model of an ancient tragedy with its prologue, episodes and exodoi. However, it is structured with respect to Homeric epics, traditionally divided into 24 books.

As for the imaginary and quite relative "action" of the poem, its subtext is definitely *Argonautica*, on the one hand, and *Odessey*, on the other. The combination of these two informational sources is certainly motivated. The imaginary ship of *Mythistorema* and its crew are very relevant, as relevant as *Argo* and its crew were. On the other hand, Seferis' companions share *Odessey's* lot starting with ship wrecks and catastrophes and ending with the loneliness of *Odysseus*.

³⁵ see: J. C. Cooper, *Lexikon Alter Symbole*, Leipzig, 1986, 144. In the Ancient world the symbol of the plane tree was quite relevant. On the one hand, it indicated sorrow and on the other hand, it was an indispensable attribute of a sacred place: Herod. V 119, VII 27, 31.

As we have already mentioned, not only the poem as a whole and its subtext are important to the poet, but certain key parts and their subtexts as well. We shall point out three poems that seem relevant in this respect: *Astyanax*, *The name is Orestes* and *Andromeda*.

The subtext of *Astyanax* is not only the Homeric epics, but the whole Greek tradition on the violent murder of Astyanax. It was reflected in other genres too. We may find it in epics as well as in Euripide's *Trojan women*. It is noteworthy that Seferis raises Astyanax's image to the symbol of a helpless child and makes a small amendment to the ancient plot, while relating the birth of the child to the plane tree. Seferis attaches even more importance to the plane tree than it is shown in Iliad, and the phrase "take with you the boy who saw the light / under the leaves of that plane tree / and teach him to study the trees" may be understood as a certain warning to make children safe.

The subtext of *The name is Orestes* is definitely Orestes' aged servant's story from Sophokles *Electra*. As mentioned above, the aged servant of Orestes tells Clitemnestra a fabricated story of Orestes' victory and his death. Seferis changes the falsehood into reality. More than that, this false story is transformed in Orestes' monologue. The aim of this transformation is to reveal not the pride brought by victory, but the helplessness of a man in the face of global, universal laws.

The subtext of the poem *Andromeda* is a myth about Perseus. It is remarkable that Seferis refers only to that episode of the myth, which shows Andromeda's hopeless state. Thus he alters the whole pathos of the myth, and what ends well in the Greek tradition becomes a symbol of endless, inexhaustible pain and sorrow.³⁶

So, considering the creative interpretation of the classical tradition we may maintain that Seferis is among the most remarkable poets. The poem which illustrates the fate of mankind and Greece in particular throughout centuries, is chiefly orientated on classical tradition, though the plot and motivation of the poem offered a wide range of other symbols as well, so numerous in the history of civilization.³⁷

It is noteworthy that, unlike other literary men of his age, Seferis makes no attempt to modernize terms, symbols, images related to the classical tradition and to present them in the frameworks of everyday life.

³⁶ In our opinion, it's not ruled out that in this case Seferis refers to the preserved fragments of Euripides' *Andromeda*, namely the prologue to the tragedy, which presents feelings of the woman chained to the cliff.

³⁷ A brilliant example of such literary work is the poem of T. Eliot *The Waste Land*.

More than that, Seferis generalizes them in almost a classical way and thus comes closer to the spirit of classical culture.

And, finally, what captures our attention are the organic links between the remote past and the present. Two planes run through out the poem: what it was (and, as already mentioned above, it is chiefly confined to classical antiquity) and what it is (of course, often merged with the author's glance into the future, realized with nothing but dreams and best wishes). Seferis succeeded in his attempt to fit the classical tradition as an integral part to his modern poetry and thus he revived ancient symbols and notions.