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THE UNIVERSAL RITUALS AND THEIR FUNCTION IN STRATIS MYRIVILIS' PROSE

Religious concepts and corresponding rituals acquire special importance in the history of the world culture. A lot of rituals have altered in the course of centuries, or even disappeared. However, there are customs that rarely yield to alterations. This way or other, rituals maintain existence in human consciousness, lifestyles and are correspondingly expressed in art. A large number of literary texts fully or partly reflect archaic rituals. Some writers use lifestyle components as supplementary materials to structure a literary piece, its texture, to build the plot on and attach to them a certain artistic function. Stratis Myrivilis is among such writers. Close consideration of rituals in his works leads to the study of the dialogues of cultures and mutual influence of civilizations. The issue is relevant nowadays as well and attracts scholars' intense interest.

The present paper aims to study the function of universal rituals in Stratis Myrivilis' prose, systemize the materials and provide their comparative analysis. While considering Myrivilis' literary texts, we are chiefly concerned with the way the relations between ancient Greek religion and modern Greek tradition are reflected in the literary works by the XX century writer, and how mythic elements and ancient universal rituals work in the modern Greek community.

The present research considers separately the rain-invoking, sacrificial and mourning rituals. The research dwells on the properties of rituals in the universal and Greek environments and their functional-symbolic implications. The research is based on the accepted conceptions of scholars about rituals and the episodes from Stratis Myrivilis' works that include the rituals.

Despite the huge size of the scientific literature dedicated to the study of rituals, the issue is not thoroughly studied in the modern Greek literature.

The greatest Greek female writer Sappho was a native of Lesbos. Sources refer to her as the "Lesbian Nightingale". Ages passed since Sappho's times. Greece fostered hosts of thinkers and went through thousands of dangers. In the XX century the country managed to regain independence. Political changes had an impact on the cultural heritage as well. In the 1930-ies, the Eolic school acquired a remarkable place in the literary life of Greece.¹ One of its leaders was Stratis Myrivilis. The group of writers from Lesbos revived Greek literature, and, consequently, the period of their activities is called "The Spring of Lesbos".² The rituals described in Myrivilis' works initiate the reader into the traditions of Lesbos island.

The 1930-ies mark the period of changes in the modern Greek literature. The Disaster of Hellenism in Asia Minor had a remarkable impact on the social life and ideology of Greek people. It found its way in political, scientific literature and fiction, in periodicals and newspapers. The works by Greek writers of the 1930-ies express the main problems of the epoch, the pulsation of the epoch through the original content and structure.³ Remarkably, the modern Greek literature revived on Lesbos island in the 1930-ies. A big number of XX century Greek literary works recognized as masterpieces were first published in literary journals of Lesbos island and afterwards enjoyed the presentation to the wider publicity of Greece. A group of distinguished representatives of Greek writers of the 1930-ies started their literary activities on the island. Stratis Myrivilis was among them.

The Pseudonym Myrivilis implies both ancient (Lepetimos mountain) and Modern Greek (the name of the hill) components as well as pre-Christian (Elijah Rock) and Christian (acoustic and orthographic resemblance with "the Myrrh-streaming") senses.⁴ The study of Myrivilis' pseudonyms leads to the detection of interesting principles that run throughout his works. In particular, Myrivilis represents a remarkable synthesis of ancient traditions and modern Greek legends, pagan mythological characters and Christian stories. The name Stratis is related to the Christian traditions (it is the title for Archangels). So, the pseudonym of the writer is another tool to express the writer's creed, which promotes the idea that modern Greece is the link of the

¹ Beaton R., *Εισαγωγή στη Νεότερη Ελληνική Λογοτεχνία, Ποίηση και Πεζογραφία 1821-1992*, εκδ. Νεφέλη, Αθήνα 1996; 180-184.

² About "The Spring of Lesbos" see: Χατζηαναγνώστος Τ., *Η Λεσβιακή Άνοιξη και ο Στρατής Μυριβήλης*, Νέα Εστία, Αφιέρωμα στον Στράτη Μυριβήλη, τόμος 128, τεύχος 1523, Χριστούγεννα 1990; 135-138.

³ Μουλλάς Π., *Η Μεσοπολεμική Πεζογραφία. από τον Πρώτο ως το δεύτερο Παγκόσμιο Πόλεμο (1914-1934)*, τόμος Α', *Εισαγωγή*, εκδ. Σόκολη, Αθήνα 1996; 67.

⁴ About Stratis Myrivilis' pseudonyms see Βαλέτας Γ., *Ο Μυριβήλης της Μυτιλήνης*, Νέα Εστία, Αφιέρωμα στον Στράτη Μυριβήλη, τόμος 88, τεύχος 1033; Αθήνα 1970; 910-922.

single chain that starts with ancient Greece. The same is implied in the writer's other pseudonyms that are less frequently used – "Foibus" and "Xanthos".

Myrivilis' works represent a literary interpretation of the history of the religious thinking and world vision, the mythos, cult and ritual of the folk. His works are rich in interesting findings and interpretations. They serve to the retrospective presentation of the pagan, pre-Christian religious thinking blended with Orthodox Christian beliefs.

The rain-invoking ritual described in the novel *Virgin Gorgon*⁵ is held in order to rescue the olive trees, the sacred and supreme trees to all Greeks. The novel describes the custom for invoking the rain which represents one of the oldest ways to achieve communion with God⁶ and refers to the ritual preserved in XX century Greece, and in particular, on Lesbos island.

The analysis of the part of the novel that describes the ritual reveals that the mentioned custom takes after the universal ritual model. The broad diversity of ritual elements spread all over the world in past, was preserved as well in Greece of Myrivilis' times. The author presents the literary interpretation of the oldest ritual, which at the same time is very much authentic. The characters of *Virgin Gorgon* experience the impact of the mystical function of the ritual. The belief in the power of the rain invoking ritual encourages the residents of the island and even, somehow, protects them. The point reveals the social function of the ritual. Myrivilis presents its psychological function as well: Every inhabitant of the island, no matter whether a farmer or a fisher, is brought up with the belief in the ritual and the perception of its relevance (cf. intensive participation of children in the ritual procession and their merriment after the ritual).

The function of the rain-invoking ritual in Stratis Myrivilis' novel has several stages. It aims at exerting an impact on the reader, which is implemented through the highly refined prose and reveals the image of the author as of the preacher of Greek people's historical and cultural unity. This determined Myrivilis' particular popularity in Greece. He reached the Greek people's spiritual core and touched its strings, which excited and attracted the Greek community to a remarkable degree.

⁵ the rain invoking ritual in the *Virgin Gorgon*: Μυριβίλης Σ., Η Παναγιά η Γοργόνα, εκδ. Οι φίλοι του βιβλίου, Αθήνα 1949; on p.p. 406-417.

⁶ About the rain invoking ritual as one of the oldest ways to achieve communion with God, see: Элиаде М., Очерки Сравнительного Религиоведения, перевод с англ., изд. Ладомир, М. 1999; Щедровицкий Д. В., Дождь ранний и поздний, в сборнике: Архаический ритуал в фольклорных и раннелитературных памятниках, изд. Наука, М. 1988; 201-220; Фрэзер Дж. Дж., Золотая Ветвь, перевод с англ., изд. Политической Литературы, М. 1986; 66-80.

In the novel *Virgin Gorgon* and the short novel *Vasilis Arvanitis*, Startis Myrivilis gives a full account of the universal ritual of offering a sacred sacrifice to the Virgin.⁷ Both works present "steady", established rituals. Myrivilis describes in detail not only the sacrificial ritual, but the whole celebration that accompanies it. In both cases, the offering is an oblation to the Virgin and is held on the day of Assumption – the 15th of August, one of the greatest holidays for Orthodox Greeks. Interestingly, both works picture the offering to the distinguished deity. In the novel, it is Virgin Gorgon – the unique synthesis of the Christian Virgin and the ancient Greek deity. And in *Vasilis Arvanitis*, the ritual takes place not in the vicinity of a church but near a sacred spring called Karini.

The ritual as described in Myrivilis' works corresponds to the ancient Greek tradition held in honour of Olympic gods in ancient Greece.⁸ The comparison reveals almost precise resemblance of the described ceremony with the ancient Greek offering ritual. The human history includes a large number of cases when a ritual was handed down to generations and was not lost in the course of centuries, and the offering ritual is among them.

Apart from blood offerings, Myrivilis' works abound in episodes that include bloodless sacrifices. *Virgin Gorgon* mentions vegetal offerings along with blood sacrifices related to the same holiday – the Assumption. As concerns human offerings, this kind of sacrifice is not directly stated. However, Lambis' suicide, who was deeply in love with Smaragde (according to the novel, Smaragde is the hypostasis of the Virgin⁹), can be interpreted as the sacrifice to Smaragde.

The function of the ritual in Myrivilis' works becomes clear when the characters demonstrate their belief in supernatural powers. The ritual

⁷ Μυριβήλης Σ., Η Παναγιά η Γοργόνα, εκδ. Οι φίλοι του βιβλίου, Αθήνα 1949; the sacrificial ritual on pp. 266-271. Μυριβήλης Σ., Ο Βασίλης ο Αρβανίτης, εκδ. Πηγάσου, Αθήνα 1944; the sacrificial ritual on pp. 65-71.

⁸ About the Ancient Greek Sacrificial traditions in details see: Буркерт В., Homo Necans, Жертвоприношение в древнегреческом ритуале и мифе, перевод с нем. и англ., в сборнике: Жертвоприношение, М. 2000; 405-480.

⁹ In the Ancient World every female deity – (as well as every male deity) had their mortal hypostasis, those were: 1) priestesses, that wore obligatorily the clothes of their deities, with their symbols (Pythia, Cassandra); 2) Every deity had their corresponding images – a famous literary character (Aphrodite – Helena, Hekate – Medea, Hera – Klytemnestra etc.) who carry every symbol of their supreme deity and are their earthly hypostasis. Evidently Myrivilis as an analogy follows the principle to create his character – Smaragde. She perfectly embodies the features of the Virgin Gorgon. These two figures (Virgin Gorgon and Smaragde) fill each other and through the literary character of Smaragde it becomes easier to understand why the Virgin Gorgon was so acceptable to Greeks. About Smaragde as the hypostasis of the Virgin Gorgon see: Chikovani A., The Virgin-Gorgon and Smaragde, Proceedings of the First Republican Conference, Logos, Tbilisi 2003; 145-150.

concentrates people's minds on the traditional event. The common belief and rite serve as inner links within the community. Remarkably, quite a number of rituals have survived ages and are preserved till nowadays unaltered, while some yielded to the modern lifestyle. This is illustrated in the episode when mothers who participate in the offering ritual mark their children's and the ailing people's foreheads with a red cross of the sacrificial blood.

Myrivilis' works abound in elements typical of the mourning ritual. The ritual is distinguished with its diversity in terms of its content and form. The works describe several death cases all very different from one another: at an early age – caused by either illness or an accident, murder or suicide, as well as the physiological death of a person over 100 years old.

It is interesting to consider the extent of precision to which the information on the mourning ritual is described in Myrivilis' works, and the implications the mourning episodes convey, to reveal the impact of cultural and temporal environments on the tradition. A close consideration of the text evidence makes it possible to reconstruct the content of a number of rituals. Mourning rituals are by no means an exception. The writer does not intent to dwell on mourning, lamentations or description of the mourning ritual in particular. The like elements frequently occur in his works and bear a peculiar function in the artistic organization of their conceptions. The episodes are the intrinsic part of the plot of the literary works and therefore leave no impression of redundancy or exeggeration; on the contrary, they help to the understanding of the events described.

The components of the mourning ritual include the attributes to the deceased – the items laid in the coffin together with the dead person, flowers.¹⁰ The offerings to the deceased person include as well the oil lamp hanging on the acacia tree for Vasilis and the marble mortar put under the tree. Their symbolic meaning illustrate the special role and importance of traditions in the Greek people's lifestyles, which found a diverse, profound and skillful presentation in Myrivilis' works. Greek people's ideas on life and eath is fostered both by ancient and Christian beliefs and are mixed with ages-old folk interpretations and customs.¹¹ The fact that the rituals are paid such a close attention in Stratis Myrivilis' prose testify to the validity of the universal rituals that have survived ages and have been handed down to generations.

¹⁰ About flower offerings in Ancient Greece see: Deubner L., *Die Bedeutung des Kranzes im Klassischen Altertum*, AFR 30, 1933; 1933; 72-75, Κοντολέοντας Ν., *Το Ερέχθειον ως οικοδόμημα χθόνιας λατρείας*, Αθήναι 1949; 37-39.

¹¹ Αναγνωστόπουλος Ι., *Ο θάνατος και ο Κάτω Κόσμος στη Δημοτική Ποίηση*, Αθήνα 1984; 243-244; see also: Lawson John Cuthbert, *Folklore and Ancient Greek Religion: A Study in Survivals*, Cambridge 1909. Reprint New York 1964; 486-514.

The present analysis points to the special importance of rituals in Greek people's lives. The rituals are linked to people's ideas of the other world, which found their way in fiction. Stratis Myrivilis gives a consistent account of the ritual. He presents the sacred duties that have transformed into traditions throughout ages and have preserved till present times in their initial form. The narrative is filled with emotions and is distinguished with its plain character. The artistic function of the described ritual is to exert a literary impact on the reader, who is aware of the ritual due to his / her native traditions, and therefore becomes a participant of the event described.

The aim of the research was to study the universal rituals as presented in Stratis Myrivilis' works and identify their function in the particular pieces of fiction. The research lead us to the following conclusions:

Myrivilis' artistic vision is distinguished from that of other writers and is remarkable for its wide range. His works are examples of a new approach to ethnographical and folkloristic issues and of integrated and retrospective representation of innovating attempts and traditional spiritual culture. His works offer successions of different mythological and religious systems, which in their unity represent the real picture of his contemporary Greece.

Myrivilis' works neutralize the confrontations that existed in his contemporary Greek community. They are: Enemy / friend, Greek / Turk, Ancient Greek / the resident of modern Greece (here – the Greek of Lesbos island). The works serve to recover the balance and the sense of love for fellow-men.

In the works of our immediate interest, certain universal rituals are described in one or several episodes. They are rain-invoking, blood offering and mourning rituals.

Along with them, we come across other customs as well that are rooted in the remote centuries. However, they appear only in single episodes. These are, basically, the episodes that picture bloodless offering, oblations (to the Virgin); likewise, the details of the sacrificial rituals introduced in the story as the author's reminiscences, which revive the rituals as a narration or a drama. They enter the reminiscences in the form of a narration as well through reconstructing a certain scene.

Rituals in the works are presented in a "steady", unchanging way: fulfillment of the ritual is compulsory and acceptable for everyone. Both – the characters and the author regard them positively. There is no evidence of negative or neutral or ambiguous appreciations.

While considering the rituals described in Myrivilis' works, the following question arises: Does the mythopetic model enable the writer to express himself? That is where his skilfulness is revealed: the set rules for the rituals

are not violated while the writer's intention is expressed in a comprehensive and highly artistic way.

The function of a ritual is actualized in Myrivilis' works in the following ways:

1. What is closer to the reader is more understandable and acceptable. This way, the writer attempts to bring his ideas to the reader through making them closer to him / her. Why does the writer choose a ritual? Because it is a meta-language. It is a convenient way to express one's own ideas and make it perceptible to the reader.
2. One of the functions of describing rituals in the prose is the intention to reveal the syncretic nature of deities as well as to emphasize the co-existence of pagan and Christian elements, which is typical for the Greek community.
3. Through the rituals Myrivilis attempts to show the reader: a) The integrity, unity of the Greek people's history; b) Close links between the East and the West; c) Close links between Minor Asia Hellenism and the culture of the author's contemporary Lesbos.
4. The rituals described by the writer imply that one can find rescue upon perceiving one's own self, own roots and traditions.
5. Along with the idea of ethnic unity, the rituals in Myrivilis' prose have universal functions as well: Through describing the rituals of his native island, he shows their universal character.
6. The rituals have artistic function. Fiction describes unreal events (which is well expressed through the English word "fiction"). Description of the rituals well-known to the reader leaves the impression of reality, authenticity, and makes the narrative more convincing.

Myrivilis' life and activities are saturated with love for his country. At first, he fought with a weapon in his hands to defend his motherland, his native Lesbos, took part in both Balkan Wars and was even wounded in the struggle for Greece; afterwards he served his country through his highly patriotic prose. In the works considered in the paper, Stratis Myrivilis accentuated description of ancient Greek mythology, rituals and customs – all what forms the foundation for the modern Greek culture and subconsciously determines modern Greek lifestyle. The writer reminds Greeks of the historical and cultural values they have inherited from their forefathers. The splendid way the rituals are described serves to the illustration of the role, importance and function of rituals. His manner of presenting rituals determines the original character of his works and produces a remarkable impact on the reader.

While describing a universal ritual, the writer refers to his native traditions and attaches them the function of uniting ancient and modern Greek mythic-religious ideas.