

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

March 4, 2008

Speakers: Susan Matthias, Andriana Mastor, Katerina Stergiopoulou

Topic: Poets, Translators, and Critics on the Poet, Translator and Critic George Seferis

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Nikki Leger (Columbia), Karen Van Dyck (Columbia), Christos Tsiamis, Elena Tzelepi (Columbia), Liana Theodoratou (NYU), Eleni Papargyriou (Princeton), Alexis Radisoglou (Columbia), Stefanos Tsigrimanis (Columbia), Artemis Schnebel, Fayre Makeig (Columbia), Spyros Ladeas

This meeting of the seminar featured three separate presentations, all related to the work of George Seferis. Andriana Mastor, in a talk entitled “A Different Sort of Nostos in Seferis’s *Logbook III*,” read from her own translations of Seferis and spoke about her methodology for translating these poems. Susan Matthias, in “Sensual, Light-Hearted, Lyrical, Magisterial: Translating Seferis’s Multi-Faceted Prose,” discussed Seferis’s novel *Six Nights on the Acropolis*, as well as her translation of it. Katerina Stergiopoulou, in “Translation in the Manner of Giorgos Seferis,” discussed Seferis’s own translation practice, focusing on his translation of Ezra Pound’s first Canto, itself a translation of Book XI of Homer’s *Odyssey*.

Summary of Presentation (Mastor):

Mastor, who has recently been translating from Seferis’s *Logbook III*, introduced her translations with a brief biographical sketch of Seferis and an overview of the place this particular book occupied in the poet’s personal history. Seferis was born in Asia Minor, near Smyrna, and left at age 14 with his family. In 1922 Smyrna burned, and the places of Seferis’s childhood were lost. He didn’t return to the area until the 1950s, and found little that was familiar from his youth. A few years later, he took a diplomatic post in Cyprus, where he felt connected to the land, which reminded him of his childhood home—he thought of Cyprus in terms of *nostos*, a kind of “homecoming” to an approximation of a home that no longer existed. In that respect, Seferis was interested particularly in the idea of an alternate homeland contained in the myth of Teucros and the founding of Salamis on Cyprus, as an alternate to his homeland of the island Salamis. The poems Mastor read were “Agianapa I,” “Agianapa II,” “Memory I,” and “Details of Cyprus.”

Summary of Discussion:

Q. Can you remind me how you translated “*evale*,” in “Details of Cyprus”? Keeley and Sherrard translate it as “added,” which I think gives too much agency. The carver is a craftsman rather than a painter, he didn’t “add” but “put” the figures on the gourd as he knew them to be.

Mastor: I have “etched,” which leaves it a bit more open.

Q. The poem about the sycamore tree, I just wanted to mention that a young composer put it to music, Ilias Andriopoulos. Seferis had died, so he asked Maro for permission, and she approved.

Mastor: Seferis was very interested in the folk music of Cyprus, and a lot of those rhythms work their way into the poems. The line, “The nightingales will not leave you sleep at Platres,” for instance—I don’t think that exact phrase came out of a folk song, but there are very similar phrases, with nightingales and so on. Here, he’s mixing the folk song of Cyprus with Euripides, of course, which brings things to another level.

Q. Did you translate the Euripides epigraphs or use an existing translation?

Mastor: I used the Loeb translation.

Q. But I guess it makes sense to take an existing translation of the Euripides, since it’s what people are familiar with.

Mastor: And the Loeb is not as literal as I expected it to be.

Q. You mentioned in the beginning of your talk that you first encountered these poems in a bilingual edition, Greek and French. I’m curious about the way in which you are translating between those two languages. Does the fact that you first came to these poems through French help your translation at all? It seems like the more musical poems, the ones that you seem to be attracted to, with rhyme and using the folk song, might be easier to do in French, though very difficult in English. I’m interested in how you might have gotten something from French that helped you in that way.

Mastor: I think it did help me, because even though my Greek wasn’t that great when I came to these poems, I didn’t have any English in my head, I didn’t look at anyone else’s English translations. I didn’t look at the Keeley and Sherrard or the Rex Warner translations until very recently, so I wasn’t working against anything. I am jealous of the French translation, by Christos Papazoglou. The richness of the vowels, the way you can have grammatical rhyme.

Summary of Discussion (Matthias):

*Six Nights on the Acropolis*, Seferis’s only completed novel, is written mostly in the form of a diary. Drafted in late 1920s, and completed in a ten-day “orgasm of writing” in 1954, just after the trip to Cyprus that Andriana Mastor just spoke about, it was not published to 1974, after the poet’s death. The diary-novel as a genre draws on the notion that a diary is not quite art, and often involves a fictional editor, who presents the text as unfinished, not for publication. George Savvides, the actual editor of the Greek novel, says that Seferis’s novel itself was not meant for publication, calling into doubt its status as a finished text; indeed, it has never been accepted as part of the Seferis canon and has not gained the kind of widespread popularity and interest his poetry has attracted. There is a degree of

resistance among the older generation to accepting Seferis as a sexual being, to seeing the sexual or sensual side of the national poet. Writing in the guise of an alter ego, Stratis Thalassinou, gives Seferis a freedom he doesn't have in his own poetic voice. *Six Nights on the Acropolis* is a roman à clef, revolves around Seferis's affair with Loukia Fotopoulou, an affair that no one really talked about until after Maro Seferis's death in 2000. Indeed, Maro is said to have had reservations about the publication of the novel, even though the affair happened ten years before Maro and Seferis met.

Matthias said that one of her primary goals in translating the novel was to give it a second chance to succeed, to give it an "afterlife" (to borrow from Benjamin), which in this case meant making it immediately likeable. That wasn't an easy task, as *Six Nights* is, she said, a narcissistic work of a highly intertextual nature, full of quotes that are often in French. At the time of composition, Seferis was translating Gide's novel *Paludes*, as well as Valery's "An Evening with Monsieur Teste," which was Seferis's first publication in Greek (*Nea Estia* 1928), and references to those texts are prevalent in the novel. She noted that her introduction also tried to "undo the damage" done by Savvides's dismissive note. The translated volume also contains other paratextual material, such as an introduction by Roderick Beaton, Matthias's own notes to the text, as well as excerpts from Seferis's notes and other archival material. Her technique when translating Seferis's prose was to proceed sentence by sentence, translating sense for sense; where necessary, she would pull the sentences apart and reconstruct them to accord with English syntax; she frequently consulted dictionaries, and tried to set down the translation in clear and well-balanced English prose.

After her discussion of these aspects of the novel and her own translation process, Matthias read selected passages from the novel both in Greek and in English.

#### Summary of Discussion (Stergiopoulou):

Stergiopoulou's paper was a critical engagement with Seferis's translations. She focused on his translation of Ezra Pound's first Canto, as a place where the boundary between the two kinds of translation Seferis identified, *metagrafi* (the intralingual translation of texts from ancient to modern Greek) and *antigrafi* (the interlingual translations of texts from other languages), becomes blurred. She began her talk with a quote from Seferis's "Letter to a Foreign Friend," in which the poet discusses his translations of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* as a way not just of expressing the emotion the poem caused in him, but of testing the "resistance" of his language. In a sense, the Greek language is changed or put into question by the process of translation. Seferis's ideas about language were formed through the translations of Valery and others that he did in the 1920s: he came through those translations to feel the pressing need to fix the Greek language through writing, to create a new idiom, combining the old and the new, that he and other Greeks could call their own. Seferis published his translation of a few of Pound's Cantos in *Nea Grammata* in 1939, during his debate with Constantinos Tsatsos about Hellenism. For the first Canto, this involved a back-translation of Homeric fragments, which Pound had translated into English—and, moreover, into Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse—not from the original Greek (with which he was familiar) but from Andreas Divus's Latin translation of it. Homer thus returns home somewhere between the two extremes of *metagrafi* and *antigrafi*. In translating Pound's alliterative verse into Greek, Seferis chose

to keep his verse form. However, while Pound's language is consistently archaizing, Seferis's is staunchly demotic, and often incorporates elements of dialect. Also, though Seferis claims not to have referenced the Homeric original, his translations of Pound often echo Homer's sounds, sometimes even using the same words. One of Seferis's more interesting translation strategies on the lexical level is his frequent use of words with double origin and double meaning, which replicates what some of Pound's archaisms are doing in the original. Seferis thus transposes to the linguistic level the issue of reinterpreting the classics, thus making what would or could be a *metagrafi* an *antigrafi*.

#### Summary of Discussion:

Q. It seems that what informed the language of both writers was an ideological or political approach. Pound consciously shifted way back to antiquity, trying to show a series of idealized states, the Greeks, then Italian princes, then the Chinese. At the time Seferis is translating, language is an extremely politicized issue in Greece, so this seems to be what informed his choice of words: he was, as you say, trying to bolster or even create this demotic language. I remember when I first read Seferis's translations I thought very highly of them, but when I reread them much later I found them affected, and his choice of words very extreme. But at that time it was necessary.

Stergiopoulou: And of course it becomes a question for me: what I read as a demoticism, what strikes me as particularly colloquial as a contemporary reader, might not actually have been at the time.

Q. I think now it sounds even too demotic, given the text that he's working from. But writers at that time felt that if they sympathized with that approach, they had to take a stand. After the 1970s, after Seferis's death, we start feeling much more comfortable with the language, we can pick words from here and there and don't have to be so single-minded in our use of demotic.

Stergiopoulou. I think that's what Seferis was trying to work towards, that kind of mix. He uses a lot of Homeric words, it's a very strategic choice of words, and there's an element of play that comes up, particularly in some of the examples I chose of words with double meanings.

Q. Can you clarify the use of *metagrafi* and *antigrafi*, and how they map onto the categories of inter- and intralingual translation?

Stergiopoulou: *Metagrafi* is intralingual, *antigrafi* is interlingual. But I'm interested in this because it's both of them at the same time. The Song of Songs is the same, Seferis translates from the Greek, but it retains some of the strangeness of the Greek that was somehow Hebraized.

Q. So you're saying some of his most important *antigrafes* are actually *metagrafes*? You were talking about his translation of Pound, which is supposed to be an *antigrafī*, but ends up having a lot of the intralingualness of *metagrafi*. But Pound doesn't have that?

Stergiopoulou: He does, actually, because he's working from the Greek—or, rather, from the Latin translation of the Greek—but drawing on Anglo-Saxon verse to do that in.

Q. How does this all map onto the distinction between foreignizing and domesticating translations?

Stergiopoulou: The reason I think these two terms become each other, in a sense, such that you can't really distinguish between the *antigrafes* and the *metagrafes*, is that his translation strategy seems to be a foreignizing one.

Q. Could it be that *antigrafī* as copy would be considered more of a mirror image with absolute fidelity to the letter of the language, whereas *metagrafi* is a filtering through the translator, which results in a cross-pollination? There is the inherent variance in the linguistic structures involved, so that the freedom comes from two ways, without injuring the substance of what is being said but still shaping the manner. One concerns itself with the particular differences from one language to another, and the other concerns itself with the idiosyncratic differences between people who approach a text want to have the text be as natural as possible

Stergiopoulou: That would seem to be the implication of the terms, but often the *metagrafes* copy the original in a way that is much more obvious than the *antigrafes*. With his translation of the Song of Songs, for instance, Seferis is just grammatically adapting his text, but keeping more or less everything else—which is how his translation manages (or so he claims) to retain so much of the Hebrew aspect of the ancient Greek translation.

Q. Do you think Seferis tried to suppress the English of Pound? Constanze Guthenke has an article where she actually argues that he's trying to suppress the Hebrew of the Songs of Songs, and I wonder what you think of that argument.

Stergiopoulou: I want to go back to that article, because I find the opposite is happening. He claims to have tried to have learned something about the Hebrew, and will occasionally say, This is wrong, from the Hebrew, but it's so beautiful I'll just keep it. I think with the Pound a lot of the English comes through, in the meter and the alliteration; that's what keeps Seferis's translation from becoming folk-songy. He was doing that meter to keep a foreign element, to prevent it from coming back to Greece completely.

Q. Which is an inversion of what Pound does: he has to find a way of connecting the languages, but Seferis has to keep them apart a little bit. *Metagrafi* the thing that connects it immediately, as a kind of transcription, and *antigrafī* is doing the opposite work.

Stergiopoulou: At the same time, it's doing the opposite work in terms of Homer but a similar work in terms of Pound, because he translates the meter and also tries to go word for word—though he changes it sometimes to accord with Homer's text, or at least to make it into a Homeric line.

Q. At the time he was doing these translations, do you think Seferis's text would have been read as something elitist, or as something accessible to the average poetry lover? I'm saying that because in English Pound is considered such an elitist.

Stergiopoulou: The language wouldn't prevent it from being accessible to somebody, but he published in *Nea Grammata*, so I'm not sure who the audience would have been. Certainly very limited.

Q. But there were people who resisted what they saw as the unintelligibility of his own poetry, of course, which were probably more so than his translation.

Q. I'm interested in how all three of you are grappling with the issue of what's hard to translate. Susan, you're talking about Seferis's sexuality, and how your translation can actually offer something the Greek can't. Andriana, with these poems there's the question of Cypriot dialect, and you're also using the French, which lends another multilingual aspect to the situation.

Mastor: It's also nice to hear about the difficulties Seferis encountered in translating English—it makes me feel much better.

Matthias: I've recently been translating some of the essays he wrote in the 1930s, and some of the passages in them are so circumlocutive that it's hard to tell what he's saying. At times I wonder whether he might have been struggling with demotic. He must have been writing *katharevousa* in his diplomatic work, so might demotic not have been the language he was used to?

Q. You said it was difficult for the Greeks to accept the sexuality in this book, but he's also in the same generation as Elytis and Embeirikos, who are also thought of as national poets and yet people were able to accept the eroticism in their work. What do you see as the difference?

Matthias: Perhaps because in a sense it's so real. You read this and think of Seferis as a young man, brooding over this affair.

Mastor: I also want to note that *Logbook III* is actually a very sensual book.

Q. The poem you read about the gourd, "Details of Cyprus," that one stanza has a very traditionalist tone, because of the importance of the gourd for Cypriot folk art. But he also uses the word *ploumizo*, which is the verb for decorating the bride, putting money on the bride. It's a long and somewhat sexual stanza, which moves from the head of the gourd to the bottom, where we find a series of corrupt people. People tend to read this

poem in a hagiographic, traditionalizing way, but you're right that this collection is the most sensual and has a sexuality about it, which needs to be taken seriously. The other poem with the oils is a poem about servility and prostitution, which becomes a metaphor for Cyprus. But in his diaries there are a number of times when he talks about brothels and so on.

Mastor: And as you say, even when it's not outwardly sexual, he's using all of the senses, putting priority on touch, feeling with your hands, making your way by touching things.

Q: I wanted to ask, since the bulk of your recent translation work was on Ritsos, how you compare the experience of translating the two.

Mastor: With the Ritsos I was working on a long dramatic poem, "Helen." I feel more of an affinity toward the Ritsos, the strangeness and the shocking images he uses are very compelling. But since that was a dramatic monologue it was important to keep the story, weaving it through but not clarifying it too much. I was having a hard time with Seferis. He's not always completely clear, and when you're translation you do have to choose something, at some point. He's also pulling in all sorts of different traditions, and the tone is particularly hard, since it's so hard to make different registers work in English.

Q. What's different about Ritsos's ambiguity and Seferis's?

Mastor: Well, again, this particular text by Ritsos was a dramatic monologue, so while it's poetic it's also heading a bit more towards the prosy, so that's a little easier to translate. Seferis is being a little bit more elliptical, at least in these works.

Q. Ritsos is always easier in English, though maybe Seferis is easier in French.

Mastor: That seems to be the case, though I can't tell exactly why. In "Helen," Ritsos is using this long line so I have leeway to make it lyrical, but if Seferis is counting syllables it's harder for me to stuff whatever meaning I'm dealing with into the metrical structure in English.

Q. Could we say that Ritsos tends to be *glafiros*, while Seferis has a kind of inward turn, a way of bringing together the cerebral and the emotional, making the cerebral convincingly emotional? That seems to me the primary difference, that Seferis is basically an introvert, while Ritsos is an extrovert.

Mastor: That's a good way of putting it. And sometimes Seferis does have this deceptive simplicity. "*Pou einai i alitheia*"—it works in Greek but it just doesn't in English, there's something transformative going on, and if you're not careful you can just lose that.

Q. Though with Ritsos there is a wide range of different forms that he uses. "*Epitafios*," for instance, is completely different, whereas Seferis's *oeuvre* is a bit more unified.

Q. Though after tonight I don't think so.

Q. It's an illusion that Ritsos is easier in any way. He is extremely difficult to translate. I'm not sure there is any such thing as an "easier" translation of poetry.

Q. But I think it works, in English translations it works. When I read Seferis it never makes me think about the Greek, whereas if I read Ritsos in translation it's building itself brick by brick, object by object, in a way that works in English.

Q. Is it true that the translator has to have an affinity for the poet being translated? That the poet is choosing to translate the poet?

Q. Well, that's one model of translation. There's another one, in which the translator is given a text and has to develop an affinity, in a sense. It's the distinction people draw between the model of the poet-translator and the professional translator. It's not to denigrate either one, they're just two modes of operating.

Q. It's interesting that we have three women here; it raises the issue of women translating Seferis, particularly with the novel.

Matthias: Yes, because if you're a woman reading *Six Nights*, and a feminist to boot, you could take great offense at this.