

Review Essays

ANDONIS DECAVALLES

Zissimos Lorenzatos, *The Lost Center and Other Essays in Greek Poetry*, Translated by Kay Cicellis. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1980, pp. 194.

Five essays by Zissimos Lorentzatos, one of Greece's most outstanding essayists and critics, in the masterful English translation of the novelist Kay Cicellis, were recently published by Princeton University Press under the title *The Lost Center and Other Essays in Greek Poetry*. This title fails to mention Dionysios Solomos, the national poet and founder of Modern Greek poetry, the consideration of whose work, value and importance lends these essays their unity. As the dates of these essays indicate, ranging from 1945 to 1972 and so covering almost three full post-war decades, long and insistent was their author's concern, his examination and consideration of Solomos' poetic accomplishment, more particularly his poetic theory and his ideology, to eventually serve him as a prism through which to view, and as a touchstone by which to judge the crisis in Modern Greek poetry and intellect as that reflects the current spiritual decline and crisis in the Western World. Solomos, Lorentzatos believes, should have served as the lasting esthetic, ideological, and spiritual foundation on which Modern Greek poetry should have built its development, which it didn't. It is his conviction that Solomos can still serve as its corrective, its remedy.

In his admiration of Solomos to the point of unreserved worship, Lorentzatos is not alone among Greek thinkers and writers whose deep and exclusive reverence for the poet surpasses by far the general respect and affection he has enjoyed in his country. A marvelous coincidence was the fact that the nation's rebirth from its ashes, from its four centuries of slavery under its Ottoman ruler, concurred with its spiritual, its poetic and intellectual rebirth in the figure of Solomos whose *Hymn to Freedom* voiced superbly the heroic battle for that rebirth and its opening stanzas became Greece's national anthem. Of decisive intellectual significance was the fact that Solomos, in being essentially the first poet of genius to choose the people's living *demotic*, versus the artificial *purist* of the ancient-minded, as the language in which to write his verse, he established that language as the nation's literary own.

There is, however, far more than these factors embodied in Solomos' figure and accomplishment which make him for Lorentzatos the still unsurpassed poetic accomplisher, the true voice of the nation's spirit and conscience, in fact the designer of its intellectual orientation, aspirations and goals. With much regret does Lorentzatos delineate the sad results out of the deviation from Solomos' code as a deviation from the uniqueness of the Greek cultural tradition and conscience themselves, a deviation much due to the unfavorable circumstances. Emerging from long extinction, Greece was too small and weak to resist succumbing to the power and influence of the Western World. The nation's fate depended and was shaped by Western views and interests. Its liberation was to some extent indebted to the classically inspired romantic Philhellenism.

Of course, of the Western impact on Greece there were long precedents. Yet it is particularly since the early part of the Nineteenth Century that the Greek intellect has been the reflector and considerably the imitator of the Western, and, consequently, of the latter's decline and spiritual crisis that reached its apex in our days.

It was natural that, on its rebirth, Greece turned anxiously in search of its national and cultural identity, a search as attested by the work of everyone of its major poets. Much material to that search was provided by the people's customs, lore and songs as reflected in the so-called *ethographic* writing of the last and part of this century. Yet that search did not stay unaffected by a disorienting and harmful, a dividing challenge, that of the West's wishing the modern Greeks to prove themselves the descendants of their illustrious ancient ancestors. That was the spirit of classical romanticism gladly fostered by the Greek «purist» intelligentsia, although it did not leave unaffected the demoticists as well. That mentality's wish and fallacy was to ignore the two Byzantine-Christian millenia of which modern Greece was culturally the outcome. Hence the detrimental split, not limiting itself to the matter of the language only, and hence the subjugation to the Western «disease».

As to that disease itself, it was, according to Lorentzatos, «already at an advanced stage [in the West] before it actually began to trouble the patient» (p. 3), a «dehumanization» wrought by long commitment to Humanism and Science, and the «neglect to nourish the soul» (p. 4). Ethics declined and so did the «sense of moderation» and «the professional 'honesty' which an artist needs to make his work 'valid *sub specie aeternitatis*'» (p. 6). Greece itself, in such a development,

had its own additional problem with its peculiar individuality. In us, Lorentzatos states, «are merged the fierce local roots of the Greek and the Jew's knowledge of the diaspora» where we happen to be «the suitors of time, and the outcasts of space» (p. 8).

Uniquely contrasting the several disparities, there stands the figure of Solomos, whose case, however, has its own peculiar strangeness.

Solomos' work poses a problem for which I can find no parallel in any other literature. It is written half in Italian and half in Greek; and the Greek half is glaringly mutilated, unfinished, fragmented. Why? We are mainly concerned here with his Greek writings naturally; they are by far the more interesting. Strange! His Italian was incomparably better than his Greek; yet the poems he wrote in the language of Dante never go beyond the limits of the most banal academism. There is still another group of writings—no more than a few pages—where he uses a language of his own invention, which was probably the language in which he did his thinking: a mixture of Greek and Italian (p. 9).

Strangeness, as to language at least, has not been infrequent in Modern Greek poetry, if we are to think of Calvos and Cavafy, two other outstanding and highly remarkable 'strangers' to the language and its established tradition. They both invented, devised, made their own unprecedented and inimitable poetic language that was to stay as a haunting landmark.

Solomos was brought up bilingual and had his studies in Italy where he stayed for ten years. There he wrote his early verse in Italian and he continued doing so even when he returned to his native Zante. Then he took the decision, urged by his Greek conscience, the great experience that his nation going through, and more particularly by the instigation and help of the statesman and historian Spyridon Trikoupis, to write in Greek, not the «written Greek» which he ignored but the «spoken Greek» of which he became a life-long learner though never a full master. Almost the only «literary» precedents he had in the demotic were the folksongs that he kept collecting and studying in his leisurely manner. Italian remained still the language that was natural to him, which he used mostly in his speaking, thinking, correspondence and note-taking. In Greek he was an experimenter. As his poetic aspirations kept rising together with his perfectionism, there

rose a desperate struggle in his trying to make his limited Greek meet the need of his aspirations, his greater visions. Eventually, near the end of his life, he gave it up to revert to his Italian writing. It is of his desperate struggle that we have the remnants, the fragments where his poetic greatness lies, the superb quality in the Third Draft of his *Free Besieged* together with his prose statements in both Greek and Italian as to the standards, principles and aspirations of his poetics and his poetic projects.

Several have been the reasons attributed to his failure of fully accomplishing those projects. Was it the disheartening litigation he had with his half brother and mother as to the paternal property? Was it the inadequacy of the demotic language itself, in its first ambitious literary use, to meet the rising demands of the poet's later visions? Was it the poet's own inadequate mastery of that language; or was it in fact Solomos' own inadequacy as a poet extraordinarily gifted for the shorter lyrical poem yet unable to bridge the huge gulf between the heights of his poetic theory and vision and their practical implementation, between the greatness of his visions and their poetic embodiment? Or, indeed, was it his leisurely nature, his «laziness»?

Solomos' capacity and value of accomplishment, Lorentzatos does not feel inclined to question or doubt. Solomos, he writes, used «a language of his own invention to provide the still unsurpassed models of our poetry... No one has come closer than Solomos to the true spirit of the modern Greek language in poetry... He set before posterity, once and for all, the complete problem of poetic expression» which was his lifelong «single concern» (pp. 12-16). It was a tormenting concern, a concern for form, in which he saw «something which exceeded the limits of his art and acceded to a philosophy, or rather to a mystic restoration of form that came very near to the conception of Plato of Goethe (in his botanical studies)» (p. 10). Vaguely recalling Schiller, he summed up the problem in his statement: «*E la forma sia l'abito del vero senso profondo d'ogni cosa*» (And let the form be the garment of the true, deep meaning of each thing). This «*forma*», Lorentzatos adds, «tortured him, in the political sense, till the end of his life» (p. 11). And if there is one notion in Solomos that has utmost appeal to the prevalently theoretical mind of Lorentzatos, it is that notion, of form, as being itself the essence, which inspires much of the argument, at least in the earlier essays. «With Solomos», he believes, «the problem of *artistic* expression enters our *cultural* life, as the problem of *independence* entered our national life, and its predominance remains un-

questionable to this day: artists are still made or broken by it» (p. 16. The underlinings are mine). One can hardly think of any other literature of which the artistic have been so closely associated with the national, cultural, political causes. It is on the basis of that association that the modern Greeks insist on judging their literature. Indeed, it is hardly possible to dissociate Solomos' artistic cause in particular from the national one in its shaping the new nation's conscience and its intellectual-cultural potentials and aspirations.

Solomos appeared at a highly critical moment, not only as far as the Greek reality is concerned but also in terms of the European circumstance altogether. The year 1800, «this particular moment in history was unquestionably great, marking the zenith of a culture, in which the different elements were poised in a blessed balance reflected in a rare creative wisdom» of which Lorentzatos sees Solomos as the «epitome» (p. 19) in his having assimilated the cream of what Europe had to offer. Interesting it is to contrast this view with what Popylas, Solomos' close friend and first biographer, critic and publisher, wrote of Solomos' withdrawal and loneliness in his later-Corfu period as due to:

the anti-poetic spirit of our century, which Schiller summed up in his saying that: «The course of events has driven the spirit of the time in a road in which there is danger that it may increasingly move away from the Art of the Ideal. That Ideal's law is to leave reality behind and to rise with modest temerity there where Necessity does not reign; for Art is a daughter of Freedom and submits herself to the necessity of the Spirit, not the violence of Matter. Yet it is Necessity that rules nowadays and drags shackled the declined humanity to its tyrannical yoke. Profit is the great idol of the time, which all the forces hurry to serve and all the minds to adore... Even the inquisitive philosophic mind grasps one realm of Imagination after another, and the limits of Art grow barrower the more science expands its own». (Dionysiou Solomou, *Apanta*, Tomos Protos, *Piimata*, edited by Linos Politis, Ikaros, 1979, p. 29).

Certainly no real discrepancy exists between the two apparently conflicting views, if we are to consider that greatness in thought and art has almost always been accomplished when the greatness of a certain

time is already undermined by its decline; its accomplishment springs from that awareness. Later on Lorentzatos will abide extensively on the decline itself when it becomes the established reality.

Lorentzatos' consideration of Solomos' verse is mostly limited to its technical and grammatical aspects: its language, metrics, prosody and musical laws. It is more its theoretical foundations, its esthetics and poetics, deemed as of the essence, that become our critic's primary focus. There is where an exceptionally wide, in-depth familiarity with European intellectual adventure, its schools and movements, its authors and works, its philosophical orientations since the ancient days, enriches with parenthetical and comparative references and associations the interpretation of Solomos' theoretical pronouncements, especially regarding the accomplishment of Form as Poetry's supreme objective, in Valéry's statement, «la limite de la fonction de l'ésprit».

Solomos' advice that the artist should «apply to mental form the history of the plant» is deemed as «testifying» to our poet's «relationship with Goethe» in a morphology as drawn from this latter's *Die Metamorphosen der Pflanzen*. What distinguishes the poet as a poet requires no less than defining the undefinable, what Lorentzatos calls a «virtue» initially existing in him, and what Solomos himself, in his *The Woman of Zakynthos*, does not go beyond calling «a certain something», and elsewhere, as «an overflowing of the soul» which «creates the harmony of a line». With this existing, «the difficulty a writer has to face is not that he must employ imagination and passion, but that he must subject these two things, aided by time and toil, to the meaning of art». Much is the excitement that Lorentzatos draws from this statement for what he reads in it as an attack on «inspiration» and the «Muse theory» behind it in its long practice, until it was finally challenged and denied in the nineteenth century by Gautier, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé, and later on by Valéry, Eliot, Joyce and Pound, the «conscious artists». No place here to contrast Dostoevsky's view of Consciousness in his *Notes from the Underground*. Much argument follows against the «mistaken» notion of the poet as a «divinely inspired puppet» (a notion, he believes, that the poets themselves did not share) in favor of «sheer hard work, of clear thinking, sensibility, will power, observation, knowledge, wisdom, in the effort to approach perfection in the art of writing» (p. 37).

It is his modern awareness that Solomos reveals to Lorentzatos. The questioning of the value of inspiration leads our critic's argument

to doubting further Surrealism as a «method of art», deeming it as a «unique regression back to the old Muse theory» (p. 42). On the same foundation, that of the need of consciousness, he calls «fortuitous» the literary merit of the work of the «mystics and other 'inspired' men», and posits the belief that «when a man *consciously* [my underlining] has recourse to mysticism or religion, it is the result of careful logic» (p. 41).

We are possibly dealing with subtleties in an area of no clear borderlines where any excess in emphasis might result into partiality or even distortion at the expense of truth. Rather than rejecting «inspiration», Solomos wishes the *eventual subjection* of «inspiration and passion» to the mastery of a conscious art, and this is understandable and expected. Inspiration should not negate art, nor should art negate inspiration. They are not incompatibles but cooperative forces, each with its valuable function, each with the proper role in the alchemy of creation and the accomplishment of form. As commonplace as this may sound, poets, at least since Homer, have worried vocally or silently as to the kindness of the Muse towards them, including even Mallarmé in his facing that white sheet of paper. Divine visitation or initial spark or what springs from Solomos' «certain something», that «overflowing of the soul», no matter how you imagine or define it, has been there to «start» you, but not without a claim upon your toil to master its offering. In fact, may it not be the spiritual essence of which the absence and necessity Lorentzatos himself will later stress in his discussing the phenomenology of the Lost Center? Romantically «inspired» Keats spent endless sleepless nights to fit consciously the Muse's gift into the perfect form of his Art, to mention just one instance. As for Surrealism, hasn't Elytis, among others, with his unswerving commitment to it as a liberating concept and force, managed through the undeniable consciousness of his art to discipline the impulsive and rich effusions of the unconscious to the lovely accomplishments of his poetry, thus transcending that movement's initial orthodoxy of mechanical recording?

Lorentzatos also considers the recourse to mysticism and religion to be «the result of careful logic», yet isn't this, at least apparently, contradicted by his stating elsewhere that «logic itself has always prevented us from attaining such a knowledge» (p. 40), the «empirical» knowledge in the works of art? Is John's Apocalypse a logical recourse to religion, to mention a characteristic instance, and is it artistically valueless if it depends considerably on a divine visitation or the explo-

sion of a dream? Is Coleridge's «Kubla Khan», whatever its value, a product of its creator's conscious logic? How does Lorentzatos' statement agree with his other statement that «the art of writing lies at *the most extreme limits* [my underlining] of human consciousness» (p. 42)? Wasn't Rimbaud, mentioned among the conscious craftsmen (as indeed he was to some extent), the precocious *voyant*, the 'miraculously' inspired child-visionary? Highly perceptive and interesting is what Lorentzatos says of him: «In the mid-nineteenth century, poetry, at the center of which we must place the strange figure of Rimbaud, begins to enter the sphere of the irrational, urged on by parallel tendency, in the field of knowledge, to emphasize the mystery of existence through the channels of the emotions» (p. 45). Romanticism had committed its uncontrolled emotional and wordy excesses. Parnassianism came to control with artful consciousness in tight moulds the torrential romantic emotionalism. Partly a Parnassian offspring, Baudelaire wrote «de la vanité et du danger de l'inspiration» (as quoted by Lorentzatos, p. 41), one assumes to condemn the Romantic evils. From Baudelaire and Verlaine Symbolism branched into the close-to-paralyzing consciousness of Mallarmé and his meticulous artcraft on the one hand, and the intuitive, dream-like though no less painful, much subconscious effusions of Rimbaud's visions, his «illuminations» on the other. Those preambled Surrealism with Apollinaire as intermediary. As for the matter of the mystics in particular, that will be given our critic's attention in a later issue.

We need to understand Lorentzatos in his almost excessive emphasis on the artistic value of consciousness when his central concern appears to be *method*, technically speaking, as that is to *eventually* control and validate what «inspiration» provides in the accomplishment of form. To identify essence (a word he is highly hesitant about) with inspiration, and form with art, would be equal to effecting a simplistic, doctrinaire division, rather detrimental upon the marvelous unity that a work of art is to accomplish. As Lorentzatos himself asserts, after Eliot and others before him, «form and content... conjoin in a *tertium quid*» (p. 49) where several matters get into play and exchange as to become inseparate and so make the works of art «resemble chemical compounds» (ibid.). I do not know whether there is any reference to Dante's *Commedia* or even *Vita Nuova* in our critic's deeming the poem «an organism that is mathematically elaborated» (p. 48), which once again stresses a kind of scientific consciousness involved. In conclusion, what Lorentzatos seems wishing to emphasize is Solomos' con-

siderable modern artistic awareness as expressed in his *subjecting* inspiration and passion to the meaning of art:

This digression, upon which I have purposely persisted, may help us to see more clearly that Solomos belongs to that category of artists who believe more in work than in inspiration; if we had to classify him, his place would be among the family of the great, who perpetuate the poetic tradition in our own age. (p. 45).

If the height of his artistic consciousness itself turned inhibitive to his creation, the exquisite poetic fragments and the haunting theoretical statements of his poetics should, we assume, alleviate our regret. Suffice the principles, the objectives and the initials of greatness.

A technical matter to which Lorentzatos, after Palamas, contributes much argument as to its centrality and importance in Solomos' giving a new and original vigor to the demotic in his verse, is the extent to which he moderated the use of synizesis in the Third Draft of *The Free Besieged*, with synizesis being a long established practice in Modern Greek poetics. As narrow as the matter may appear, it involves, our critic argues, no less than Solomos' overall approach to and handling of the language in a way that gave the first practical and decisive answer to the crucial conflict between the demotic and the purist. To quote Lorentzatos:

If we should next consider that synizesis threatened to invade the new poetry which was growing out of the demotic idiom, in contrast to the purist idiom which forbade its use and allowed only elision, we shall see that Solomos, solitary and far-seeing, was able to understand something we are only just fully realizing: that it is unwise to discard either of these two conflicting traditions, for they continually counterbalance each other and provide a unique basis upon which the intellect can operate fruitfully through the interplay of opposites.

In his final, mature views of the problem of artistic expression, Solomos accomplishes a synthesis of the two traditions; he rejects the negative elements and makes use of the positive elements in each one (p. 59).

To, this he adds:

After the long journey of Greek poetry from the Alexandrians to the great burst of *The Erotokritos* in seventeenth century Crete, the application of thesei deas [the selective synthesis of the two traditions] in Draft C should be seen as *the greatest discovery* in the annals of poetic expression in our country, and *the only real discovery* prior to Cavafy's introduction of prose elements in our poetry. (pp. 59-60, my underlinings).

It is in the last stage of Solomos' creativity, the Draft C, where the selective befriending of the demotic with the purist is attempted, and one might in fact wonder as to whether that might have been a matter of necessity where the demotic sensed its shortcomings in meeting the poet's expectations, and called for the purist's help. There have been the orthodoxies, mostly after Solomos, as to the division between the two languages, and there have also been the moderations as to the extent of mixture that would not hurt the ear and taste through 'bilingual' discrepancies.

Solomos' final selectivity, which meets with Lorentzatos' appreciation and praise, would appear as a concession of his earlier, more orthodox stand as that was expressed in his *Dialogos*, to the discussion and evaluation of which the critic devotes a whole later essay, comparing it with Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, its influential precedent and striking parallel. The extent of concession depends on the extent that one would identify the demotic with the «common», the «spoken» language, and would identify the purist with the «written» of the literati.

In both the *De Vulgari Eloquentia* and the *Dialogos*, the first a treatise and the second a dialogue, the issue is the right choice of a nation's literary language. In their respective and considerably similar circumstances, though by four centuries apart, both works plead for the language of the people, the common, the living speech, the *vulgaris locutio*, in its supposed vulgarity more noble than the artificial and conventional «*grammatica locutio*», the «written» language (the Latin for the Italians and the purist for the Greeks). In their respective choices, «Dante was the founder of the language of Italian literature as Solomos was the founder of the language of modern Greek literature» (p. 151). The instruction he gives in the *Dialogos* as to the user's right approach is: «First submit to the language of the people, and then, if you are able, master it». As to the way of that «mastering», in a letter of his

(in Italian) to his friend Tertsetis, referring more particularly to the language of the Klephtic songs, he explains that the poet: «ought to use it in its essence, not merely formally ... And as for poetry ... it is certainly good to tread in those tracks, but not to stop there: one must raise oneself up perpendicularly» (pp. 153-4) so as to lend nobility to that language, yet without modifying it. Later artistic necessity in its rise, as we have remarked, made Solomos widen his approach to the demotic through grafting to it, selectively, elements from the purist, yet without reducing the foundational value of the living demotic as his language and that of the nation. There is in Lorentzatos' essay a critical survey of the language problem in its growth since the First Century B.C. to which Solomos gave his creative solution.

Of the essays in the volume, the one that offers the most challenge and would raise most of the reader's questionings is possibly the one that has lent its title to the volume itself, one assumes as to indicate its central importance. It is the widest in the range of its coverage, the most comprehensive and most adventurous in its prevalently traditional views, even the most combative. Essentially, in the light of the spiritual, literary and cultural crisis of the Western World altogether and its precedents, it projects Lorentzatos' own beliefs as to what modern Greek poetry has been, should have been and should become, — in essence and not merely in form, technically speaking. As he explains in his «Preface», after the consideration of «the technical or esthetic side of the poet's art, the «philological elements», and the exploration of «a definition of style» in its general significance, topics that preoccupied the preceding essays, this, «the third essay is openly concerned with the broader foundations of art, which remain always spiritual or metaphysical — in other words, directed toward the eternal». If Solomos is not still the obvious focus of this essay, one senses in it his presence in terms of his creative and ideological orientation and principles, in fact of his Modern Greek conscience as a touchstone through which to judge the crisis, a precious heritage that modern Greek intellect should have kept faithful to in order to avoid succumbing to the crisis.

In the prevalently adventurous and highly parenthetical unfolding of his earned prose and argument, an initial consideration of Seferis' poetic modernity deviates into the sad general attestation that:

It is from Europe [as if Greece were not part of it]
that we in Greece have received our models, whether

we like it or not. Since the War of Independence (1821), we have been copying Europe in a considerable number of fields, including the arts. We have been continuously producing identical miniature imitations of European models. (p. 87).

He wishes to see Solomos as a brilliant exception to this rule, yes, one assumes, in a particular sense, for he too absorbed much of the European spirit and intellect of his time, the German philosophic and poetic idealism and a great deal more. It is the specific orientation of his absorptions that counts. He grew up in the Ionian Islands which were themselves «a striking exception to the general cultural climate of Greece» (pp. 88-9), once again in terms of its European flirtations, and he therefore:

harks back to Dante, to a tradition diametrically opposed to that of the Renaissance, the Reformation, the *Erklärungszeit*, and the classicizing ideal of the French Revolution. It is through Dante, in other words through the metaphysical tradition of medieval Western Christendom that Solomos came home to the metaphysical tradition of Eastern Christendom. (p. 89).

For his insistence on the value and necessity of a spiritual, metaphysical re-orientation of the Greek intellect that inspires this essay and the following «Ultima Verba», as expressive of his mind, Lorentzatos would hardly avoid his appellation as a «Neo-Christian», a term applied in our days to those nostalgic of the great days of Christendom, the Middle Ages as centered round their faith in God, and this with a belief that their blessed state could be recaptured. Such a notion has had an equal appeal upon T. S. Eliot, Paul Claudel and others, with Dante as the supreme voice of those times. This essay of Lorentzatos and his «Ultima Verba» are both thickly studded with biblical references and quotations.

Such a re-orientation, as far as Greece is concerned, involves a wider matter: a consideration or reconsideration of the modern country's cultural relationship with its ancient past and its closer predecessor, the Byzantine-Christian world, in terms of identity. It is Lorentzatos' view that:

During the reign of romantic classicism in Europe we signed our own death warrant. We signed it the moment we agreed to take part in the European debate about whether or not we Greeks were the true de-

scendants of the ancient Greeks. As if we did not exist in our own right ... We were no more than mandarins, dried up scholars who were totally unaware of the spiritual tradition we had inherited from our fathers over a period of almost two thousand years. (pp. 91-2).

Obviously involved in the issue is, therefore, the perennial conflict between the classically-oriented «purists» and the Byzantine-oriented «demoticists» with their notion of «Romiosyne», although the division is not as simple as thus stated, and has had its endless variations.

Regarding the Ancient world itself and its cultural message, Lorenzatos' conviction is (and he is not alone in this conviction) that this world's message was fatally misunderstood, misinterpreted and misapplied, in fact it has been constantly and increasingly perverted by the Western World since the Renaissance with the emphasis on Humanism, on the «absolute independence of man from the not-purely-human, the divine element» (p. 124). As he further states it: «Our civilization has replaced the metaphysical center, the 'rule of heaven with man': man is the supreme law» (p. 125). The tragic fallacy was the anthropocentrism round which the Western World has mostly developed, and it is that anthropocentrism, that humanism that has caused our modern world to lose «the immemorial metaphysical *center of life*» (p. 125, my underlining). It is the utilitarian mis-fostering of the Classical World's message that has been imposed upon Greece itself by the West and through the West-educated and enlightened Greek literati, and this at the expense of Greece's own genuine tradition.

We never lacked tradition; and we have known nothing like the Inquisition, the Renaissance, the Reformation ... Quite simply, we knew the ancient Greeks had their own spiritual tradition, their own sacred universe, in the same way as we have ... Whatever was meant to remain alive from the Hellenic tradition was channeled into the Christian tradition, and there it still lives in 'another form'. That which we call Greece, that which was spiritually viable and therefore survived Greek antiquity, is not to be found, as some people believe, in Schleiermacher, Shelley, or Keats (Ode on a Grecian Urn), but in the sanctuary of the Christian spirit, as it was passed on to our Orthodox forebears by the Fathers of the Eastern Church and

all those who safeguarded through the ruthless centuries, the same metaphysics. (pp. 130-1).

It is mostly in the light of this spirit that Lorentzatos passes judgment on Modern Greek poetry altogether, with particular focus on some of its most outstanding figures and landmarks, like Cavafy, Karyotakis and Seferis. What was the nature of Cavafy's and Seferis' undeniable originality and modernity and what positive Greek answer did it give to the spiritual crisis?

Cavafy, we are told, «had not been subjected to the intoxication of the new demotic idiom» (p. 93), a reference to the practice of the so-called New Athenian School under Palamas' leadership. He «showed us the way to keep on discovering new aspects of the Greek spirit» (p. 8). Much like Solomos, he «chose a course which for a long time to come cannot help but be our own course as well» (p. 39). He «extended the horizon of art ... with his 'Hellenism' or his 'hedonism'; but his real effect on poetry was achieved by his use of subtle, distilled rhythms, his borrowing from prose, which he was the first to introduce in Greek poetry, and his condemnation of synizesis, which was an innovation that Solomos was first to try out» (p. 43). He did not follow the purist metrics and was one of the few in Greece who could really «keep up with contemporary thought and art» (p. 64). He was «able to see that the lethargy that had overtaken poetry written in purist Greek ... was now attacking poetry written in demotic as well» (p. 92), and was able to liberate himself from the increasing deadness. His «grafting prose elements onto poetry», as the mark of his liberation, is, however, deemed by Lorentzatos as a characteristic feature of the European poetic crisis itself. The answer that he, and Seferis after him, gave to that crisis seems, erroneously, to «stem from the belief that the impasse in the art was transitory, or merely technical matter. So they tried to apply new methods to poetry; but it was still the same poetry, the same art as before» (p. 111).

His younger and tragic contemporary, Karyotakis, was the very signaller himself of the crisis within the Athenian demotic tradition, the sharpest expression of that crisis. His suicide in 1928 soon followed the publication of *Elegies and Satires* where «we have the extreme point of dissolution in normal metrics... a kind of St. Vitus' dance» (p. 96) that closes the tradition and opens the void.

It is the consideration of Seferis' accomplishment that practically opens and closes this essay. Rather than his much acclaimed *Turning Point* of 1931 (no more than «a demonstration of his appren-

ticeship» in the tradition), it is his *Mythistorima* of 1935 that Lorentzatos deems as the real turning point which makes Seferis «the first poet to provide an answer to the crisis» (p. 86) in his departure from the old poetics and the opening of a new era. Lorentzatos, however, still deems the short *Cistern*, of 1932, as Seferis' «farthest - reaching work from the spiritual point of view», a point that «he did not substantially surpass» in his second period, i.e. after he encountered Eliot (pp. 97-8). The critic's view as to the *Mythistorima* is that «regardless of its worth... it did not help to bring the cause of poetry one step forward, whether in the direction of the great yawning abyss at the beginning of the world, or towards what may be the true solution» (p. 105), i.e. regarding the spiritual crisis, the lacking center, «the lost vision without which nothing can be accomplished» (p. 107), the vision of God that inspired Dante and Solomos. Other critics, George Savidis among them, viewing Seferis' work in a different light, saw in its prevalent pessimism a temperamental relationship with Karyotakis if not really an influence. To Lorentzatos, neither he nor Cavafy «put into question poetry itself» (p. 111). They only revised and brought up to date the methods of poetics, ignoring the poetry's function. Seferis' approach to Attic tragedy reflects Western «humaneness» rather than its essential Greekness. He, on the whole, «engages his heart in exhausting the whole gamut of natural or cosmic love», but does not extend love into its «metaphysical, apocalyptic sense» (p. 132), although he himself as a person and his verse brim with compassion. Lorentzatos takes strong exception to his relevant statement and belief that «we are a people who have great Fathers of the Church, but no mystics», counterposing extensively his view that «we Greeks... more than any other Middle Eastern people... have been the main vehicle of the great tradition of Christian mysticism», (p. 141) and that, denying mysticism to the Greeks «has always been the humanistic fallacy in Europe» (p. 142). He concludes his long consideration of Seferis with the statement that «Seferis' main concern was our language, for he saw it as the poet's last hope of salvation in the great shipwreck that was to come» (p. 145).

If the matter of poetic method occupied the two previous essays, method in this one is put aside as only secondary to the contents of poetry, its orientation for the sake of a spiritual recovery in the recapture of the essence that makes poetry the means of regaining the lost center, God and faith in him. The following lines are quintessential of his conviction and advice:

Each one of us must try to solve the problem on his own, until that time-when the solution can become generalized and reach the whole society [Might this remind us of Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* of 1939?] What I am trying to say is that it is necessary for each one of us to start going through a total, radical change, the true metamorphosis or «change of mind» — μετά-voia — which is «needful», which has always been «needful», before we can proceed to help others in a really effective and creative manner. We must first change the way art functions; from the aesthetic function we have today, we must move to a metaphysical function, which is the way that art always functioned before the Renaissance. It may seem the wrong way about, but in order to «save» art, we must first «lose» it. (pp. 105-6).

To his respectable sermon he adds:

If poetry (*o altra arte*) is to grow fruitful and strong once more, it must somehow renounce itself in its present function, plunge into the abyss that gapes at the beginning of the world... In the abyss, poetry will find again the source and the roots from which it has strayed; only thus can it be brought back to the living light. Art must turn into the serious undertaking it used to be. Art must be baptized in the waters of faith. (p. 109).

This emotional, moved and touching thinking of Lorentzatos as to the evils plaguing modern intellect, poetry in particular, as reflecting wider evils in the loss of spiritual direction and ethical and other values, may, at times, have frequented the minds of lots of us. We may even have shared his wish as to a possible solution in terms of a recovery. We may have expressed silently or vocally the spirit of his advice, his urging. We do not question the correctness of his views as to what constitutes the cultural heritage of modern Hellenism. Highly perceptive are his remarks as to the Western World's mis-inheriting much of the Ancient spirit, although his condemnation of Humanism might cause some wider reservations. His attitude towards it may only be too partially exclusive. There must be several Neohellenists, I am sure, who would disagree with his criticism of Cavafy's and Seferis' accomplishment, although he is certainly right in his belief that no

matter how original and valuable their technical novelty has been, the world of their poetry is either enslaved to the body's and its pleasure's decline, or abides under the heavy cloud of historical awareness with its sorrow and despair, with no supernal light from above to offer it some uplifting solace and hope. Both poets remained ingeniously faithful recorders of their time's reality as to the promise that it did not offer.

But to return to Lorentzatos's advice itself with its instructions-his homily. We should not expand on arguing its correctness and advisability with regard to poetry and the national conscience as a way, in fact *the* way of recovery. No matter how knowingly and thoughtfully argued, it much reflects a personal taste and opinion, and as such it should be considered and respected, theoretically speaking. Several would be those among Lorentzatos' peers, with concerns and worries of the same and similar width and grandeur, that would question or even oppose his views in principle; their attitude towards the Ancient heritage (Lorentzatos, let us mention, is the son of one of the most distinguished Greek classical scholars and Homerists), or towards the post - Renaissance European intellect as it influenced the modern Greek mind, or with regard to the spiritual re - orientation they wish to foster and propagate in times of burning social, sociological and materialistic problems and issues. As to Orthodox Christianity itself, strange as this may appear to an outsider, hardly any important modern Greek poet, including Varnalis, Vrettakos and Ritsos, to mention three of several with a leftist conviction, has failed, out of an unavowed metaphysical need, or in moments of emotional strain, impulsively or even conventionally, in agreement with the traditional, cultural, Byzantine heritage, the Romiosyne of the people whose their verse addresses, to address or invoke or refer to Virgin Mary or Christ or God. This, nonetheless, does not take care of the major spiritual void as Lorentzatos views it in Modern Hellenism and the European world at large.

His wish for the recovery of the Christian faith in its purity, the medieval faith in God as supremely expressed in Dante (and reflectively shared by Solomos), has had an outstanding modern precedent in the similar wish of T. S. Eliot as voiced in several of his writings and above all in his *Four Quartets*. Yet no matter how deep is our critic's respect and admiration for Eliot as a poet and thinker, as this is shown in several references to him as well as in his obvious influence on the mind and manner of Lorentzatos, when it comes to Eliot's version of Christianity as embodied in the *Four Quartets*, strong oppo-

sition is expressed for its belonging «to the tradition of abstract European philosophical thought, or Western scholasticism, evils from which our own spiritual tradition was more or less protected as long as we lived under Islamic rule and had not been 'discovered' by the scholars of Europe» (p. 109) Seferis was of the same mind as to the *Four Quartets*. In short, Eliot, the pious Eliot, could not serve the Greek intellect as an exemplary model in an approach to Christianity, nor are there any other Western models available. Orthodox Christianity has its own character.

To repeat again, the correctness and advisability of Lorentzatos' advice and urging are not presently to be further argued about. What we would still, naturally, question and doubt is the practical feasibility of its fulfillment in our Twentieth Century and the centuries hereafter as our globe keeps shrinking to its «global humanity» contemplating and touching yesterday's mystery of the stars and the numberless galaxies. Could his advice indeed be taken as other than a theoretical (he is much the theorist), contemplative, Quixotic, «pious wish», an εὐσεβὴς πόθος? Is the Lost Center still recoverable in its old sense, although we do not doubt its primeval and eternal necessity? Is it recoverable, except as a wish in the privacy of an individual soul like that of Lorentzatos or T. S. Eliot or others select few, if theirs is really a recovery more than theoretical (let us remember Lorentzatos' statement that «recourse to mysticism and religion... is the result of careful logic»), or principle? Can it transcend the quandaries of our modern awareness? Are we still able, with all the blinding fascination of our scientific and technological discoveries, revelations and advancement, to recover our faith in our traditional, our biblical God, to recover genuinely the spirit that «built the medieval cathedrals»? Are we possibly wrong in reading in his advice a nostalgic retrogression as recommended, and could culture (if still extant after Spengler) be planned in its present and future development? Can we retrace our steps through effacing what centuries, even millenia have brought upon us? Can we deviate from those ominous 2000 - year gyres of even a visionary like W. B. Yeats? And can we tell the poets what their mind should be, what they should create? Isn't there a theoretical blasphemy committed? And does the genuine poet indeed accomplish his greatness through conscious planning? Was Socrates wrong in his *Apology* and in *Ion* on that matter?

A wish is one thing, and reality is another—a truth that even the most idealistic among us are eventually obliged to painfully re-

cognize. We assume that it has been Lorentzatos' fervent wish to fight that recognition in a contemplative isolation, and this, among other matters and virtues reflected and reflected upon in this volume, makes its reading a fascination and a challenge besides the learning and perception that it amply provides.

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