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## **IMAGES OF SCULPTURES IN THE POETRY OF GIORGIS MANOUSAKIS**

**SUMMARY:** The imagery of fragmentary sculptures, statues and stones appears often in Modern Greek Poetry in connection with the question of Modern Greeks' relation to ancient Greek past and legacy. Many famous poets such as the first Nobel Prize winner in literature, George Seferis (1900-1971), as well as Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990) frequently use sculptural imagery in order to allude to, among other things, though in different approaches, the classical past and its existence in modern conscience as a part of cultural identity. In the present paper we focus on some selected poems by a well-known Cretan poet Giorgis Manousakis (1933-2008) from his collection "Broken Sculptures and Bitter Plants" (*Σπασμένα αγάλματα και πικροβότανα*, 2005), trying to shed some light on his very peculiar usage of sculpture imagery in comparison with the earlier Greek poets. We attempt to categorize Manousakis' metaphors and allusions regarding the symbolism of sculptures in correlation with existential motives of his poetry and the poet's attitude to the classical legacy.

**KEYWORDS:** Modern Greek literature, Modern Greek poetry, reception of Antiquity, sculptures, stones, George Seferis, Yannis Ritsos, Giorgis Manousakis

The third poem of the most famous Seferis' composition "Mythis-torema", full of reminiscences of classical past and mythical allusions, starts with a powerful picture of a marble head in the hands of a person for whom it turns out to be an unbearable burden that "exhausts [the] elbows". The piece of stone which basically belongs to a museum has

unexpectedly intruded into a private space – a bedroom – and turned a dream into a nightmare (Segal 1989: 293). The marble fragmentary head used in Seferis' poem as a symbolized memory, explicitly of ancient tradition – here being rather a source of embarrassment – is strongly connected with the concept of artistic potency struggling with a burden of the past (Giannakopoulou 2002: 45-49). Thus, the motto to the poem, taken directly from Aeschylus' "Libation Bearers, 491", with words of Orestes speaking at Agamemnon's tomb, naturally places Seferis' poem in the context of the searching for continuity of Greek tradition (Rexine 1979: 31-32)<sup>1</sup>. However, the dialogue with the classical past, manifesting itself in a marble form, turns out to be completely futile and pointless, which is confirmed by the last lines of the poem where the speaker has an impression that his hands are "mutilated" (ακρωτηριασμένα)<sup>2</sup>.

Undoubtedly, the whole cycle "Mithistorema" explores the limits of collected memory searching for an unified view of past and present (Klironomos 2002: 226). However, such an interpretation does not always seem to be the only possible one and – what is often neglected – there is always a personal level of Seferis's poetry that we must not forget, in which the poet struggles with his poetic creativity feeling overwhelmed by a burden left by his ancient predecessors (Segal 1989: 294). Nevertheless, the broken sculptures such as in "Mithistorema 3" and generally the stones haunt the poet's imagination in many other poems where he strives to find a link between the mythical past and the tragic present<sup>3</sup>.

In his most famous poem "King of Asini" this futile searching seems to acquire a new dimension. The mythical king of Asine (mentioned only once by Homer in his catalogue of the ships, Hom. *Il.* 2, 560)

<sup>1</sup> Klironomos sees in the epigraph to the poem a sort of a didactic example for the modern age, especially regarding the tragic consequences of *hubris*. Klironomos 2002: 221.

<sup>2</sup> For Giannakopoulou this might be an adaptation of the myth of Medousa in a Freudian style. Namely, the head that still possesses the power of turning into stone. Giannakopoulou 2002: 49. For Segal in turn it is awareness of the speaker that he has himself become a mutilated fragment of the past. Segal 1989: 295.

<sup>3</sup> In his poems, Seferis petrifies different things: the summer ("A word for summer") or the human body ("The Cistern"). Beaton 1991: 47.

searched by the poet in the Mycenaean archaeological site of modern Asini near Tolo in the Peloponnese, holds out a slight hope of a contact with the past in a poignant picture of a bat flying away from a cave and the speaker's confession: *If only that be the king of Asini/ that we've been searching for so carefully on this acropolis/ sometimes touching with our fingers his touch upon the stones* (transl. by E. Keely and Ph. Sherrard).

A significantly different approach to stones and sculptures can be traced in poetry of Yannis Ritsos, the poet belonging to the same so-called "generation of the thirties" as George Seferis. The period between 1957 and 1969 when he creates his best poems is marked by two meaningful factors: the earlier experience of exile (1949-1953) while he was a political prisoner during the civil war and his frequent travels throughout Greece in the years 1954-1966 and his captivation by Samos (Giannakopoulou 2002: 51-52). The poems of that time, divided into two categories: the short and the very long compositions, are the ones thanks to which Ritsos gained his worldwide reputation (Beaton 2004: 219-220).

The stones in Ritsos' poems appear in a completely different context in comparison with their somehow overwhelming presence in Seferis. Described often as shining or even soaked with light, they become just an integral component of human life in the Greek countryside, a seemingly insignificant element placed in its natural environment. Moreover, even though they are inorganic, in Ritsos' poems they transform into apparently organic matter (Giannakopoulou 2002: 53): *Stones become drenched with light and memory./ Someone sets a stone for a pillow./ Another, before swimming, leaves his clothes under a stone/ so that the wind won't take them. Another uses a stone for a stool* (Stones, tr. K. Friar).

The stones and sculpture imagery and their coexistence with the present vividly reveals itself in the poem "Perspective" (Προοπτική). Ritsos sketches here a picture of multilayered tradition of Modern Greece, where every single house is built directly on another one and all strata are *supported on the heads of upright armless statues* (tr. K. Friar). What is yet the most important in this poem, it is not only a conviction that the fragmented statues naturally belong to the Greek

landscape being an integral part of it, but that they also constitute the fundament of the world. Thus, contrary to Seferis' frustration caused by the impossibility of disposing of the marbles, Ritsos places them as a significant part of day-to-day reality. The last line of the poem in a somehow surrealistic way makes the contact between the inhabitants of Greek land and the ancient statues more closer, one could even say, tangible: *a statue, now and then, leans its hand lightly on your shoulder* (Hom. tr. K. Friar)<sup>4</sup>.

The sculpture and stone imagery appears to be completely different and highly astonishing in comparison with the above-mentioned poets in the poetry of Giorgis Manousakis (1933-2008), born in Crete, belonging to the so-called "second postwar generation" (Argyriou 2007: 217). The poet, novelist, essay writer and philologist, in 1977 was awarded the Kazantzakis Prize and the State Prize in travel writings for his "Travelogue of Sfakia" (Οδοιπορικό των Σφακιών) in 1981<sup>5</sup>. His exceptionally unique and deeply existential poetry translated into many languages and known abroad, paradoxically is very rarely mentioned in monographs aimed at presentation of the whole of Modern Greek literature<sup>6</sup>. Highly admired in his native Crete, among others as the one that always placed his birthplace Chania as "the navel of the world" (Kouvaras 2008), Manousakis' poetry is commented and analyzed rather seldom, not to say, almost at all<sup>7</sup>. One of the most famous

<sup>4</sup> Giannakopoulou's remark that "statues are not deceitful, but there seems to be a real, impulsive comradeship" (Giannakopoulou 2002: 58), seems to us a little exaggerated and slightly out of context. A "touchable" presence of statues is exactly in the same metaphorical space as in the abovementioned poem "Stones". They are just components of the Greek landscape, parts of the immediate surroundings.

<sup>5</sup> He also published several collections of poetry, among others: "Monologues" (Μονόλογοι, 1967), "The body of silence" (Το σώμα της σιωπής, 1970), "Triglyph" (Τρίγλυφο, 1976), "Embalming shop of birds" (Ταριχευτήριο πουλιών, 1978), "Breathing places" (Χώροι αναπνοής, 1988) "Human beings and shadows" (Ανθρώποι και σκιές, 1995), "On the promontories of existence" (Στ' ακρωτήρια της ύπαρξης, 2003), "Broken Sculptures and Bitter Plants" (Σπασμένα αγάλματα και πικροβότανα, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, he is completely absent in Beaton 2004 or in Vitti 1994. Only Argyriou devotes some pages to Manousakis (Argyriou 2007: 373-377).

<sup>7</sup> There are of course significant exceptions. Two well-known periodicals, Nea Estia and Palimpiston devoted whole issues to Manousakis' poetry: Νέα Εστία, τόμος 165, τχ. 1820, Μάρτιος 2009; Παλίμπυστον, Εξαμηνιαία έκδοση της Βικελαίας Δημοτικής Βιβλιοθήκης, Ηράκλειον Κρήτης, τχ. 25, Φθινόπωρο 2010.

Modern Greek poets, Athenian Titos Patrikios (born in 1928) in an essay devoted to Manousakis admits to his regret that he knows so little about Chaniotis' poetry and that this literature is wrongly regarded as provincial (Patrikios 1996: 239-244).

Thus, our attempt to show the presence of the sculpture imagery in his poems, we do hope will contribute to better knowledge of Manousakis' poetry that, in our opinion, deserves utmost attention.

In the poem "Ancient Poetesses" (Αρχαίες ποιήτριες), belonging to the cycle «Broken Sculptures and Bitter Plants» Manousakis struggles with the questions of memory regarding the ancient legacy and the concept of destiny – *moira* (μοίρα). The image emerging from the first part of the poem delineates a broad perspective of forgetfulness juxtaposed with the ancient concept of *Okeanos* – in Homeric poems being a border river circulating the known universe (*Il.* 18, 399-400). Here, it is a vast ocean of forgetfulness in which the only sort of landmarks are names of ancient poetesses whose poetry has survived only in scattered fragments<sup>8</sup>. Thus, the poet seems to create a sort of a link to the Greek tradition which appears to be a collection of, on the one hand, single verses of defragmented poems<sup>9</sup>, on the other hand – of the visible signs of its well-known splendour, namely the statues and sculptures.

The person speaking in the poem strives to create a connection with the forgotten poetry, yet the only thing he faces is a headless statue standing somewhere in the museum's court (ένα ακέφαλο άγαλμα/στην αυλή του μουσείου). The broken statue, contrary to its haunting appearance in Seferis' *Mithistorima* 3 and its natural coexistence with the Hellenic landscape in Ritsos' poems, in Manousakis' verses

<sup>8</sup> These fragments are: Sappho, XXX, Voigt; an anonymous poem from the Greek Anthology, Vol. 2, book 7, chapter 490; Erinna's from Mytilene epigram no. 399. It is usual for Modern Greek poets to cite original fragments from ancient Greek poetry that, in most cases, constitute an integral part of the poems. If we would like to translate a poem with such a fragment, it would be a real challenge to find a satisfactory equivalent. Namely, if the "ancient part" should be archaized or if the translator should use an existing translation, or just translate it like the rest of the poem, making no difference regarding its style.

<sup>9</sup> It is definitely a trace of the reflection on nineteenth and twentieth century Hellenism that was based indeed on the reading and deciphering of fragments, however aiming at the holistic exegesis of ancient texts. Klironomos 2002: 223.

manifests itself as a conventional object of a museum, featureless and meaningless.

Therefore, the ancient past appears to be devoid of a particular shape, but what is yet more important, this past is separated from the context, which is underlined by the well-known image of column capitals thrown carelessly into the grass (ένα ιωνικό κιονόκρανο/ γεμμένο στη χλόη), a familiar scenery in almost every museum in Greece. The person is undoubtedly aware of the feeling of a specific distance towards the classical tradition, contrary to the West Europeans for whom it might be rather a reason of admiration and pride<sup>10</sup>.

Not being able to find a connection with the classical past, he turns his attention to the visible but, it seems, mythologized landscape, rhetorically as well as ironically asking if the spirit of the fragmented poems mentioned above could have been preserved in the poppy fields (ο κάμπος με τις παπαρούνες) – the place symbolically hinting at the ancient Greek mythology where poppies were used in an eschatological context, as offerings to the dead<sup>11</sup>.

The last part of the poem reflects the ancient concept of destiny (*moira*), a powerful force from which even the gods could not have escaped, in a rhetorical question: *Who will oppose Moira?* (Ποιος θα σταθεί άντικρυ στη Μοίρα;). The last lines seem to turn into a sort of confession of the aging poet who faces his own texts. The citation of a fragment of an unknown ancient poet in the original: Μουσάων ὀλίγη τις ἀηδονίς (...) <sup>12</sup>, may suggest that the key concept of the poem is his own art of poetic creation.

The conclusion is expressed by means of an appealing image alluding once more to the forgotten poetesses of *the drops of speech flying forever in light over the dust of the bodies* (οι ρανίδες του λόγου σας/

<sup>10</sup> Manousakis follows the same path in treating the ancient Greek legacy as George Seferis in his above-mentioned famous collection “Mythistorema”, where the classical past is regarded as a burden.

<sup>11</sup> Besides, according to Theocritus (*Idyll* vii.157), Demeter was regarded earlier as a poppy goddess. She is often depicted seated on a throne, with poppies in her hand.

<sup>12</sup> *Greek Anthology*, Vol. 2, book 7, chapter 41-42. The phrase “the nightingale of the Muses” appears in connection with Palamedes killed by the Greek at Troy in a fragment from an Eurypides’ unperformed tragedy: πάνσοφον (...) ἀηδόνα Μουσᾶν (all-wise nightingale of the Muses).

θα αιωρούνται για πάντα στο φως' πάνω απ' την κόνιν των σωμάτων)<sup>13</sup>. Thus it is poetry, even in scattered and apparently incomprehensible form, the only thing not wholly susceptible to decay.

Ancient sculptures as objects in museums, placed there as if out of their natural context and as a consequence seemingly lifeless, appear in two poems entitled together as “Two variations on the same theme” (Δυο παραλλαγές στο ίδιο θέμα).

The first of them, *Kore* (Κόρη) alludes to the type of ancient Greek sculptures from the archaic period representing young female figures with a characteristic, restrained ironic “archaic smile”. The person speaking here, analogously to the previous poem, seeks to find a link to experience the ancient heritage while contemplating a piece of art in museum. In *Kore* his reflections, stimulated by the view of an ancient statue, circle around the question of anonymous ancient sculptors and their artistry that after so many centuries still impresses and inspires. The subsequent rhetorical questions “what hands...” (ποια χέρια) emphasize the bewilderment he feels facing such an aesthetic masterpiece. The archaic statue appears to be a timeless object accompanying human beings through centuries, the object not affected by the passing of time, standing proudly upright without any wrinkles (ορθή κι αρυτίδωτη). Yet, as it was in the previous poem, here Manousakis intertwines his narration with the mention of the concept of destiny (*moira*) as well as of the impermanence and fragility of human life, asking the statue: *Have you ever been dazzled/ by the destiny of us – ephemeral beings...?* (Θάμπωσαν άραγε ποτέ τα μάτια σου/ απ' τη μοίρα εμάς των εφήμερων;). Simultaneously, he keeps asking rhetorically, looking at the eyes of the statue and wondering what could be hidden behind *the unfading flowering smile* (το χαμόγελο που αμάραντο ανθίζει). However, he realizes that the mystery is insoluble and that he has been waiting in vain to hear the words the unknown ancient artist must have whispered into the statue's ears before he pushed it *with a subtle touch into the prow of time* (με κίνηση απαλή στην πλώρη του καιρού).

<sup>13</sup> The image of dust or ashes as a visible sign of passing away is present also in other poems of Manousakis, for instance “Dust I” (Η σκόνη I) and “Dust II” (Η σκόνη II), or “In Expectation” (Εν αναμονή).

The same futile searching of any tangible as well as audible contact with the ancient past permeates the whole poem entitled “A blind man in the museum” (Ένας τυφλός στο μουσείο)<sup>14</sup>. In this case we are dealing with a definite place, there is a mention above the poem that it was written in the summer of 1989 in a sculpture gallery in Munich. The poem is based on the concept of a blind man who touches the ancient sculpture of – according to the epigraph below it – “an unknown god or hero”. The blind man’s act of touching the surface of the statue is depicted as a sort of hands’ odyssey. Step by step he is groping for something that could make him closer to the real experience of this piece of ancient craftsmanship. Touching, as if with “erotic pleading” (μια ικεσία ερωτική), the lips of the statue, he is waiting aimlessly so that he could hear “a whisper from the abyss of time” (απ’ το βυθό του χρόνου έναν ψίθυρο).

The intensiveness of the movements of the blind man, who besides is characterized somewhat familiarly, if we take into account the previous poems, as an ephemeral being, (εφήμερος) is confronted with the perfectness and timeless existence of a *motionless, unmoved marble shape* (ακίνητη, ασυγκίνητη η μαρμάρινη μορφή)<sup>15</sup>.

The three cited poems from the collection “Broken Sculptures and Bitter Plants” clearly show that Manousakis is searching through the ancient statues and sculptures a sort of a bond between the present and the past. His attempts are fruitless because, as it has been already stated, those ancient masterpieces are beyond our comprehension and seem to belong rather to the world of ideas, timeless and not susceptible to decay, being silent witnesses to human efforts. However, in this sense Manousakis stands apart from his Modern Greek predecessors for whom the ancient legacy, though overwhelming, constitutes

<sup>14</sup> The motif of blindness appears already in Manousakis’ first collection, “Monologues” (Μονόλογοι) published in 1967, in the poem “A blind man” (Ο τυφλός), written in the form of a monologue. A blind man struggles to shape his world but the only matter he possesses is clay from which he is able to create only black statues (τα μαύρα αγάλματα).

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, in the same early collection, in the poem entitled “Museums” (Μουσεία), Manousakis expresses deep aversion towards museums, the statues and *happy indifference* (ευτυχισμένη αδιαφορία) of their gaze as he realizes his existence is just temporary (πρόσκαιρος) in contrast to their *eternity* (αιωνιότητα).



an integral part of tradition and a natural element of Greek landscape. For the Cretan poet the statues and sculptures are just objects placed in museums, as if they were out of their natural context and in this way deprived of their true meaning.

The sculpture and statue imagery haunted Manousakis' imagination quite often also in his earlier collections in many different contexts and ways, strictly connected with the existential dimension of his profound poetry<sup>16</sup>. The complexity of the subject matter needs thorough research taking into account the whole of his poetry which is beyond the scope of this paper. The issue of the reception of antiquity in Manousakis' poetry is still open to research because, as it turns out, his work even in comparison with other Modern Greek poets is unique and not easily defined.

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, we could cite a fragment of the poem "Encounter" (Συνάντηση), from the collection "On the promontories of existence" (Στ' ακρωτήρια της ύπαρξης, 2003), in which the motif of a statue appears in reference to a dead friend, the memory of which comes back as the person speaking in the poem visits a cemetery and finds him as a "dusty statue, blind and deaf" (τεφρό άγαλμα εκείνος τυφλό και βουβό). Another example from the same collection is the poem "A Dream" (Ενύπνιον) in which the poet apparently alludes to the well-known Seferis' poem we mentioned above, with the motif of a marble head which becomes a burden in the hands of the person speaking. In Manousakis' poem, it is not a head of a statue, as it was in Seferis' case, but the person speaking leans his head against a "semi-buried Doric column capital" (Κοιμήθηκα με το κεφάλι/ ακουμπισμένο στο μισοθαμμένο/ δωρικό κιονόκρανο)).

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