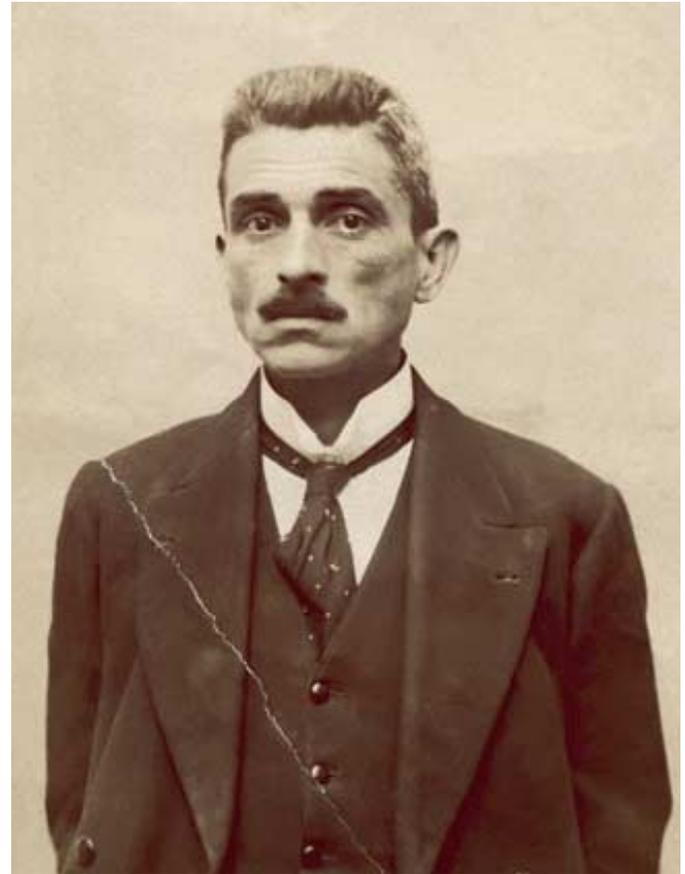




GRIGORIOS XENOPOULOS

It may be that the first novels of Grigorios Xenopoulos (1867-1951), represent a minority 'opposition' to the dominant folkloric realism of the time, and should be seen as the neglected forerunners of an urban tradition that only came fully into its own in the first decade of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the (justified) excitement at the rediscovery and reassessment of these neglected texts should not obscure the adherence of most of them to the dominant 'folkloric' model of the period, as that was defined above. The focus in them is frequently on a community rather than on an individual, and descriptive details of setting and social behaviour are no less prominent than in the rural ethnography of the time. It would not be unreasonable to suggest, then, that the urban fiction of the last two decades of the nineteenth century gives a distinctive 'twist' to folkloric realism without fundamentally challenging its preoccupation with social groups and with individuals, either representative or 'picturesque', whose fates are presented as the inescapable consequences of their social and physical environment. The same could also be said, despite its subtitle 'An Athenian Novel', for *The Wax Doll*, the posthumously published work of Konstantinos Christomanos, who after many years in the service of the Empress Elizabeth of Austria returned to Athens and left behind this rather lushly written novel which appeared as late as 1911.



KONSTANTINOS THEOTOKIS

Born into the Corfu aristocracy in 1872, Konstantinos Theotokis studied in Graz and died at the age of 51 in 1923. His greatest influence was the Russian novel and he became a committed socialist. His prose writing was deeply social in orientation, and with narratives such as *The Life and Death of the 'Hangman'* (1920) he treats themes such as the obsession with private ownership and the love of profit and money. Theotokis was a skilled anatomist of the great class divisions and conflicts of his time. His prose is grounded in passion and romanticism, but his contact with socialism and its theoretical underpinnings resulted in an abiding interest in direct social experience, which he sought to present through human conflicts, often so intense that they lead to disaster. In these conflicts the human conscience, inextricably bound up with its environment, is centre stage. Although an outcast of his own class and its ideology, Theotokis never permitted his work to be 'committed' in the narrow sense, and for this reason continues to be read today, with undiminished interest.

KOSTIS PALAMAS



Woodcut by Kostas Grammatopoulos. (N.H.R.F.)

Κωστας Παλαμας



(Collection of the Parnassos Literary Club)

Georgios Roilos' painting *The Poet Aristomenis Provelengios Reading one of his Works to a Group of Poets* depicts (from left to right) G. Stratigis, G. Drosinis, I. Polemis, K. Palamas, G. Souris and A. Provelengios, all poets of the 1880s generation. The painting's subject (the friendly gathering of fellow poets to listen to a recitation of poetry) reflects the sense of camaraderie typical of that generation. This attitude was the outcome of the poets' fervent involvement in vital spiritual and social issues, the most important of which was to establish the demotic language as the language of literature. On the other hand, the way in which Roilos arranged the group of poets suggests the hierarchical order among them. Palamas, positioned at the centre of the painting, affable yet pensive, attracts the viewer's eye and emerges as the heart of the group. Indeed, most of the poets of Palamas' age acclaimed him as their spiritual leader.

Opposite page:

Palamas in front of Kaufman, the international bookstore in the centre of Athens, c. 1925
(National Hellenic Research Foundation, donated by K.T. Dimaras)

The poet and critic Kostis Palamas (Patra 1859-Athens 1943) dominated the Greek literary scene for almost fifty years, from about 1880 until 1930. With his eighteen books of poetry published between 1886-1935 and the abundance of essays and articles that he wrote during the same period, he is considered the chief proponent of the fundamental changes brought about in Greek letters by the 1880s generation, the generation of which he was undeniably the greatest poet. Palamas promoted, perhaps more than anyone else, the use of the colloquial language in literature, establishing its eventual dominance, and contributed to the appreciation of Greek popular culture. He worked tirelessly in the cause of literature and, as a recluse within the four walls of his house next to Athens University – hardly ever travelling –, he lived every moment of his long life in the enjoyment of his compulsive writing. His *Complete Works*, published in sixteen compendious volumes between 1962-1969, include only his most important literary and critical texts, whereas the full edition of his *Complete Works* to be published shortly by the Palamas Foundation will extend to about fifty volumes.

It is difficult for the contemporary reader to find his way through the work of Palamas because of its broad scope and its seeming lack of focus. On the one hand, Palamas' work is infused by patriotism and love for his country – a prevalent attitude in the literature of the 1880s. Palamas believed that the idea of patriotism should be developed in harmony with the ideals of Art, emphasising that "I am a lover of my country, not a nationalist". As regards his aesthetic standards, Palamas attempted not only to express all aspects of contemporary Greek reality, but also to achieve an imaginary synthesis of the various stages of Greek culture (classical, Byzantine and modern) in order to demonstrate its essential unity. Thus, the Byzantine era, hitherto disparaged in Greek poetry, was given special prominence. This essential unity of Greek culture is clearly apparent in Palamas' style and subjects. He exploited the whole range of Greek literature in a masterly manner. Classical literature, religious texts, Byzantine historiography, late Byzantine popular texts, folk songs, works of the Cretan Renaissance, and the poetry of Valaoritis and Solomos were, on occasion, sources of inspiration and creative dialogue for Palamas. Consequently, his poetry displays the highest degree of versatility when compared with the work of any other modern Greek poet.

On the other hand, this 'Hellenocentric' trait of Palamas' work is fruitfully combined with various elements of contemporary European literature, philosophy and ideology in general. More than any other Greek of his time, Palamas followed developments in contemporary European art. Thus, his earlier works are influenced by the style of the French Parnassian School, although enrichment of form and experiments with innovative rhythms are to be found throughout his work. Subsequently his poetry was moulded by symbolism. Palamas' work, however, in regard to its philosophical and ideological content, is characterized primarily by variety. Both his poetic and critical texts contain elements of Nietzscheism – the concept of Superman eradicating all statutory 'idols' of civilisation is uppermost in his synthetic poem *The Twelve Lays of the Gypsy* –

continued on p. 137





pher”, “citizen of the Universe”, “prophet”, “Messiah of song” and “theanthropos”.

Critics have attempted to interpret Palamas’ all-embracing ideas and all-embracing poetry as a sign of many-faceted dualism or even imbalance both in his mental state (his moods ranged from querulous melancholia to boundless optimism and energy) and in his work. As far as his work alone is concerned, one may point to one more dual pattern, named by the poet himself as, on the one hand the “lyricism of the I” and on the other the “lyricism of the We”, given expression in his ‘grand vision’ poems. The ‘lyricism of the I’ pervades his minor tone lyric poems, the melancholic or ominous ones that have to do with the private world of the individual. Schematically, we could include in his lyrical poetry Palamas’ collections *Iambs and Anapaests* (1897), *The Grave* (1898), *The Inert Life* (1904), *Heartaches of the Lagoon* (1912) and *Nights of Phemius* (1935). The “lyricism of the We” is expressed in his longer major tone epic compositions, in which he is at pains to give his poetry a national or even universal perspective. His most significant works in this category are *The Twelve Words of the Gypsy* (1907), *The King’s Flute* (1910) and *Altars* (1915). Palamas wrote: “It is not possible for me to be a poet for myself alone. I am a poet of my time and my fellow coun-

trymen”. Present-day aesthetic criteria are clearly in favour of the “lyricism of the I”. Conversely, Palamas’ long and composite poems are laden with grandiloquence, rhetoric and intellectualism; it was Palamas’ principle that “poetry owes its superiority to the fact that among all the arts it is the most intellectual”. The poem ‘Palm Tree’ is held to be the epitome of Palamas’ art. It is a short composite poem of thirty-nine eight-line stanzas written in 1900 and published in *The Inert Life* in 1904. In this poem symbolism, musicality and versification are evolved and combined as never before or since by Palamas, making it perhaps the most perfected and successful of all symbolist poems in the Greek language.

Palamas’ extensive literary criticism is considered his most important contribution to Greek letters. He has been named “the premier philologist of Modern Greek letters” (Linos Politis) and founder of modern Greek criticism. Palamas established the scale of values for the ‘demoticist’ literary tradition by applying standards of literary criticism in his numerous essays to virtually all of his antecedent modern Greek poets and prose writers (his “ancestors”) and to the authors of his own time as well. The rules of modern Greek literature, as determined by Palamas, are in general terms still valid today, confirming Palamas’ intellectual awareness and critical perception.



Palamas around 1900.
(National Hellenic
Research Foundation)



Satirical drawing by Ilias Koumetakis (1889-1979) on the Balkan Wars parodying the role of foreign powers and their economic interests in Asia Minor. (Angeliki Papadopoulou Archive - E.L.I.A.)

C.P. CAVAFY

Κ. Π. Καβάφης



C.P. Cavafy. (E.L.I.A. - Egyptian Archive)



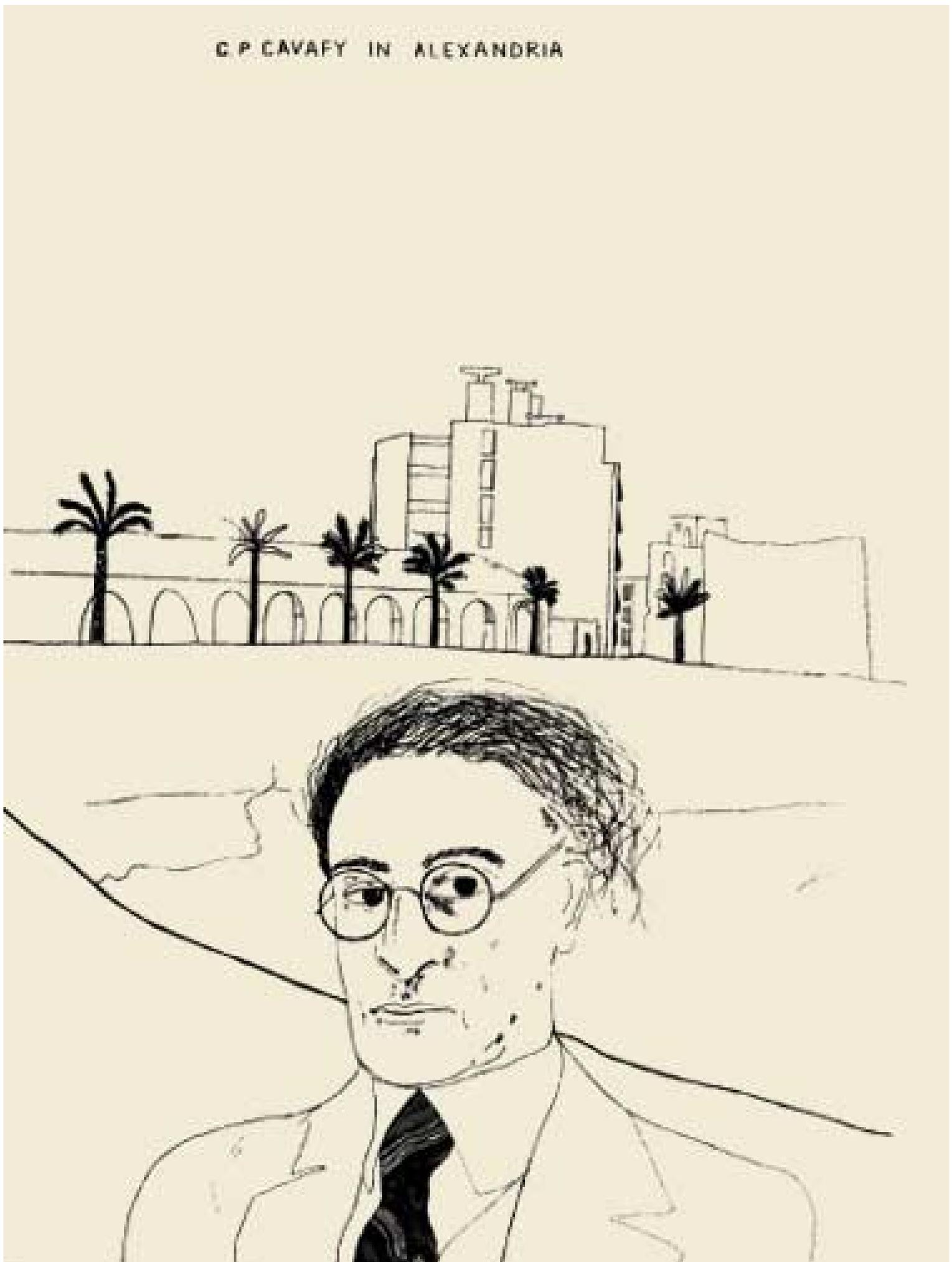
Alexandria - East Port Wharf. Postcard from the beginning of the 20th century. (E.L.I.A. - Egyptian Archive)

In Alexandria, Egypt, on the south-eastern periphery of the Greek diaspora where he lived most of his seventy years (1863-1933), Constantine P. Cavafy wrote the poetry that was to earn him international recognition as one of the most important poets of the twentieth century.

Cavafy is reported to have called himself, late in life, a “poet of old age”, comparing himself with Anatole France who “wrote his colossal work after the age of forty-five”. Indeed, it was after he reached his fortieth year, following a poetic crisis which led to what he termed a ‘philosophical scrutiny’ of his earlier poetic production (1903-04), that Cavafy discovered his own poetic voice – that “unique tone of voice” as W.H. Auden has called it that “survives translation”.

The process of discovery was a long one: it lasted some twenty years, at the latest from 1882, when he wrote his first extant poem, to around 1903. Along the way, drawing from his wide reading in European (especially English and French) literature, Cavafy experimented with the poetic idioms of Romanticism, the ‘Parnasse’ and Symbolism. Poems written during the 1880s (but also into the 1890s) bear the imprint of Romantic influences – Shelley, Keats, Lady Anne Barnard, Hugo, as well as representatives of Greek Romanticism –, and this at a time when in Greece Romanticism had been declared “dead” by the poet Kostis Palamas, *chef de file* of the literary ‘Generation of 1880’. The early 1890s saw Cavafy turn in two new directions. On the one hand he adopted the model of the ‘Parnassiens’ in his use of “Ancient Days” (one of his early thematic headings) as a source of poetic inspiration. The attraction of Symbolism was, however, significantly stronger. In the poem ‘Correspondence according to Baudelaire’, written in 1891, he declares his attachment to the French poet’s notions of “correspondences” and synaesthesia, while in ‘The Builders’, written the same year, he echoes Baudelaire’s rejection of the ideal of progress. His adherence to Symbolism and to other associated movements (Aestheticism, Esoterism, Decadence) during the 1890s is evident in a number of other poems as well as in his one short story, ‘In Broad Daylight’.

Cavafy’s apprenticeship to various poetic schools during his formative years coincides with his early interest in history. There is abundant evidence of his wide reading in ancient, Byzantine, and European history, as would be expected of a writer who at the age of fifteen had begun compiling a historical dictionary, and who in later years would call himself an “historical poet”. Of particular significance in view of Cavafy’s development are his reading notes on Edward Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Cavafy’s extensive ‘dialogue’ with Gibbon during the years c.1893-1899 makes clear his disagreement with the eighteenth-century historian-philosopher’s unfavourable view of Byzantium and of Christianity, whether on matters of history, spirituality, or aesthetics, as well as his espousal of the views of the Greek Romantic historian Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos, known for his role in the rehabilitation of Byzantium in the modern Greek consciousness during the second half of the nineteenth century. It was in this climate that Cavafy wrote a series of early ‘Byzantine’ poems with a ‘national’ character which he later expressly rejected. For it was shortly after his encounter with Gibbon



David Hockney, Portrait of Cavafy, from *Fourteen Poems* by C.P. Cavafy chosen and illustrated with 12 etchings by David Hockney, Editions Alecto, London 1966.



Alexandria, Cook's Corner. Early 20th-century postcard. (E.L.I.A. Photographic Archive)

that Cavafy underwent the poetic crisis of the years 1899-1903 which led to his passage to realism and to poetic maturity. Poems from these years in which Cavafy questions established myths as he 'rewrites' episodes from the modern and ancient traditions – Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Wagner's *Lohengrin*, the prologue to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* – reflect his rapprochement with Gibbon's ironic view of history and at the same time his abandonment of Romantic historiography and Symbolist mysticism and aesthetics.

The one hundred and fifty-four poems that comprise Cavafy's recognized work (some thirty additional examples were left unfinished at his death) fall into three categories, which the poet himself identified as follows: poems which, though not precisely 'philosophical', "provoke thought"; 'historical' poems; and 'hedonistic' (or 'aesthetic') poems. Many poems may be considered either historical or hedonistic, as Cavafy was also careful to point out. The poems of the first category (to which belong some of Cavafy's best-known pieces, such as 'The City' and 'Ithaca'), all published before 1916, often display a certain didacticism. The historical poems (often historical in appearance only), the first of which was published in 1906, are usually set in the Hellenistic age (including Late Antiquity), the period which Cavafy believed was "particularly fitting as a context for his characters", although Byzantium does not disappear entirely from his poetry. Beginning in 1917 the poems of this category take on a political (in the broad sense) element which gains in importance as it interweaves with questions such as religion and ethics. As for

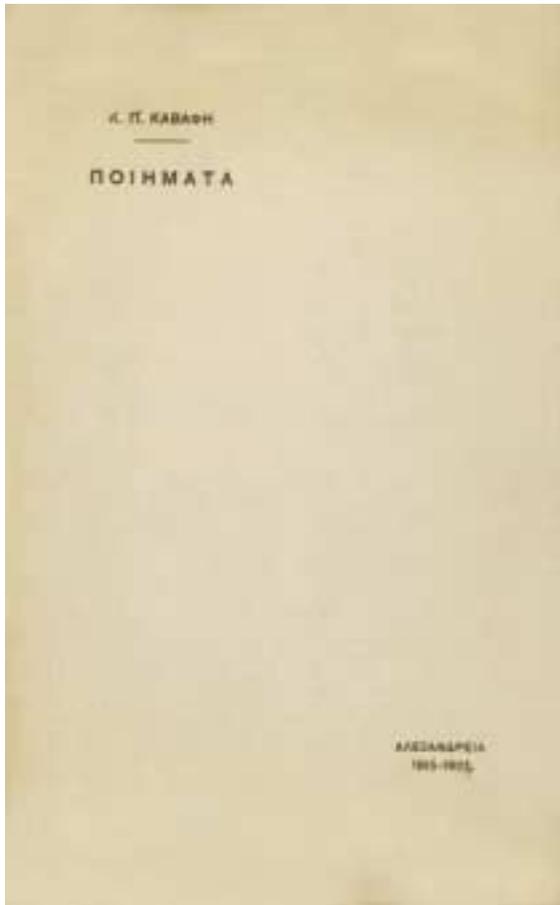
the third category, Cavafy's first daringly hedonistic poem ('Dangerous Thoughts') was published only in 1911 (the year which Cavafy indicated as a dividing line in his poetic production). Later poems become increasingly explicit – although Cavafy did not begin publishing poems in which the eroticism is specified as homosexual until after 1918 – and acquire a social dimension as they depict characters living on the margins of society in sometimes harshly realistic settings.

Cavafy was keenly aware that his poetry was ahead of its time, especially within the sphere of modern Greek letters. The poem 'For the Shop', published in 1913, speaks of this awareness: a craftsman of exquisite jewels, "beautiful according to his taste, to his desire, his vision", will "leave them in the safe, examples of his bold, his skilful work". The "safe" would in fact remain closed for several years, for although Cavafy's work had been presented to the Athenian public in 1903 by the writer Grigorios Xenopoulos, it was either ignored or ridiculed by the literati of the metropolis until around 1918, when it began to gain wider acceptance – although the voices of detractors were still audible. The reasons for the negative criticism were diverse: Cavafy's language, a subtle mixture of demotic and purist Greek not in keeping with the directives of the 'demoticist' movement; his style, considered prosaic; his lack of idealism; his bold eroticism. It is therefore not surprising that in an interview reportedly given three years before his death (1930) Cavafy described himself as "an ultra-modern poet, a poet of future generations" whose poetry "will

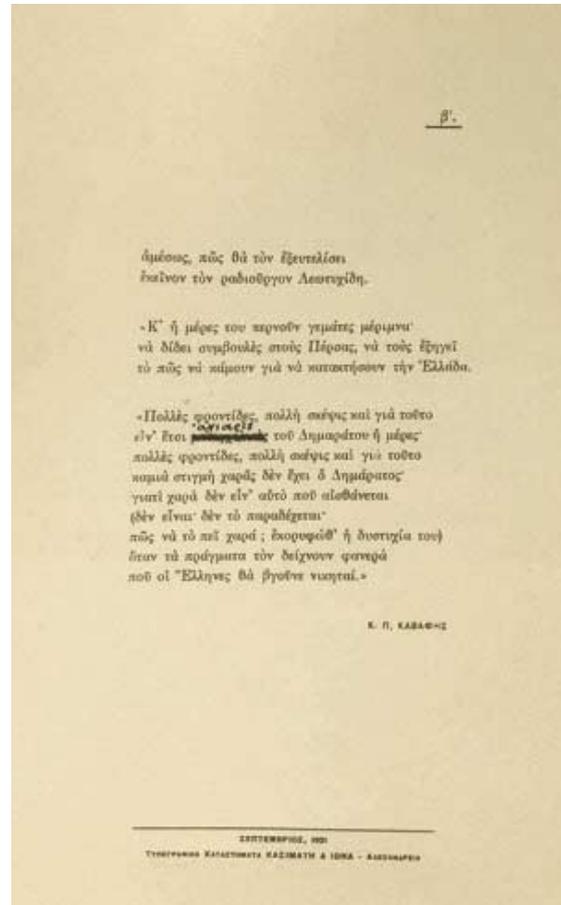
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C.P. Cavafy. (E.L.I.A. - Cavafy Archive)



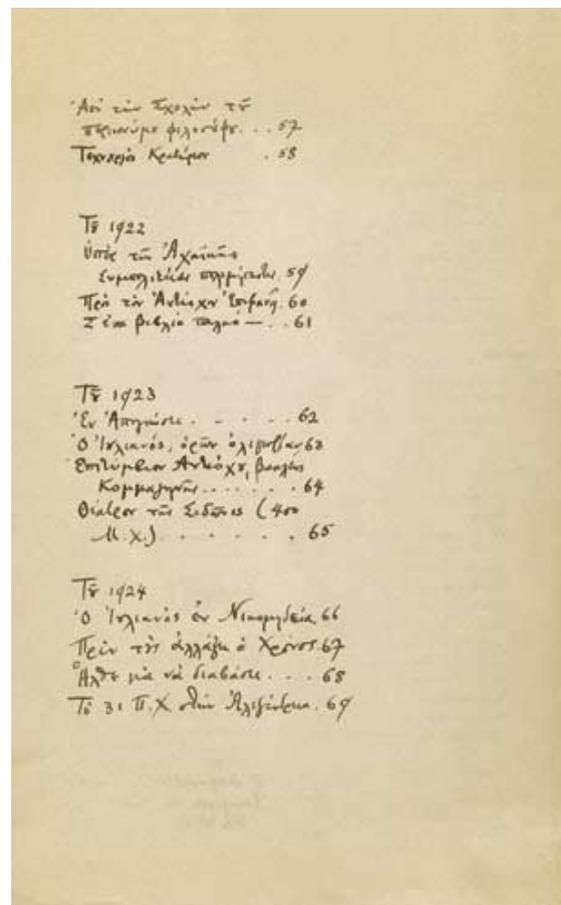
a.



b.



c.



d.

C.P. Cavafy, *Poems*, Alexandria, 1915-1924. Booklet with sixty-nine poems printed on separate sheets, with corrections by Cavafy. a. Cover, b. Part of the poem 'Demaratos', c. Contents, d. Manuscript continuation of contents. (Gennadius Library, Athens)

Cavafy printed his poems on separate sheets of paper which he then bound together to form a collection. He was thus able to add new poems, or to remove or correct older ones, thereby adjusting the contents each time he 'reissued' the collection.

Περιμένοντας τους Βαρβάρους

- Τι περιμένουμε άνω άνω συνδρομητές,
 είναι ή βάρβαροι να φθάσουν σήμερα.
- Γιατί μέσα άνω Συγγαλο μια τέτοια ασφάλεια;
 Τι κείναι' οι Συγγαλοί και έσ' νομοδελία;
 Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα.
 Τι νόμος πια θα κείναι οι Συγγαλοί;
 Οι βάρβαροι σαν έλθουν θα νομοδελίσουν.
- Γιατί ο αυτοκράτορας μας τόσο περί σκέψη,
 και κατέλας έσ' πόλεως τών πιο μεγάλη τύχη
 όλοι θενο έσ' αινω, έσ' όργια, φεώντες τών κορίνα,
 Γιατί οι βάρβαροι θα φθάσουν σήμερα.
 Κι ο αυτοκράτορας περιμένει να δειχθεί
 τών αρχηγό τους. Μάλιστα έσ' έμιασε
 μα να τή δώσει μια παραμεγή. Έκεί
 τών έσ' ατε τίτλους πολλούς κι όνόματα.
- Γιατί οι έσ' μας ύπατοι κ' οι πραιτορι έσ' ήσαν
 σήμερα με τής κόκκινος, τής κούκρινες τής.



Above: Alexandria, Rue Chérif Pascha. Below: Rue de la gare de Ramleh. Early 20th-century postcards. Cavafy lived in this neighbourhood. (E.L.I.A - Egyptian Archive)

not simply be closed within libraries as part of the historical record of the development of modern Greek literature”.

Cavafy’s prediction was fulfilled. Not only is his work read more in Greece now than it was during his lifetime, but it has travelled well beyond the confines of the modern Greek literary world. It was Cavafy’s friend E.M. Forster who in his essay ‘The Poetry of C.P. Cavafy’, published in 1919, first presented to the English public the “Greek gentleman in a straw hat, standing absolutely motionless at a slight angle to the

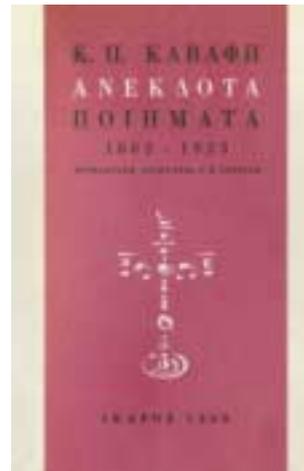
universe”. The first English translation of the Cavafy ‘canon’ (by John Mavrogordatos) was published in 1951; since then the poet’s work has been translated into most of the world’s languages. But beyond being the most widely translated poet of modern Greece, Cavafy is a poet with whom a host of other poets worldwide have been ‘conversing’ through their own work for over seventy years. His “unique tone of voice”, which he laboured so hard to discover and then to perfect, has thus become the foundation for a rich new poetic dialogue.



Alexandria 1935



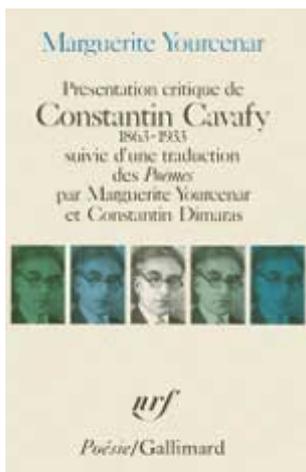
Greece 1969



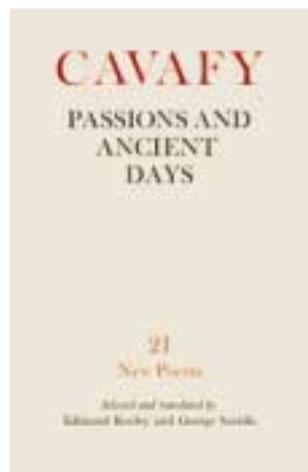
Greece 1968



The Czech Republic 1997



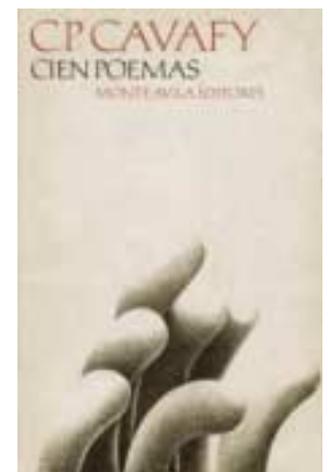
France 1978



England 1972



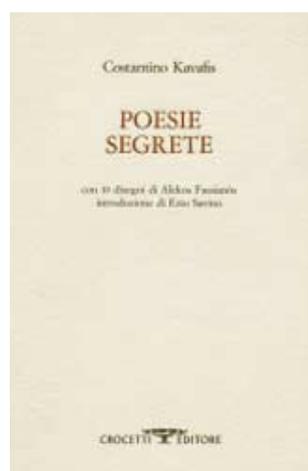
France 1993



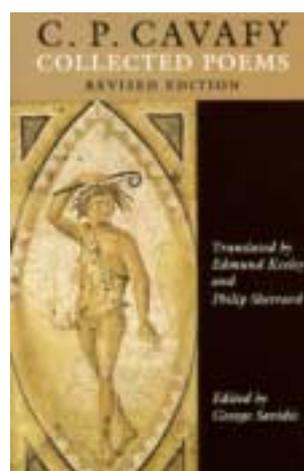
Venezuela 1978



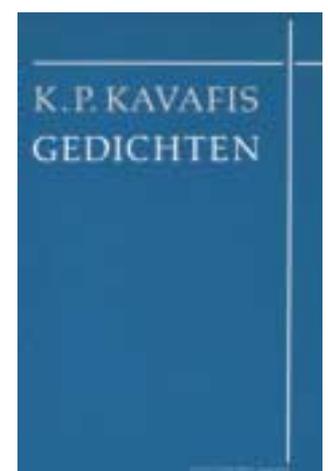
Spain 1991



Italy 1985



U.S.A. 1992



The Netherlands 1984



The University of Athens seen from Korai Street, Athens. Watercolour, 1927, by Ilias Koumetakis (1889-1979). (Angeliki Papadopoulou Archive - E.L.I.A.)

K.G. KARYOTAKIS

FROM NEO-SYMBOLISM TO MODERNISM



Sketch of the poet, published
August 1923, N. Kastanakis.



Karyotakis with his sister, nephew and a friend, Sikia, summer 1927.

In Greece, the decade of the 1920s signalled a period of manifold crises: ideological, political and social. The experience of national discord and the Asia Minor catastrophe of 1922 seriously injured the concept of Greek ‘grand idealism’. The dictatorship of Pangalos (1925-1926) and a succession of governmental crises (1926-1928) created an atmosphere of widespread instability and insecurity. The refugee problem, unemployment and the wretchedness of state employees sparked a series of protest demonstrations and demands from the unions.

Lofty poetry, written by writers such as Kostis Palamas and Angelos Sikelianos, was replaced by gentle lyricism – a poetry that sprang from the convergence of symbolism and aestheticism at the start of the 19th century, but which was later enriched with shades of deeper emotion during the first decade between the wars. Contending with a series of ideological, existential and social obstacles, young writers sought refuge in art, love, even the artificial world of narcotics and were inspired, either fleetingly or permanently, by a vision of social revolution. Their poetic experiments were grounded in the lyricism of the older Symbolists such as Kostas Hatzopoulos, Lambros Porfyris and Miltiadis Malakasis, the aestheticism of Napoleon Lapathiotis and the fanciful audacity of Romos Filyras, whereas their symbolic imagery was drawn from Baudelaire and the “accursed poets”.

Young people in the 1920s tended to live unconventionally, identifying life with art and preferring the honesty of experienced emotion to the heroic rhetoric of so-called sublime poetry. Nevertheless, despite their sensitive lyrical assertions, they did not succeed in advancing, poetically, the complex dynamic of their period. Kostas Karyotakis, however, constitutes a unique and important exception. While setting out from a common starting point he was to surpass the others “quickly and successively”, to quote the poet and critic Tellos Agras.

Karyotakis gave existential depth as well as a tragic dimension to the emotional nuances and melancholic tones of the neo-Symbolist and new-Romantic poetry of the time. With a rare clarity of spirit and penetrating vision, he captures and conveys with poetic daring the climate of dissolution and the impasses of his generation, as well as the traumas of his own inner spiritual world.

*At that moment a dry bay leaf falls,
the plea for you to live, and strips you bare.*

Meanwhile, Karyotakis cultivated a poetic language that escapes from his personal world and confronts the challenges of his surroundings. As a poet who combines veracity of experience with a superbly crafted poetic form and a precision of language which moves between lyric sentiment and realism of thought, Karyotakis brought a new sensitivity to Greek poetry.

His suicide, in 1928, in a distant province where he had been exiled by a vindictive and autocratic regime, was considered a poetic deed, par excellence, and was the reason why he became a symbol for the younger generation of the time. Even so, this shattering chapter of his life-story does not altogether explain the revival of interest in his poetry among later generations of mostly young readers which continues up to the present day. Karyotakis, whilst analysing his personal quest in



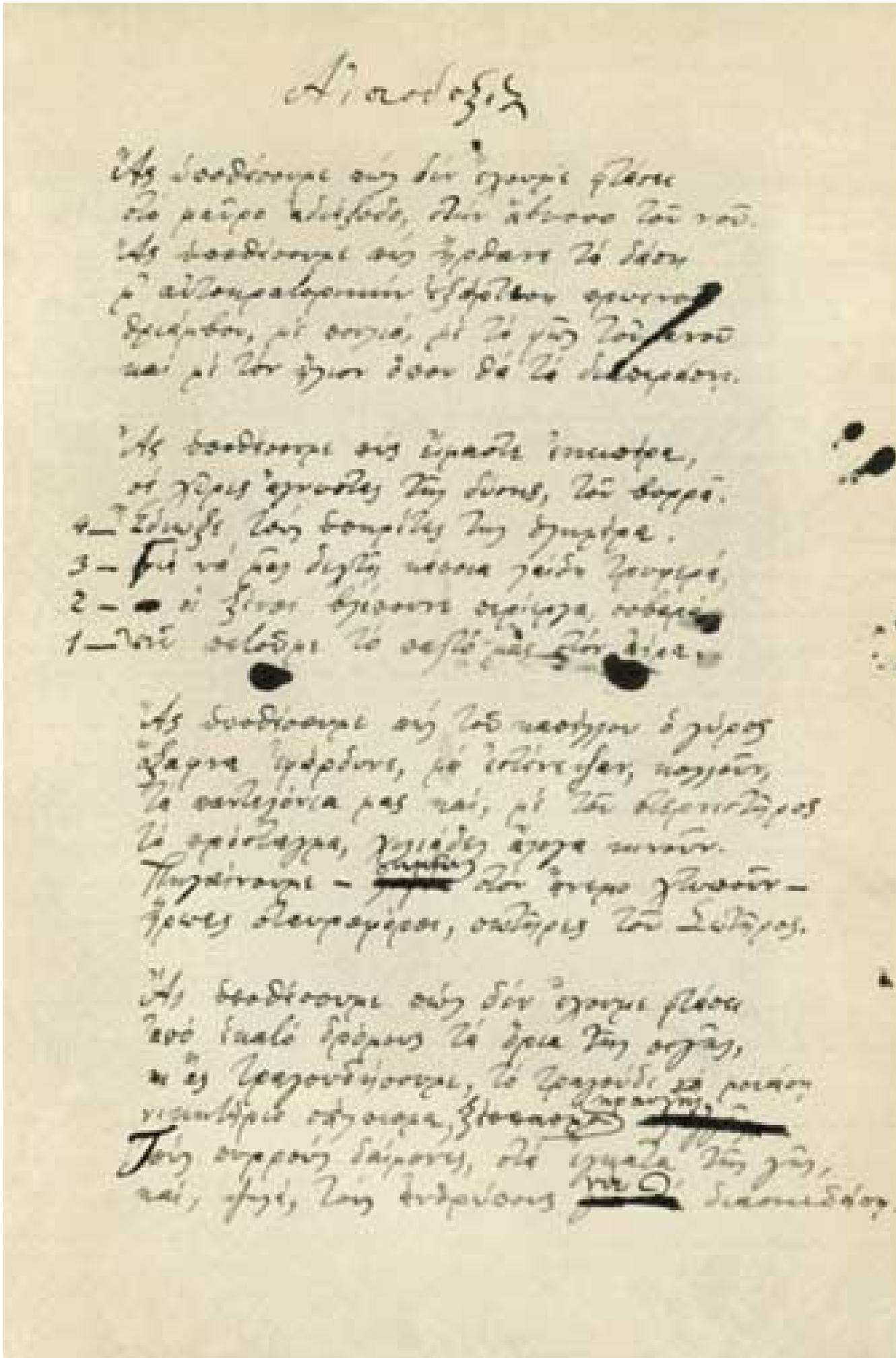
Karyotakis, early in 1920.

a voice of shattering sincerity, exposes “the futile open sore in the sun”, like the “Don Quixotes” in his poem of the same name. He then assumes a more universal voice and succeeds in expressing the other man’s opinion. His lasting appeal is to be found in the unique gravity of his poetry, a poetry that at the same time transcends the biography of the poet and the frontiers of the period in which he lived. Precisely because the events of his life are accompanied by a high degree of artistic awareness and a personal stance that is both uncompromising and incorruptible they contribute to the creation of a myth that reflects ancient tragedy. The hero, crushed by adverse forces of fate, is in the end morally vindicated and achieves immortality.

The son of a high-ranking civil servant, K. G. Karyotakis, was born in 1896 in Tripolis in the district of Arcadia. His early childhood and teenage years were spent in various places, following his family’s successive moves around the Greek provinces. He studied at the Athens Law School and in 1921 became a civil servant. That year, he published his first collection of poems, *The Pain of Humans and Things*. Although related in their approach and thematic material to the Greek neo-Symbolist movement, these poems incorporate the germs of a different intensity and a daring verse technique that were to form the main elements of his later poetic style. Karyotakis’ basic point of reference is neither in a Greek-centred poetic tradition nor in the melancholic delicacy of the Gallicised Greek poet Jean Moréas, but in the strange poetic alchemy of Charles Baudelaire. ‘People who carry the evil hour within them’ is the sub-title of the first poem in the collection and refers directly to Baudelaire’s introduction to the translation of *Histoires extraordinaires* by Edgar Allan Poe, an author whom Karyotakis passionately admired. This phrase – though possibly incompatible with a young twenty-three years-old – was eventually to prove prophetic. In other words, the poet feels he belongs to a distinctive group of people – “those richly endowed with poetry and passion” (*trop riches de poésie et de passion*) for whom “fiendish Providence” (*Providence diabolique*) “prepared evil from their cradles” and threw into “hostile places” (*milieux hostiles*).

In *Nepenthe* (The Opiate), published in 1921, the reference to Baudelaire is more direct and opportune, since the French writer’s poem ‘La voix’ acts as a prologue to the book, whilst the title of the poem, even though taken from *The Odyssey*, is borrowed from Baudelaire (see ‘Un mangeur d’opium’, ‘La Léthé’). Art is viewed as a narcotic plant, something “to soothe away pain”, in the words of Constantine Cavafy, a poet who had a subconscious but decisive influence on Karyotakis’ path to maturity. Translated works, mostly by French poets, are also included in this and in his subsequent collection of poetry. For example, he selects works by Heinrich Heine, Paul Verlaine, François Villon, Jean Moréas, Francis Carco and Tristan Corbière, poets who complement his style, while at the same time he lends them the freshness of his youthful originality so that they read like Greek poetry or even poems by Karyotakis himself.

Elegies and Satires (1927) is the last and most complete collection of poems published by Karyotakis. A landmark



Manuscript of Karyotakis' poem 'Optimism'.

work in the history of Greek poetry of the 20th century, it is remarkable for its simplicity of expression, its condensed meaning, its existential anguish and the social pressure endured by the poet.

*We are like broken guitars.
When the wind passes
over verses, discordant sounds, it awakens
strings which hang like chains.*

In *Elegies and Satires* as well as in the short stories that the poet wrote the year before his suicide, his propensity for conflict and the sharpness of his social criticism emphasise the distance which separated him from the Symbolist movement and from his own starting-point. The misery of life as a government employee, the nightmare of syphilis, ship-wrecked emotions, his surprising and dynamic involvement in the union movement, are all elements of a personal history that are transmuted in a work of amazing potency, rooted in the underlying ideology of the period. Artistic and social dissension and the role of the poet in the modern world are the loom on which texts are woven that speak of denial, corruption, the abyss, the void and of despair and death in a tone that is now angrier and less melancholic. This rage, coloured both by elegiac lyricism as well as the realism of satire, lends a new chill to his poetry and to the poetry of his period. At the same time, it disturbs the metric harmony and purity of his verse and opens up the path to modernism.

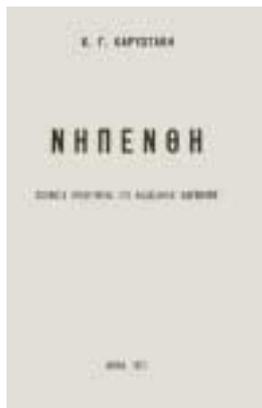
Today, there is general agreement on the importance of Karyotakis' work, despite the fact that, for a long period, it was undervalued on ideological grounds. Greek idealists as well as spokesmen for the Leftist movement reproached him



Karyotakis lying dead, Preveza.

On 21 July 1928, the poet Kostas Karyotakis after having failed to drown himself the night before, shot himself dead in an orchard in Preveza, aged 32. This photograph comes from police files, which explains the position of the dead poet's body, arranged for purposes of identification. His arms are folded, his jacket has been straightened out, his straw hat placed next to his head. Karyotakis' revered position in the history of modern Greek literature and his subsequent canonisation cannot, however, be put down to his suicide – rather his suicide was an expression of his existential anxiety.

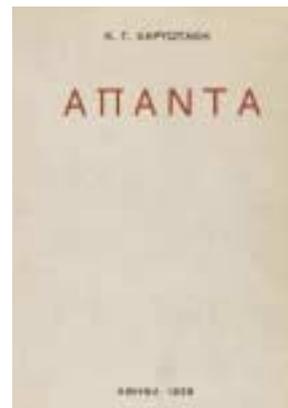
for being both pessimistic and decadent and they tried to stifle the striking effect he had on the younger generation. Despite being labelled as a minor poet by critics and philologists until 1970, poets amongst the Communists and surrealists of the inter-war, post-war and later years nevertheless recognised his leading role in the shaping of modern Greek poetry.



Greece 1921



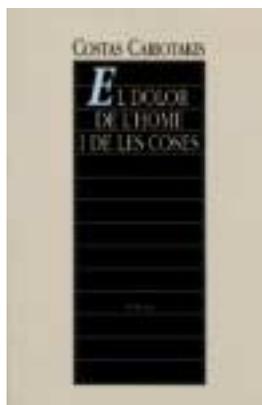
Greece 1927



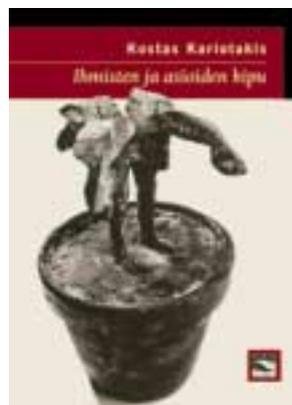
Greece 1938



Greece 1966



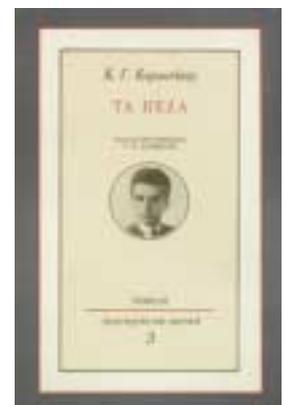
Spain 1996



Finland 1996



The Netherlands



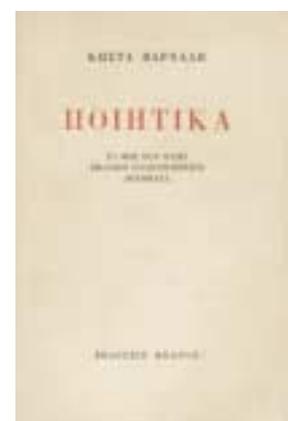
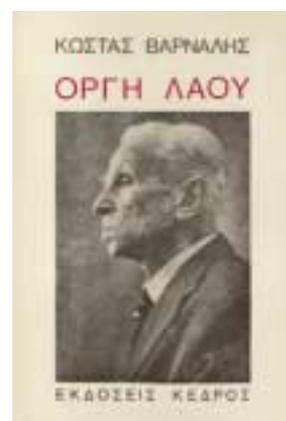
Greece 1989



K. Varnalis. (E.L.I.A. Photographic Archive)

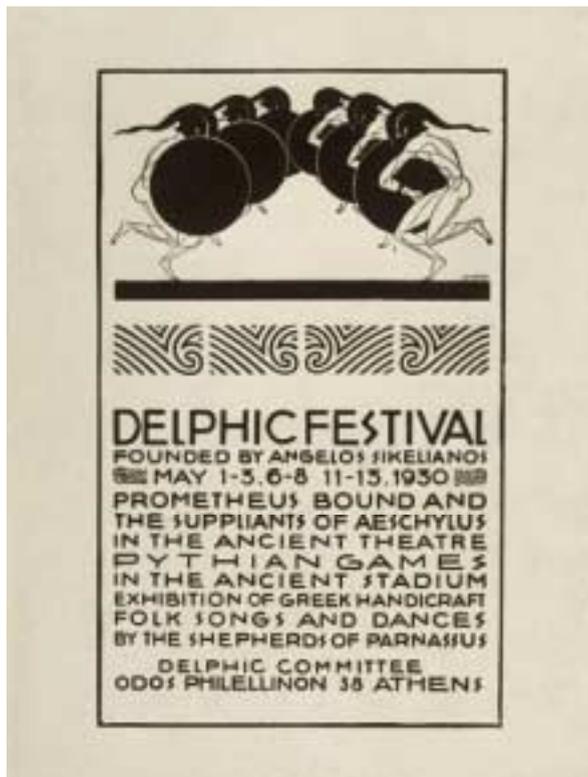
KOSTAS VARNALIS

Kostas Varnalis, while developing as a poet within the traditions of the Parnassos Group and the neo-Classicists, successfully impersonated the role of poet-prophet in *The Pilgrim* (1919) and was the first to doubt, not so much the image of Greek poetry, as the role of national poet and his ideological potential. A poet with great talent and a classical education, Varnalis was introduced into the socialist movement in 1920, an event that was to influence decisively his life and work. In 1922 he published *The Burning Light* and in 1927 *The Free Besieged* – two poetic compositions which, with their effective satire and daring language, contributed to the subversive climate challenging traditional values and demanded social change; at the same time they secured him a unique place in the history of modern Greek literature.



ANGELOS SIKELIANOS

POET OF THE DELPHIC IDEA



Back cover of the programme of the Delphic Festival.
(Gennadius Library, Athens)



Angelos Sikelianos at the Delphic Festival, Delphi 1930.
(National Hellenic Research Foundation -
N.I.R., Modern Greek Portraiture).

Throughout his extensive literary oeuvre, Angelos Sikelianos (1884-1951) combines an authentic lyric gift with powerful poetic inspiration, a passion for Greece with a universal viewpoint and a mystical vision with pagan sensibility.

Born on the island of Lefkada, he had the good fortune to spend his childhood and adolescent years surrounded by the unique natural beauty of his homeland and the cultural tradition of the Ionian Islands. After completing high school in Lefkada, Sikelianos went to Athens for university studies which he soon abandoned in order to devote himself uniquely to literature. With his natural good looks, strong personality and prolific poetic talent, he quickly stood out in the artistic circles of the capital. In 1907 he married Eva Palmer, a prosperous young American Philhellene who was passionately devoted to him and who provided the necessary stability for him to dedicate himself to writing poetry.

In 1909 Sikelianos published *Alafroiskiotos* ('Moonstruck'), a lyrical autobiographical work which vibrates with the poet's desire to become one with the miracle of nature. One might say that the poet was perhaps influenced by *The Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman, but the impact of this work was only superficial. The young moonstruck man finds himself mirrored in nature as in the ancient myth of Narcissus but, despite the richness of the language, the work does not transcend the boundaries of demotic or popular Greek poetic idiom. The American poet is more earthy in his outlook and does not hesitate to use words which shock when discussing love-making or the lower social classes. Contrastingly, the ideology and poetry of Sikelianos is more closely associated with that of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Certain aspects of his poetry, as well as the way in which he presents his social image, correspond to his Italian counterpart who was very well known to the Greek intelligentsia.

Between the years 1915 and 1917 Sikelianos published his *Prologue to Life*, a four-volume work entitled *Consciousness of my Land*, *Consciousness of my Race*, *Consciousness of Woman* and *Consciousness of Faith*. A much later volume, *Consciousness of Personal Creativity* was published in 1947. In these works Sikelianos combines free verse with traditional form, worship of nature with worship of Greece, Ancient with Modern Greece, and Christianity with pantheism. Acting as both prophet and mystic the poet continued to live and work in this vein until the end of the '30s.

In 1917, the death of his sister Penelope, sister-in-law of the dancer Isadora Duncan, provided Sikelianos with the source of inspiration for a long poem entitled 'Mother of God'. This work, written in fifteen-syllable couplets, is reminiscent of 'The Cretan' by Solomos, and is considered the most accomplished of all Sikelianos' work since it combines musicality with an impressive flow of imagery. In 'Mother of God', the emotional lyricism is balanced by Christian faith in everlasting life with the Virgin, portrayed as the sorrowful mother of Orthodoxy coming to comfort the bereaved poet. For Sikelianos, death is not an end, it is a beginning. Two years later, in the poem 'Easter of the Hellenes' (1919) he makes the transition from the personal to the universal, while the concept of the Greek character takes on an almost mystical dimension, at the same time as it fuses elements of religion, history and mythology with a united and undivided cosmos.

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Angelos Sikelianos in 1909.



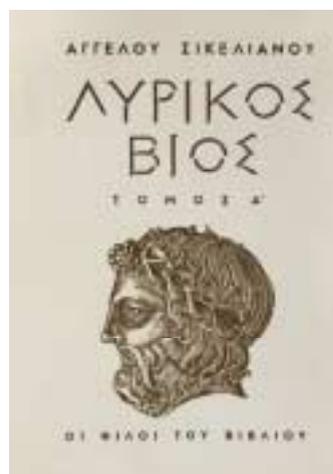
Angelos Sikelianos in 1951.

The decade of the 1920s finds the poet in his prime but it is also a time when poetry is no longer his only field of expression. With the help and encouragement of his wife Eva, he devotes all his energies to the Delphic Idea, the creation of a new world-wide cultural amphictyony. The aim of the movement was the spiritual redemption of modern man by means of a mystical communion, composed of Dionysian and Apollonian elements and centred at 'the navel of the earth' – the ancient sanctuary at Delphi. In 1927, the 'Delphic Word', a poetic interpretation of the Sikelianos vision, was published and the first Delphic Festival was organised with a performance of *Prometheus Bound* and the staging of athletic games before a large audience, a great number of whom were foreigners personally invited by the Sikelianos couple. The Delphic Festival generated considerable publicity, but whereas interest in the project according to optimistic observers was primarily artistic, to the sceptics it was merely touristic.

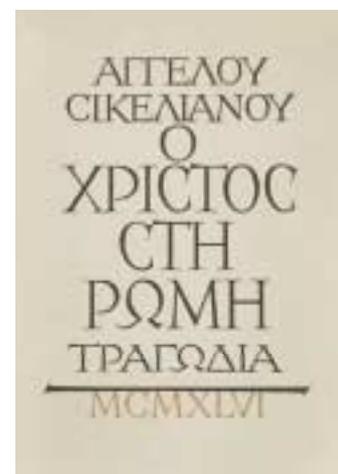
Nevertheless, Sikelianos persisted with his utopian vision of redemption, in which his role was that of interpreter of the mysteries of religion rather than organiser of artistic events. He also encountered great problems in handling the practical side of his inspired venture which led him into considerable economic difficulty. In 1927, Eva's fortune was seriously depleted and a repeat of the Delphic Festival in 1930, with a performance of *The Suppliants* by Aeschylus, ended in financial ruin. The dream that Sikelianos believed was about to be realised began to shatter. However, he remained hopeful, even after facing financial catastrophe and the departure of Eva for America, but his poetry, particularly after 1935, shows a marked change in tone away from his earlier euphoria. The best poems of this period incline towards the lengthy lyrical rhymes of the past, whilst some shorter, finely-crafted poems combine, for the first time, elements of realism with familiar archaic motives and an Orphic reflection of mystic revelation. One of the best examples of this group of poems is 'The Sacred Way': here the poet encounters a she-bear belonging to a sad itinerant theatrical group on the well-worn path to Ancient Eleusis and he identifies her with Dimitra, Alcmene and the Virgin as the symbol of "the Great Goddess of Eternal Motherhood".

After 1940, following the experience of the Delphic Festivals and prompted by the wish to reach out to a wider public, Sikelianos turned to tragedy, which he pursued with a passion. Here again, his subject matter is taken from antiquity, Christian Byzantium and modern Greek tradition, as illustrated in the following titles: *Sybilla*, *Daedalus in Crete*, *Christ in Rome*, *The Death of Digenis*. In these works, the poet presents a visionary dimension to neo-classical tradition and although inferior, from a theatrical stand-point, they contain moments of intense emotion and lines of genuine lyricism with interesting aesthetic results.

Sikelianos died in 1951 at the age of sixty-seven, leaving us with the myth of his prolific personality and an extensive literary oeuvre that contains great richness of expression. Prominent modernist Greek poets such as Seferis and Embiricos acknowledged his contribution to the history of modern Greek poetry and if today the Sikelianos' literary legacy is not widely read, it nevertheless includes poems that delight not only philologists but also a more general public.



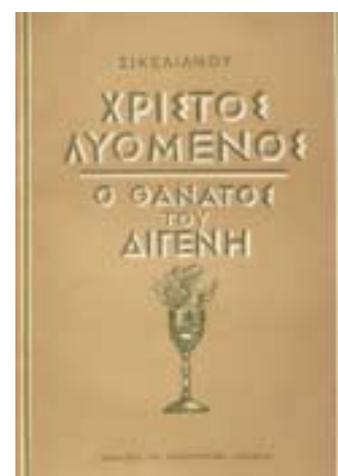
Greece 1946



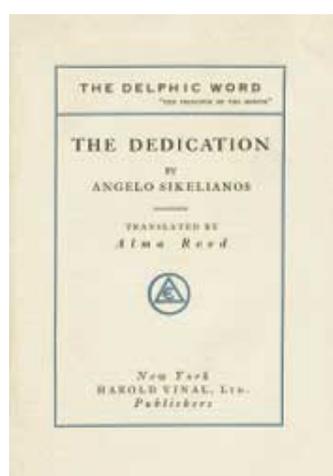
Greece 1946



Greece 1981



Greece 1956



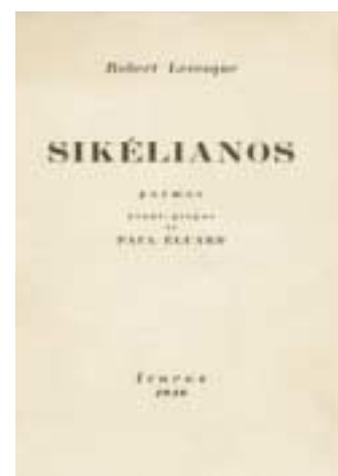
U.S.A. 1928



Italy 1987



Greece 1960



Greece 1946

NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS

Nikos Kazantzakis is paradoxically the best-known Greek novelist outside Greece: paradoxically, because he himself rated his poetry and dramas far above his novels, to which he devoted himself seriously only during the last decade of his life. Paradoxically, too, because Kazantzakis has tended to be regarded more highly in international circles than at home.

Born in Heraklion, Crete in 1883, during the final stages of the violent and protracted struggle of the island's Christian population to break free of Ottoman rule and become part of Greece, Kazantzakis was a writer of truly vast ambitions. His early writing juxtaposes the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, the 'vitalism' of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, aesthetic idealism, and a strong sense of national culture, including a deep commitment to the spoken form of Greek, *demotiki*, as the natural language for literary expression, against the conservative trends of the time. To this already explosive mixture Kazantzakis, by the early 1920s, had added Buddhism, Communism, and Christian asceticism. It was during a visit to Mount Athos with the poet Angelos Sikelianos in 1914 that Kazantzakis first formulated a doctrine that he would enunciate again and again throughout his career: that the goal of human life is the 'transubstantiation of matter into spirit'.

Kazantzakis' literary career began in 1906 with the publication of the novel *Serpent and Lily* and the writing of the first of many plays, *Day is Breaking* (performed 1907). The novel draws heavily on the aesthetic excesses of the *fin de siècle* in much of the rest of Europe and failed to establish a place in the Greek fiction of the time; the play is close to the manner of Ibsen. After 1909, when his next play was rejected for performance, most of Kazantzakis' dramas were not written for the stage.

Throughout the greater part of his life Kazantzakis supported himself by journalism, much of it describing his far-flung travels, and by translating several of the world's classics into modern Greek. After the defeat of prime minister Venizelos in the election of November 1920, Kazantzakis left Greece disillusioned. His short lyrical and philosophical 'credo' entitled *Askitiki*, translated into English as *Saviours of God: Spiritual Exercises*, was written in Vienna and Berlin in 1922-3. But the work which, then and later, Kazantzakis regarded as his *magnum opus* was the epic poem entitled in Greek, simply and boldly, *Odyssey*, and in its English translation as *The Odyssey: a Modern Sequel*. The writing of this enormous work, through successive drafts, took fourteen years, from 1924 until its publication in 1938.

The Odyssey spans twenty-four books (like Homer's) and, at 33,333 lines, of seventeen syllables each, must surely lay claim to being the longest poem ever composed. Its language is a recondite treasury of the attested oral speech of the Greek regions, so comprehensive as to require a glossary for the benefit of the poem's urban readers.

The story begins where Homer's *Odyssey* leaves off, with Odysseus finding his native Ithaca too small to hold him. After a series of adventures in the more or less historical world of the Aegean Bronze Age, as it was known in the archaeology of the time, Odysseus travels southwards until he leaves the known world altogether. On the equator he finds an ideal city-state,



Nikos Kazantzakis with Angelos Sikelianos (see p. 154), 1921.
(Eleni Kazantzaki Archive)

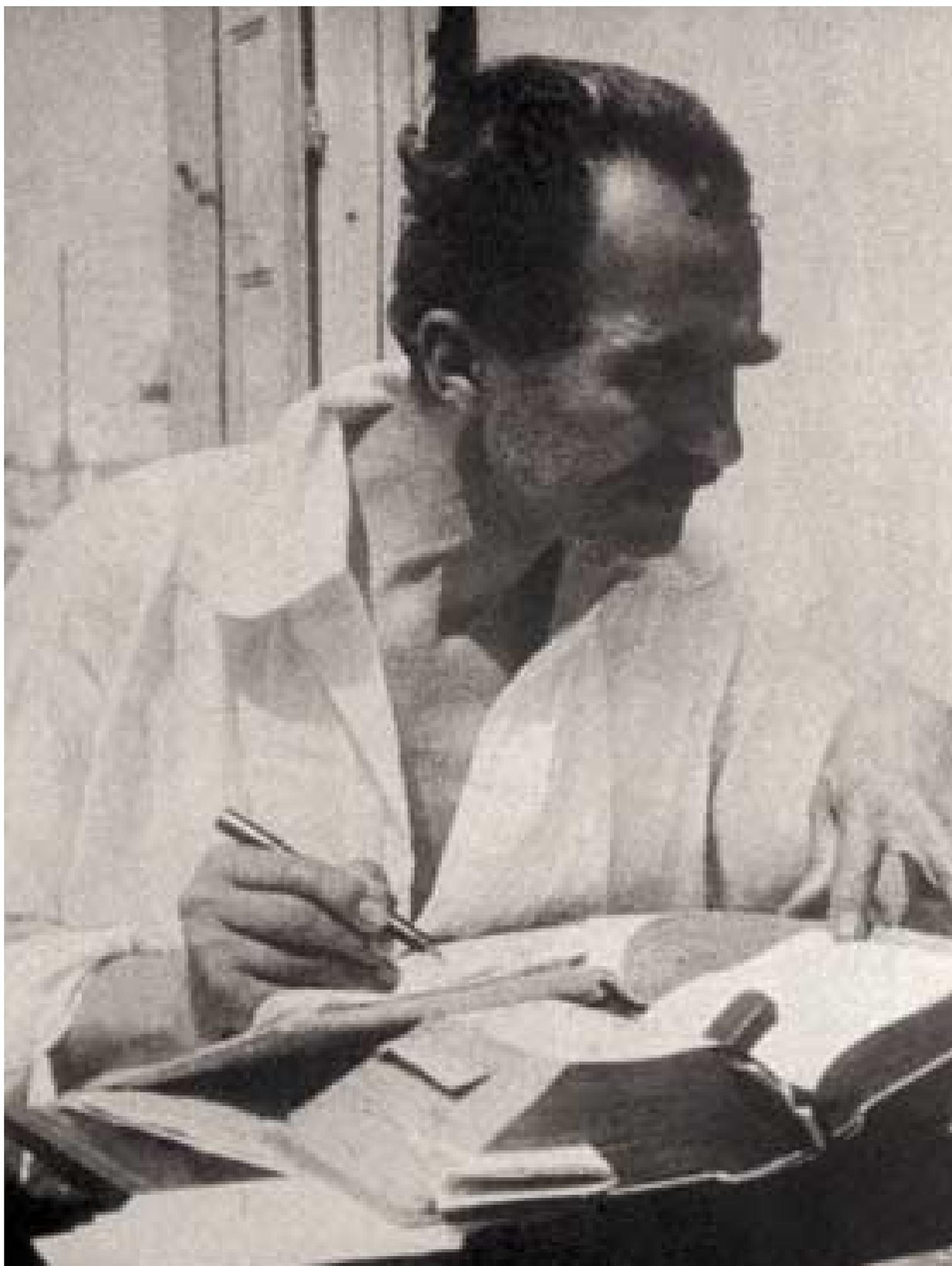
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Nikos Kazantzakis and Panait Istrati in the 'Tropical Garden' at Borjum, 1928, mimicking the two ancient Egyptian statues of monkeys on either side of them. (Eleni Kazantzaki Archive)



Nikos and Eleni Kazantzaki with Albert Schweitzer at Grunnsbach, Austria, 11 August 1955. (Eleni Kazantzaki Archive)



Nikos Kazantzakis in Aegina, Greece, 1931, compiling a Greek-English Dictionary. (Eleni Kazantzaki Archive)

but after its destruction by earthquake the scene moves inwards, to the consciousness of the hero as he continues an increasingly dreamlike progress southwards, to die adrift on an iceberg headed, with some geographical licence, for the South Pole. Many have thought this a profoundly nihilistic work, though Kazantzakis himself denied it.

His wanderings temporarily halted by the occupation of Greece during the Second World War, Kazantzakis in the winter of 1941-2, at the age of fifty-eight, began work on the novel that would mark his second *début* in Greek literature. This was *Zorba the Greek*. *Zorba* was the first of seven novels (if we count the autobiographical *Report to Greco*, on which he was still working at the time of his death) that Kazantzakis wrote in his final years, and on which his international reputation now principally rests.

The action of *Zorba* is set in a Cretan village, more than twenty years before the time when it was written. The novel has been admired for the larger-than-life character of Zorba, whose peasant wisdom and vitality, honed by hard experience, wean his timid employer, who tells the story, away from his books and abstract introspection.

Of Kazantzakis' later novels, two are daring treatments of the life of Christ. *Christ Recrucified* updates the Gospel story, transplanting it to a remote Greek village under Turkish rule in the early twentieth century. *The Last Temptation* is a historical novel of the life of Jesus, in which Jesus is finally 'tempted', during his final moments on the Cross, by being allowed to dream the rest of the life that might have been his had he not been crucified, before returning to the present to embrace his martyrdom. Banned by the Catholic Church when it first appeared in French in 1954, this novel, and the 1989 Martin Scorsese film based upon it, have provoked accusations of blasphemy from Christians of many denominations. A gentler treatment of a Christian theme is found in *God's Pauper: St Francis of Assisi*, while *Freedom and Death* and *The Fratricides* (the latter published posthumously) deal with violent conflict, respectively the rebellion in Crete against the Ottomans in 1889 and the Greek civil war of the late 1940s.

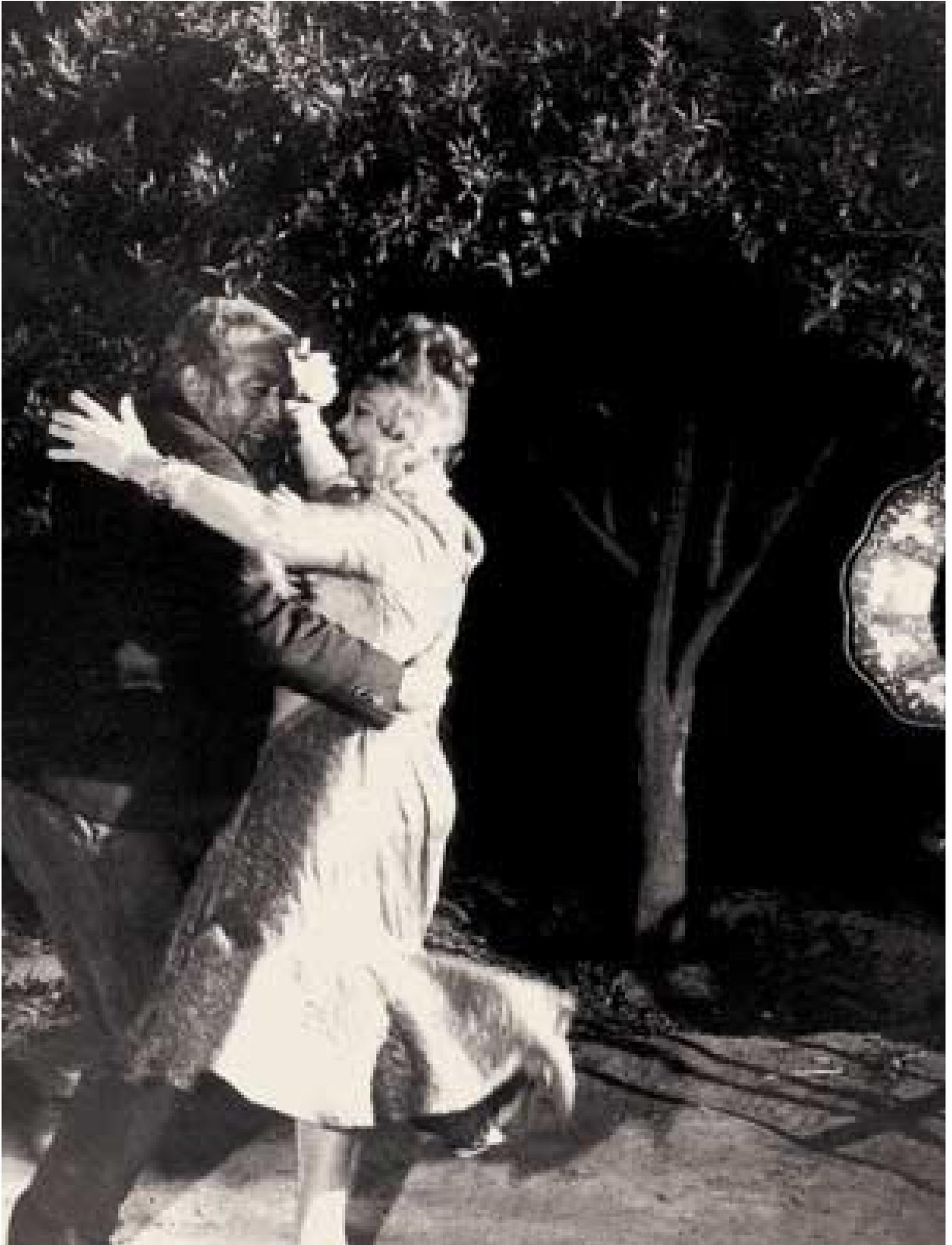
All Kazantzakis' novels, and his *Odyssey*, have been translated into the major European languages. Several have been successful in film adaptations with international directors and stars (Cacoyannis with Alan Bates and Antony Quinn; Jules Dassin; Scorsese). After 1946 Kazantzakis made his home in the south of France, at Cap d'Antibes. He died in Freiburg, Germany, in October 1957 and was buried, according to his wish, under a simple cross on the highest part of the sixteenth-century Venetian fortifications of his native Heraklion.



Kazantzakis with Panait Istrati beneath the Acropolis, 1928, during Istrati's visit to Athens where they were interrogated in court about speeches they had made in an Athenian theatre in support of the Soviet Union. (Eleni Kazantzaki Archive)



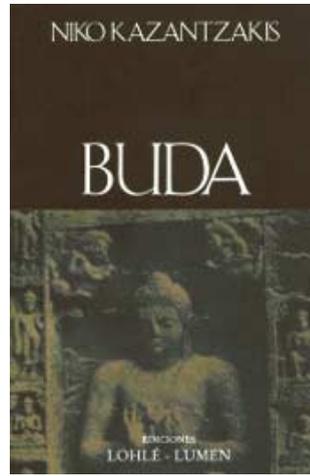
Kazantzakis at the temple of Aphaia, Aegina, 1927. (Eleni Kazantzaki Archive)



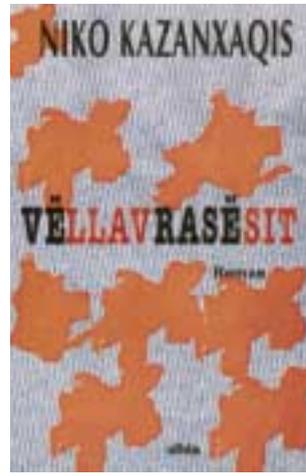
From the film *Zorba the Greek* by Michael Cacoyannis, 1963-4. Anthony Quinn as Zorba dancing with Lila Kedrova's Madame Hortense.
(The Greek Film Archive - Cinema Museum of Greece)



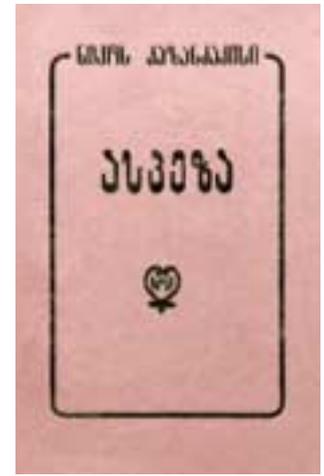
Greece 1945



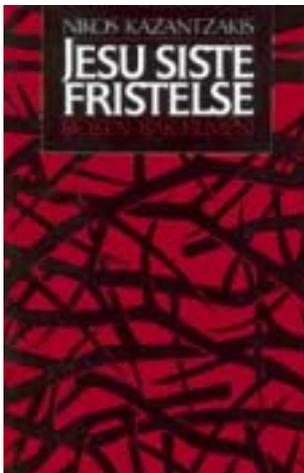
Argentina 1995



Albania 1997



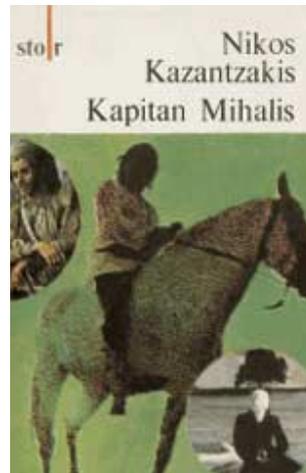
Georgia 1997



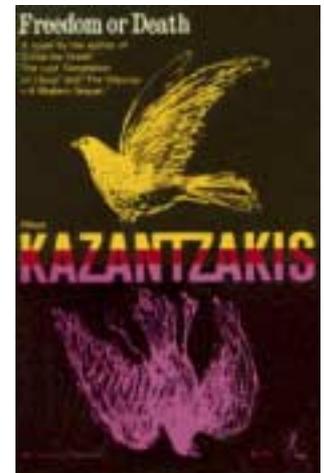
Finland 1988



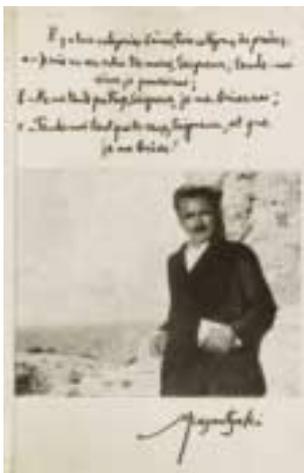
The Netherlands 1997



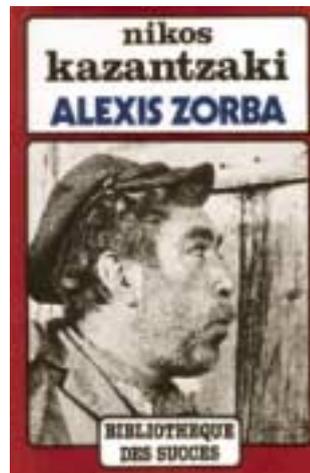
Yugoslavia 1976



U.S.A. 1961



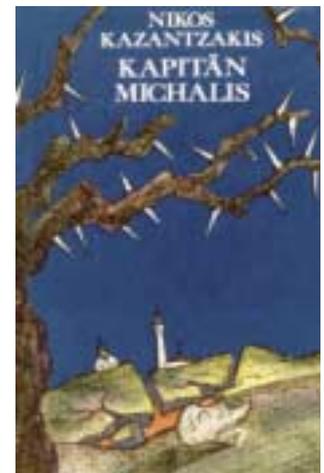
France 1961



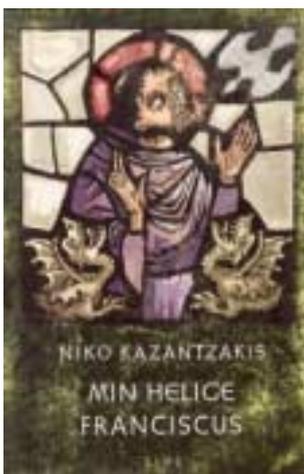
France 1976



Poland 1960



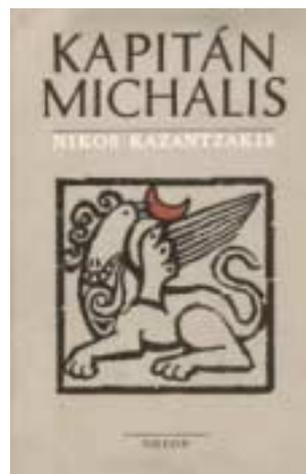
Germany 1973



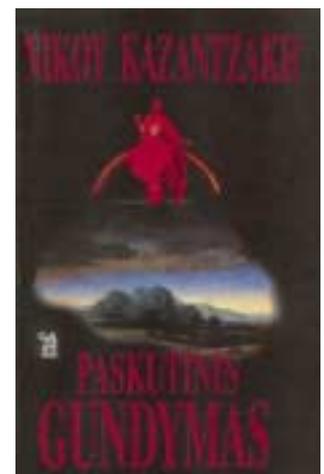
Sweden 1956



Spain 1997



Czechoslovakia 1980



Lithuania 1997

The Hungarian dancer Nikolska at the Acropolis,
Athens, 1929 – Photograph by Nelly.
(Benaki Museum, Photographic Archive, Athens)



SECTION VI

THE THIRTIES: A TURNING POINT
NEW DIRECTIONS

(1930-1974)

THIS PERIOD OPENS with the so-called ‘1930s generation’ and closes with the overthrow of a dictatorship in 1974. During these years, Greece lived through two dictatorships (Metaxas, 1936 and the Colonels, 1967), WWII, Occupation and Resistance and Civil War (1944-49). Moreover, a large portion of Cyprus was occupied by Turkish forces, and remains occupied to this day. However, only a few years after the restoration of democracy in 1974, Greece became the twelfth member of the European Community, and recently joined EMU. It is clear from all these developments that this was a highly turbulent and tragic period, coloured as it was by national and popular struggle, national disasters, political and social oppression, exile, and concentration camps, but on the other hand it was not short on heroism and hope. All these historical conditions and related human experiences were, naturally, reflected in the literature of the period.

Two of the most dominant voices of the 1930s generation, Seferis and Andreas Embiricos, introduced two great artistic movements of the European avant-garde: Anglo-American Modernism and Surrealism. It is therefore no accident that this generation was to produce two Nobel laureates in poetry: Seferis in 1963 and Elytis in 1979. Yannis Ritsos, the great versatile poet of the Left also belongs to this group, as does the bold poet-painter, Nikos Engonopoulos. The fiction produced at this time was also notable, both in its more traditional expression (Kosmas Politis, Yorgos Theotokas, A. Terzakis, P. Prevelakis) and when it displayed more obviously modern preoccupations (Pentzikis, Axioti, Scarimbos).

Many of the writers of the next generation had participated in the military and political events of the time, which is why they look to these experiences for their subject matter, and to the traumatic socio-political consequences they had for the country in the 1940s and 1950s. They were not so much concerned with discovering new literary modes (a significant number of them employed the techniques and models of the previous generation) as with a felt obligation to witness and record everything they saw and suffered during this cruel period of war and social turmoil, starting with the Second World War and ending with the collapse of democracy.



Several representatives of the so-called '30s generation' photographed at the home of Yorgos Theotokas in the early 1960s. *Seated, from left:* Angelos Terzakis (see p. 205), K.T. Dimaras, Yorgos Katsimbalis (Henry Miller's original 'Colossus of Maroussi'), Kosmas Politis (see p. 198), Andreas Embiricos (see p. 178). *Standing, from left:* Diomedes Petsalis, Ilias Venezis (see p. 214), Odysseus Elytis (see p. 186), George Seferis (see p. 170), Andreas Karantonis, Stelios Xefloudas, Yorgos Theotokas (p. 205). (E.L.I.A. Photographic Archive)



GEORGE SEFERIS



The twin-tailed mermaid drawn by Seferis, which he used as an emblem for his works.



George Seferis in Bhamdoun, Beirut, 1955.
(National Bank Cultural Foundation, Athens / Anna Londou Photographic Archive)

George Seferis was born in Smyrna in 1900 and died in Athens in 1971. In 1931 he published, at his own expense, a collection of poetry with the ambiguous title *Strophe* (meaning both part of a poem and ‘turning-point’). The collection contained thirteen short poems, most of them in traditional metre and rhythm, and a more extensive poem, the cryptic *Erotikos Logos*, in 96 rhymed 15-syllable verses, which vividly brings to mind *Erotokritos*, the celebrated Cretan 17th-century poem. What became clear from the first appearance of this poet, who had already spent some years in Paris and in London studying law and English, was his desire to shed new light on the existing poetic landscape, overshadowed as it was both by the patriarchal figure of Palamas and by the ghost of Karyotakis. Many poems appear to follow the dictates of ‘pure’ poetry, such as those found in the work of the French poets Mallarmé and Valéry. There are, however, also what were called ‘impure’ poems, with ‘lower’, more common speech forms, written in everyday language with corresponding subject matter. Today, seventy years later, most of the poems in *Strophe* (‘Turning-Point’) retain their vigour. Some in fact are quite familiar to the public at large as they have been put to music, as have many of Seferis’ later poems. One such poem is ‘Denial’, which, thanks to the music of Mikis Theodorakis, has probably become the best known poem in all of Modern Greek poetry.

The Cistern, Seferis’ next work, is a lyrical poem of 125 verses. It was published in 1932, while the poet was working in the diplomatic corps in London. It appears, however, that *The Cistern* no longer expressed Seferis’ artistic needs, as the poet was now searching for new poetic directions. He had, during Christmas of 1931, been introduced to the poetry of T.S. Eliot, whom he was to meet in person twenty years later. There followed a long period of anguished experimentation – it was during this period that he translated *The Waste Land* into Greek – until, in March of 1935, his *Mythistorema* appeared.

Mythistorema (whose title – from the Greek words for ‘myth’ and for ‘history’ – is particularly significant) is a composite poem comprising 24 sections in free verse – a poem that contains the basic concepts and recurring themes of the poetry to follow: ‘common’, almost unpoetic speech (Seferis was later to declare that what interested him primarily was to speak “plainly” and “without affectation”); a familiar, narrative but also dramatic voice; a continued intermingling of history and mythology (the poem resounds throughout with echoes of the Asia Minor Disaster of 1922) as everyday figures (those called “friends” and “comrades”) parade through the poem in the company of mythical “personae” and symbolic figures. Everything takes place in “typical” Greek landscapes, sometimes recognisable, while the mythical subject matter (drawn chiefly from Homer and the tragic playwrights) appears fragmentarily, “peaks” of myths, as the poet himself would say, nevertheless capable of providing (in the manner of the “mythical method”) stability and clarity to the emotion possessing the poet. This is Seferis’ most definitive poem and the most truly representative text of Greek Modernism. It continues today to retain its effectiveness and to a certain extent its inherent cryptic nature.

In the spring of 1940 two more collections came out: *Book*

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George Seferis in Piraeus with Philippos Hadzopoulos, Nikos Kavvadias' nephew (see p. 196), 1970.
(National Bank Cultural Foundation, Athens / Anna Londou Photographic Archive)



George Seferis receiving the Nobel prize from the King of Sweden, Stockholm, 10 December 1963.
(National Bank Cultural Foundation, Athens / Anna Londou Photographic Archive)

of *Exercises* and *Logbook I*, containing poems written between 1928 and 1940. The five years between 1935 and 1940 were a critical period, both in terms of Seferis' own life story and in the history of Greece. He served as Consul to Albania in the city of Korytsa for a brief period, where he felt extremely isolated, while in 1936 General Metaxas imposed a dictatorship in Greece along the ideological lines of Mussolini's fascism and of Nazism. As a diplomat Seferis felt himself trapped in the cogwheels of dictatorship, as seen in the confessional work *Manuscript '41*, but nevertheless he did not resign his post. Certain poems, particularly in the second collection, reveal this dilemma and also the oppressively stifling circumstances he was living under. There is no lack, however, of poems filled with poetry and existential *angst*, such as 'Nijinsky', inspired by the vision of the great dancer, or the better-known 'The King of Asine', in which the poet, while strolling through the ruins of the Homeric king's castle, contemplates, among other things, the eventual disappearance of a work's creator, the "void" that will unavoidably cover his actual person.

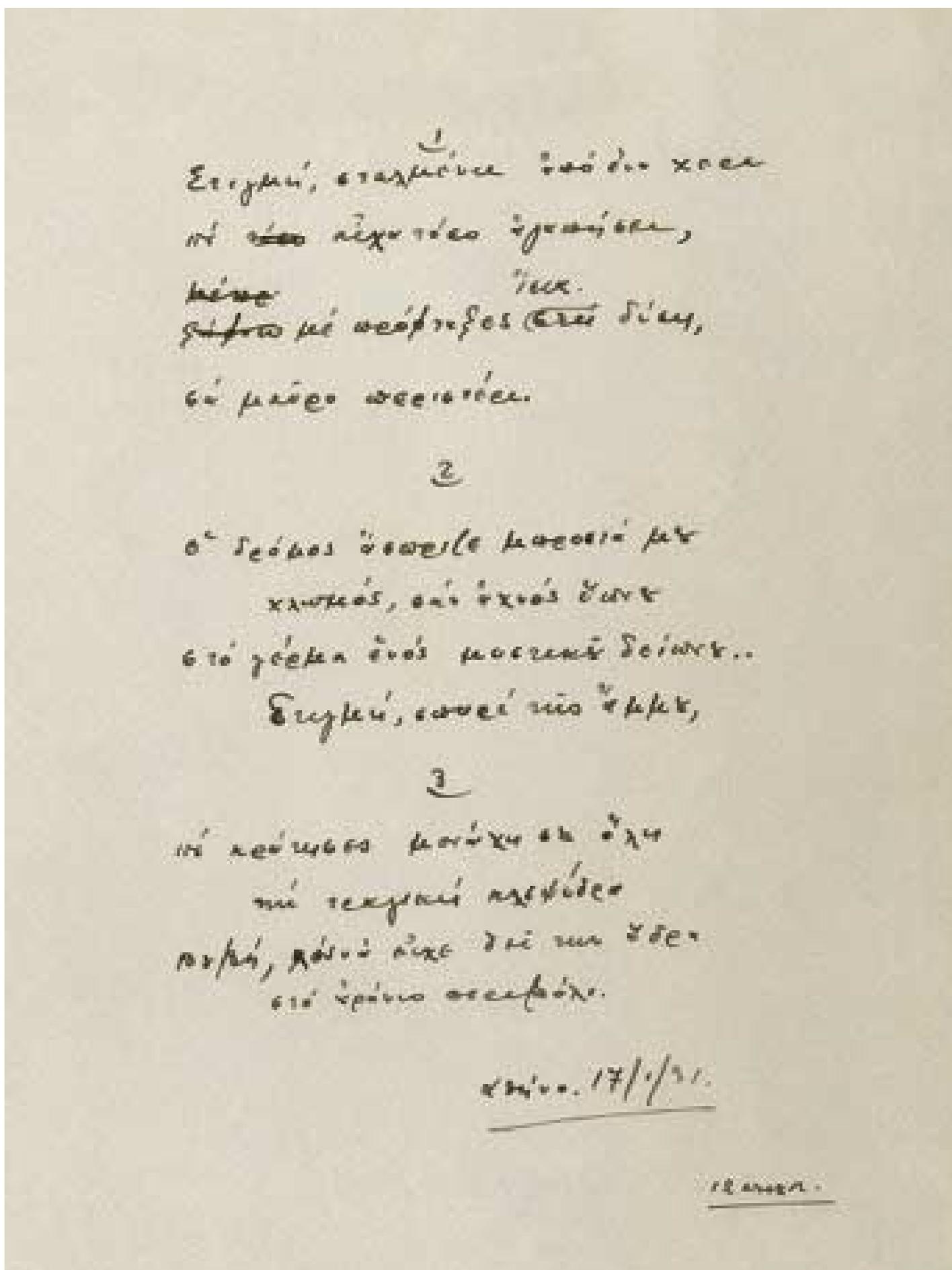
The German invasion and occupation of Greece, his flight, along with the Greek government, to South Africa and to Egypt, the horrors of war, the political intrigues and clashes between Greeks – precursors of the impending Civil War – were the experiences that served as the subject matter for *Logbook II*, which came out, in a first version, in Alexandria in 1944. But

now was also the time when he began to feel deeply the influence of the climate of cosmopolitanism and of greater Hellenism, as it was expressed in the poetry of the Alexandrian poet C.P. Cafavy, whom Seferis discovered during this period.

The decade from 1947 to 1957 was a particularly successful one for Seferis. In 1947 he brought out his most mature work, *The Thrush* – taken from the name of a small boat that sunk in the waters off the island of Poros –, a three-part 'musical' composition, where personal and erotic memories are freely interwoven with the traumatic memories of WWII and the tragedy of the Civil War. In 1953 Seferis discovered Cyprus, a place "where the miracle still works", and in 1955 he brought out *Logbook III*, containing poems inspired by the ancient and modern history of the island. Many of the poems, 'Helen', 'Salamis of Cyprus', 'The Demon of Fornification', 'Engomi', are considered classics. During this same decade he was placed in the highest diplomatic positions. He served first in Ankara in 1947, and had the opportunity to visit his birthplace, Smyrna, to which he had not returned since 1914. He later served in Beirut as acting ambassador to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq, and in 1957 he was appointed ambassador to London, where he was to finish his diplomatic career.

In 1963 Seferis became the first Greek author to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. In his *Three Secret Poems* (1966) the poet, "the desolate mind [that] has seen the end", sums up his

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Manuscript of the first poem in the collection *Strophe* ('Turning-Point'). (Gennadius Library, Athens)

George Seferis' *Strophe* ('Turning-Point') of 1931, a slim volume of verse, at first glance seems to announce itself from within the existing poetic tradition, both formally and thematically. However, the poet is in fact defining the limits of this tradition, and signalling a commitment to change in Greek poetry.





'Artistic Comment' by Yannis Moralis in the sixth edition of Seferis' *Poems* (Ikaros, 1965).



George Seferis and Ezra Pound, Athens, 1965. (National Bank Cultural Foundation, Athens / Anna Londou Photographic Archive)

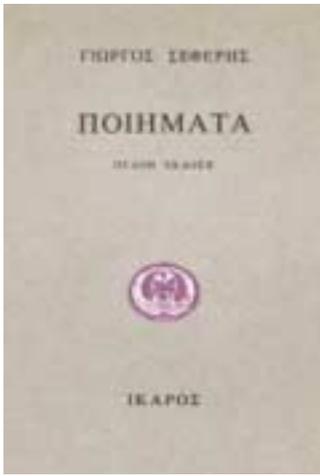
In 1965, the year of T.S. Eliot's death, Seferis met Ezra Pound at his home in Athens, thus closing a circle which began in the 1930s when Seferis discovered works such as Eliot's 'Marina' and, through him, Anglo-American Modernism. In the Introduction to his translation of *The Waste Land* (1936), Seferis enumerates the 'five most important masters' of Anglo-American Modernism: T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound. Although Seferis translated only a few of Pound's poems – 'The Lake Isle' from *Lustra* and 'Exile's Letter' from *Cathay* and three Cantos (I, XIII, XXX) – he was nevertheless profoundly influenced by Pound and his new 'epic' voice.

work and his life, accepting the fact that "everything that has passed has fittingly passed". His views on poetry, the Greek language and literature and on popular cultural traditions, his critical studies of T.S. Eliot, Dante, Cavafy and others, are included in the three volumes of his *Essays* – texts of unusual sensitivity and perspicacity, considered by some critics to be equal in merit to his poetry. Of particular interest are his journals (*Days*), his letters, and his early novel *Six Nights on the Acropolis*.

On the subject of his being awarded the Nobel Prize, Seferis said that through its choice the Swedish Academy "wished to express its solidarity with Greece's ever-vital intellect" and to honour a "language spoken for centuries but having at present a limited number of speakers". This viewpoint reflects Seferis' deep-seated belief in the current dynamic interrela-

tionship between the ancient and modern Greek language and literature, between the diachronic power of Greek civilisation and its modern expression, and finally between tradition and innovation. It was, moreover, only through tradition that the demand for renewal of Greek poetry in the early 1930s was able to be realised, and Seferis' modernism and innovations were in large part characterised by the revitalisation and imaginative use of the Greek tradition.

Seferis, the poet from Asia Minor, estranged from his homeland at a very early age, perpetually feeling like a refugee, died during the Colonels' Dictatorship, a government that only months before he had denounced internationally as tyrannical and dangerous. His funeral turned into one of the largest mass demonstrations against the military junta.



Greece 1972



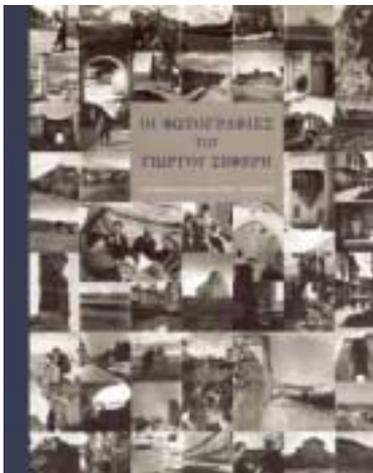
Seferis' translation of *The Waste Land*



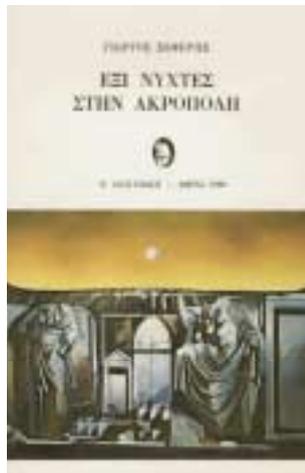
Greece 1978



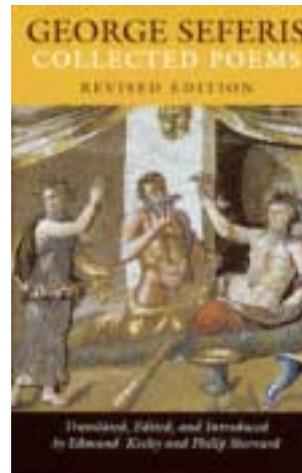
Greece 1986



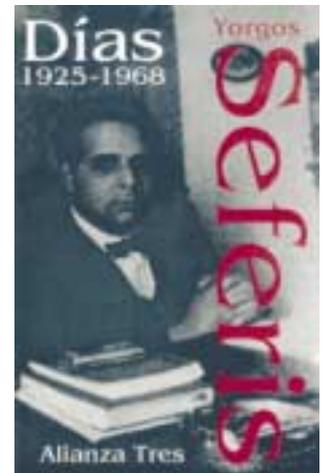
Greece 2000



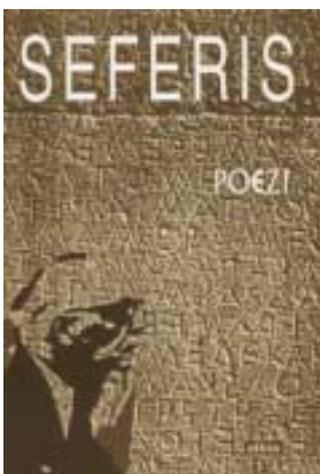
Greece 1980



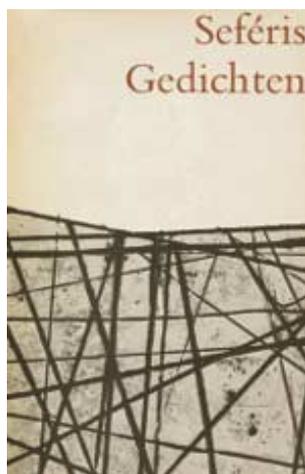
U.S.A. 1995



Spain 1997



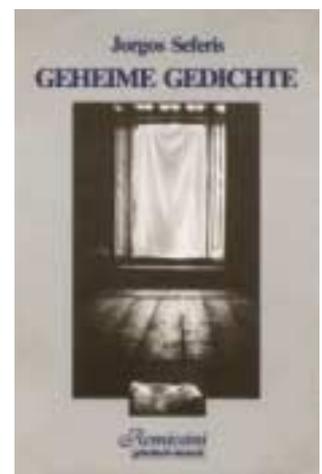
Albania 1996



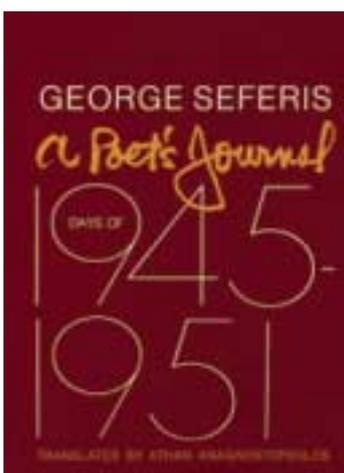
The Netherlands 1965



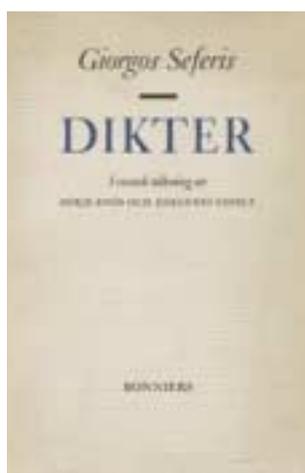
Czechoslovakia 1971



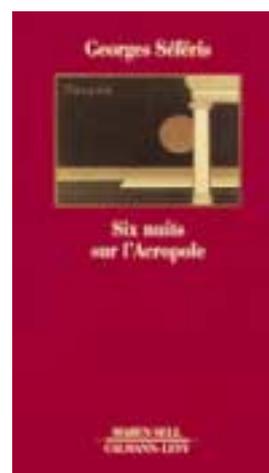
Germany 1985



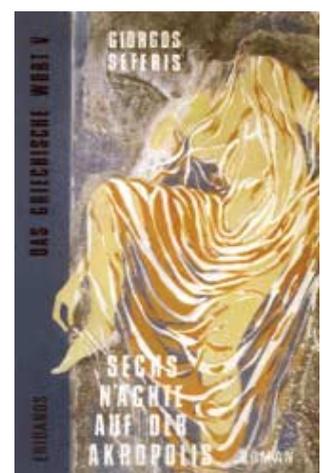
England 1974



Sweden 1963



France 1994



Athens 1984



From left: Odysseus Elytis, Andreas Embiricos, Nikos Engonopoulos in 1964 during the launch of the records with the poets' own readings of their works.

SURREALISM



Nikos Engonopoulos, *The Secret Meeting of the Poets Raymond Roussel and Georg Trakl, at the Ruins of Ephesus, as yet Unconfirmed by Other Sources*, 1968.

In March 1935, eleven years after the publication of the first manifesto of surrealism by André Breton, two hundred copies of a collection of sixty-three prose poems entitled *Blast Furnace* were circulated in Athens. The collection was signed by one ANDREAS EMBIRICOS (1901-1975), the offspring of a well-known shipping family, with no work published before then. Born in Braila, Romania, to a Greek father and a Russian mother, Embiricos studied economics in Switzerland, literature and philosophy in London and psychoanalysis in Paris. In 1929 he entered the circle of French surrealists, was initiated into the technique of automatic writing and made the acquaintance of Breton in person. Two months before *Blast-Furnace* appeared, he gave a lecture on the subject of surrealism to “a grim middle-class audience who listened in obvious annoyance”, as an on-the-spot witness named Odysseus Elytis noted.

Blast-Furnace holds a unique place in modern Greek poetry. No poet prior to *Blast-Furnace* – in spite of indications that surrealism was known in Greece before 1935 – and no poet since, has put together a book so heretical, so cryptic and so “difficult” – one which nevertheless sold out in no time, “not because it was of interest, but because it was considered so scandalous, written by someone deranged”, as the poet himself reminisces. Without punctuation, in a language mainly scholarly and precocious – something which the proponents of demotic Greek found particularly annoying – with interminable phrases, perfectly constructed but without any apparent logical coherence, yet with the typically Greek fifteen-syllable meter



Andreas Embiricos – Photograph by Aris Konstantinidis, 1964. (Agra Publications Archive)



Andreas Embiricos, with hookah, and Odysseus Elytis (left), Mytilini, 1935.

1935 saw the publication of Andreas Embiricos' *Blast-Furnace*, the first example of Greek Surrealism. Embiricos later started to practice psychoanalysis, the first Greek to do so.

At the beginning of 1935 Embiricos and Elytis went to Mytilene in the footsteps of the folk artist Theophilos, who had recently died. They had been sent there by Tériade (Eleftheriadis), the great publisher and art collector, who together with Albert Skira published the Parisian periodical *Minotaure* (1933-39) and had already creamed off the best examples of the avant-garde of the period, including Picasso, Breton, Man Ray, Lacan, Eluard, Crevel, Masson, Bataille, Dali, Leiris, Brassai, Dérain, Tzara.

Ancient Greek motifs were also used by Greek surrealists: see the painting by Nikos Engonopoulos opposite.



clearly discernible, *Blast-Furnace* seems to have met the requirements of free association and the resultant automatic writing. It would be difficult however plausibly to maintain that these poems had an 'automatic' or 'chance' origin or that no work was done on them, in spite of the fact that Embiricos himself stated that his poems do not always develop "within the limits of consciousness". Every poem, he says, is a "poem-event", dynamic and self-contained, and its elements remain "free of any compromised or standardised aesthetic, moral or logical construction". The recipe was never to be repeated, in spite of the fact that the experiment succeeded in bringing to the forefront the most authentic Greek surrealist writing.

Embiricos' next collection, *Inner Land* (1945), as well as a short volume of prose, *Writings or Personal Mythology* (1960), contain texts bathed in surrealist light, but with coherence and logical consistency. It is now quite clear that what was mainly of interest to Embiricos was to keep alive the subversive and emancipating strain of the European surrealist movement and to promulgate the vision of a world free of every type of oppression, a world "without borders and without limits". Political, social and particularly sexual liberation were Embiricos' main concern, so much so that he emerged as the Greek poet and visionary par excellence of a world system of politics and co-existence. His city, Oktana, described in the collection bearing the same name, "will be the capital of the New World, in the heart of mankind's future", a universal city, filled with poetry, love, pleasure, justice and freedom. The eight-volume novel *The Great Eastern* (1990-1), is the most extensive and the most daring modern Greek text, where all of Embiricos' fantasies, doctrines and visions are developed in an epic tone.

The poet and painter NIKOS ENGONOPOULOS (1907-1985) and Embiricos are the grand old duo of modern Greek surrealism. However, although both seem to follow in the main the dictates of surrealist poetics (daring combinations of words and meanings, at first sight incompatible; free-associative accumulation of multiple images; erotically infused rhetoric and a rebirth of romanticism; the use of dreams, etc.), the final result is different. Engonopoulos appears to be more 'ethnic' in his choice of poetic material, subject matter and poetic vehicle (he writes only poetry), but in his poems there is a more frequent occurrence of the 'miraculous', the unexpected, and the element of surprise – elements dear to surrealists. He is clearly less optimistic than Em-

The hand-painted chest, the work of the folk artist Theophilos, which contained the artist's paints, a few favourite pictures and notebook, brought from Mytilene by Embiricos in 1935 (Embiricos family collection).



André Derain's cover for vol. 3-4, 1935 of the French periodical *Minotaure*, published by Tériade (Eleftheriadis) and Albert Skira.



Nikos Engonopoulos, *Theseus and the Minotaur*, 1960-61, oil on canvas (private collection).



Nikos Engonopoulos in Corfu, Easter 1957.

biricos – researchers have found a strongly rooted Karyotakian influence – but he is not lacking in sarcasm and the occasional black humour of the surrealists. His predisposition towards the epic and its commensurate tone – something that also sets him apart – is not directed largely to proclaiming and extolling a vision of universal freedom and happiness. Rather it is concerned with particular liberation movements and political and social uprisings: the Greek revolution of 1821; the liberation movement of the Latin-American Simon Bolivar (the similarly-titled poem, *Bolivar: A Greek Poem* was written during the German Occupation and was characterised by a spirit of resistance); the Spanish and the Greek civil wars. It is of interest, consequently, that these two major Greek surrealists espoused to a great degree the aesthetic and poetic ideology of the European surrealist movement, but where they seem to have remained more steadfast is in the emancipating and subversive ideology of the movement.

ODYSSEUS ELYTIS (1911-1996) appears at first to be a fellow traveller with the other two major Greek surrealists. But already with his first collection *Orientalisms* (1939) he shows that what he keeps in the end from surrealist poetics is the automatic writing, that “unique achievement”, as he puts it, “in the pursuit of lyric poetry”. It is not, however, without importance that, first, his two major ‘patriotic’ poems, the *Heroic and Elegiac Song for the Lost Second Lieutenant of Albania* (1945) and the better-known *Axion Esti* (1959), owe much to the new dynamic lyricism, which has its source in surrealist proclamations, and, second, he is a staunch adherent of the poetic, aesthetic and social ideology of Embiricos (see his ‘Report’ on *Andreas Embiricos*, 1978) and of NIKOLAS CALAS who also wrote under the names of Kalamaris, Randos and (Robe)Spieros (1907-1988), an “insubordinate” poet and more or less incomprehensible figure who, as he writes, “has something of Jacques Vaché and something of Marcel Duchamp”. Calas’ four *Notebooks* contain poems whose form skirts the edges of surrealism, but as far as their ideas are concerned they are considered to be prime examples of revolutionary and anarchic writing.

The second wave of Greek poets who may be considered to have followed in the footsteps of the first surrealists made their appearance during the decade of the forties and later, when the initial impetus of the movement had died down. Nikos Gatsos (1911-1990), Matsi Hadjilazarou, (1924-1990), Miltos Sachtouris (1919-), Hector Kaknavatos (1920-), Nanos Valaoritis (1921-), E.H. Gonatas (1924-), Manto Aravantinou (1926-1990), and Yorgos Likos (1920-2000) comprise a group of important poets who wrote and in some cases continue to write under the influence of the surrealist movement. They are an impressive but atypical group of post-surrealist poets – if such a characterisation has any meaning – who are not imbued by the same poetic ideals, save for the obsession, in most of them at least, with the dynamic lyric language set free by the imaginativeness of automatic writing. In any case what remains today from the surrealist movement is common property. Surrealism inspired freeness and bold language and destroyed once and for all the sway of academia over the arts and in life. These elements are still alive and they activate and sustain every poetic spirit. Surrealism, in this sense, does not live on today as unwholesome nostalgia, nor does it hover over us as a sacred ghost.



A group of exiles in New York circa 1944-45. *Front row, from left:* André Breton, Mme Césaire, Jacqueline Matisse, Elisa Breton, Mme Calas, Nikolas Calas (*centre below Marcel Duchamp*), Patricia Matta, Matta, Teeny Matisse, (the future Mme Duchamp), Aimé Césaire. *Back row:* The painter Enrico, Denis de Rougemont, Kay Sage (?), Yves Tanguy, Marcel Duchamp.

NIKOLAS CALAS, also known as Nikos Kalamaris or Nikitas Rantos or N. Spieros (Lausanne 1907 – New York 1988), was, in the words of André Breton, “one of the most brilliant and daring spirits of the age”, alongside Georges Bataille, Benjamin Peret, Leonora Carrington, André Masson and Marcel Proust.

He was an unusual figure of the Greek intellectual and poetic world. Writing for left-wing reviews in the 1930s, he made a name for himself as one of the first Greek Surrealists, with a clear preference for the political and social dimension of the phenomenon. In 1938 he left Greece, then led by the fascist dictator Ioannis Metaxas, for Paris where he entered French Surrealist circles, becoming a friend of Breton. It was here that he published his first theoretical work, *Foyers d’Incendie*, in which he called on artists and writers to smash the ‘grubby windowpane’ of contemporary art and make it invincible and revolutionary.

When war broke out he moved to New York where he set up *New Directions* (1939), an early anthology of European Surrealist poets. In New York, where he was to remain for the rest of his life, Calas became closely associated with the avant-garde movement becoming a lively and polemical critic of modern art and a proponent of a broadly active art and dynamic critique. His interests – ranging from the pre-Socratic philosophers to Wittgenstein, and from the Portuguese renaissance and Hieronymus Bosch to Surrealism and the American avant-garde – mark him out as a unique Greek intellectual who produced a staggering variety of works. He wrote for the leading reviews of the day, including *View*, *Village Voice*, *Artforum*, *Arts Magazine* and *Art International*. Many of his articles are included in *Art in the Age of the Risk* (1968), *Icons and Images of the Sixties* (1971), *Surrealism Pro and Con* (1973) and *Transfigurations* (1982).



Nikolas Calas or Nikitas Rantos or Nikos Kalamaris in the 1930s. (E.L.I.A. Archive)



Photo by Stelios Skopelitis

NIKOS GATSOS

Nikos Gatsos earned his reputation as a poet from a single collection, *Amorgos* (1943). The world presented in *Amorgos* is a combination of shocking and absurd imagery written in the popular, at times purely spoken language, with the Aegean landscape in the background. Gatsos went on to write several song lyrics and worked with Manos Hadjidakis on most of his recordings. Although he never published any more poetry, Gatsos without a doubt figures amongst the most prominent, pioneering Greek surrealists.



Photo by Stelios Skopelitis

MILTOS SACHTOURIS

Miltos Sachtouris was born in 1919. He belonged to the group of post-war Greek Surrealists and established his reputation as a poet with collections such as *The Forgotten* (1945), *The Walk* (1960) and *Vessel* (1971). Sachtouris drives certain elements of his work from the store-house of Expressionism, and his lines convulse with images of mutilation, malformed animal and human portraits. His own experience of the horrors of WWII during the German Occupation and of the Civil War that followed it come alive in his poetry.

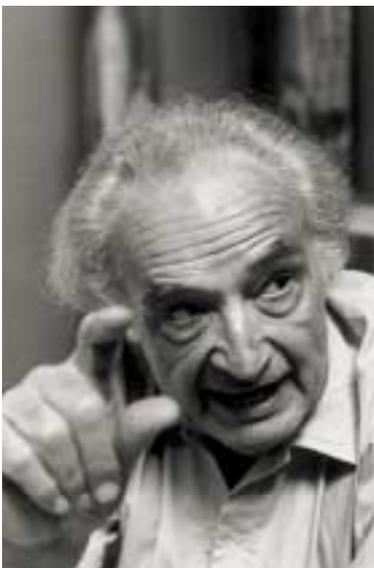
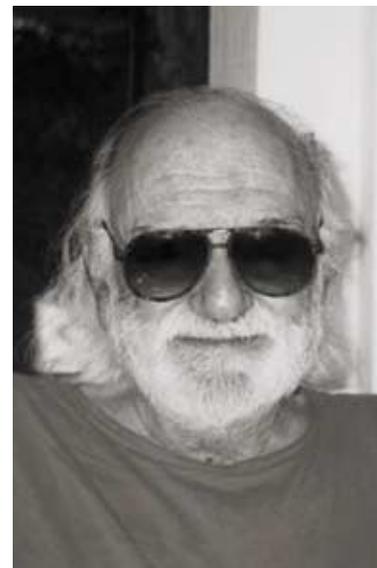


Photo by Kostas Ordolis

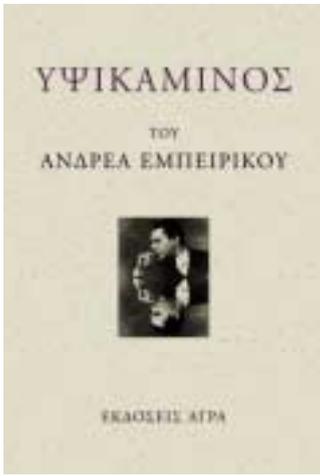
HECTOR KAKNAVATOS

Hector Kaknavatos was born in 1920. From early works such as *Diaspora* (1961) and *Scale of Hardness* (1964) to the recent *Akarei* (2001) he has been working assiduously in the service of the founding principles of surrealism, through a language in which the ruptures in logical continuity and the train of thought encounter the play of acoustic harmony of words, suggesting a purely internal functioning of the lines. One characteristic of Kaknavatos' poetry is the recurrent use of mathematical elements; Kaknavatos read mathematics at university and taught the subject for several years.

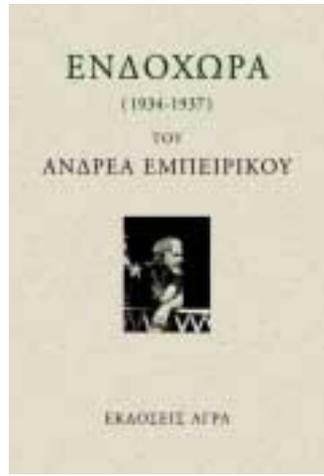


NANOS VALAORITIS

Born in Lausanne in 1921, Nanos Valaoritis has led a varied, cosmopolitan existence. He has published pioneering artistic journals in Greece and taught literature at American Universities. But above all, he is a poet and his verse collections include *The Punishment of the Magi* (1947) and *Breeding Ground for Germs* (1977). His poetry contains many narrative elements; his verse frequently restores older forms and sometimes makes use of surrealistic modes to achieve poetic self-transcendence.



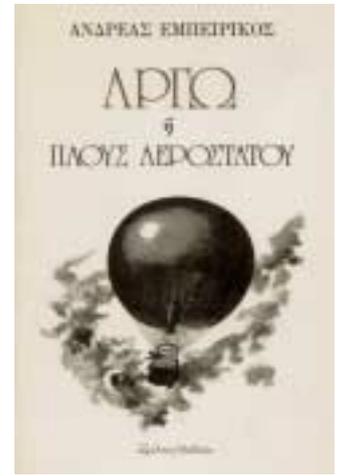
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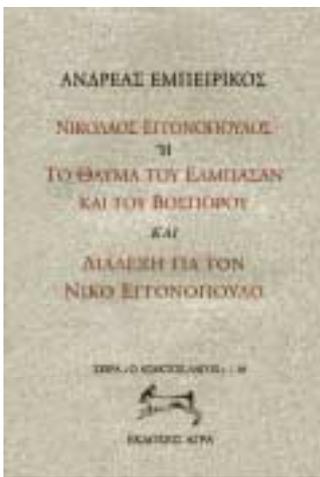
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Greece 1989-91



Greece 1980



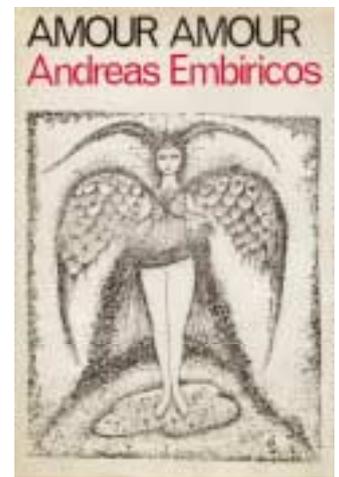
Greece 1999



France 1991



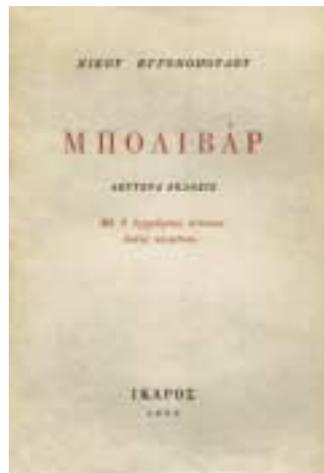
France 1991



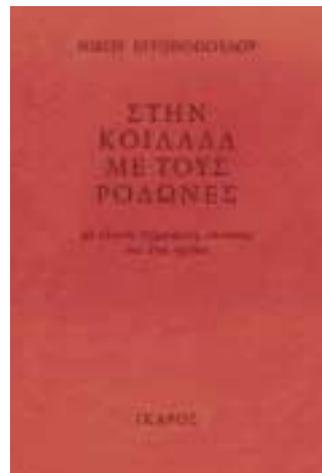
England 1966



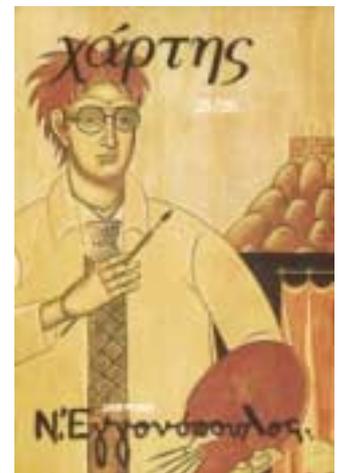
Greece 1977



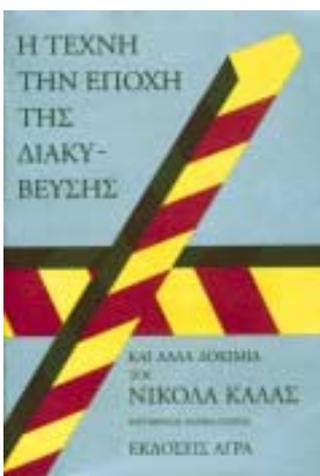
Greece 1962



Greece 1978



Greece 1988



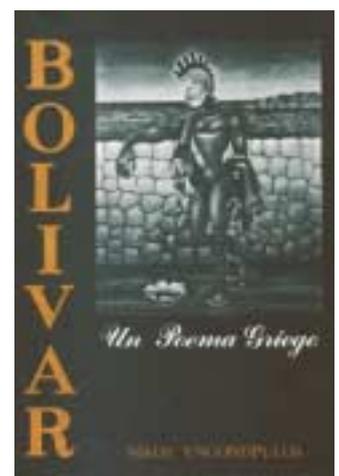
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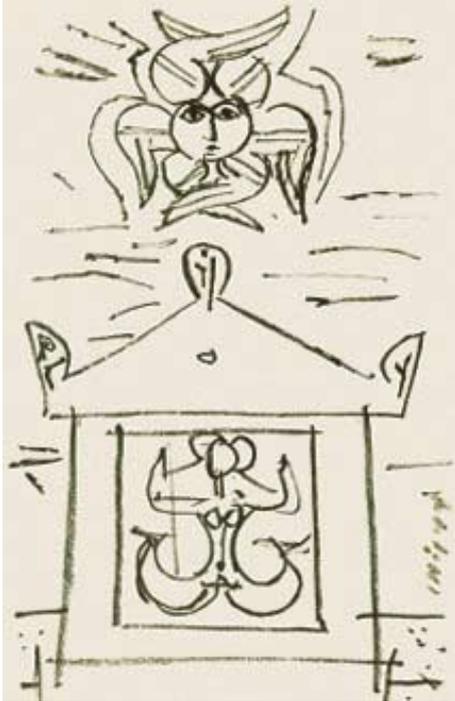


Greece 1968

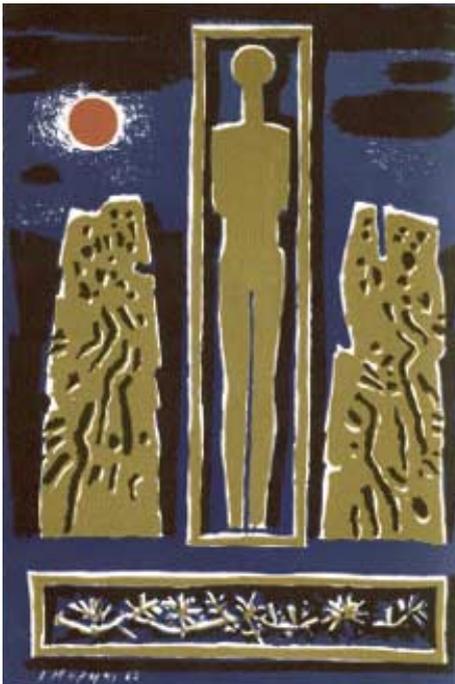


Venezuela

ODYSSEUS ELYTIS



Frontispiece for the *Axion Esti* by the artist Yannis Tsarouchis. (Ikaros, 1966)



Frontispiece for the *Heroic and Elegiac Song for the Lost Second Lieutenant of Albania* by the artist Yannis Moralis. (Ikaros, 1967)

The 30s generation poets and writers were closely associated with the artists of the time, which resulted in beautiful editions of literary works by writers such as Elytis and Seferis richly illustrated by such great names as Yannis Moralis, Yannis Tsarouchis and Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, brought out by Ikaros.



Photograph by Andreas Embiricos, Paros, 1954. (Ioulita Iliopoulou Archive)

Odysseus Elytis, winner of the 1979 Nobel Prize for Literature, was born in Heraklion, Crete, in 1911 and died in Athens in 1996. A major poet in the Greek language, Elytis is also one of the most outstanding international figures of 20th-century poetry. In his work, modernist European poetics and Greek literary tradition are fused in a highly original lyrical voice.

Elytis became acquainted with French surrealist poetry in the '30s and was captivated by surrealism's affirmation of feel-



ing and the subconscious self, its rejection of traditional forms and rigid modes of poetical expression. An advocate of free verse, he discarded established verse forms and conventions considering them to be “vessels for the containment of the most heterogenous material”. He believed that poetical content determines an inventible form and he was dismissive of rhyme which he described as “lulling” and “superficial delight”. But he did not adopt surrealism’s free associations and automatic writing as proclaimed by André Breton. His is a

mild and controlled surrealism, the syntax in his poems is not violated and, thanks to his talent, the juxtaposition of images is coherent and pleasurable. These qualities are manifest in his first collections of poetry (*Orientalism*, 1939, and *Sun the First*, 1943) which are joyous and radiant, celebrating the Greek landscape as an ideal world of sensual enjoyment and moral purity. The blue seas and the azure skies, the explosive light, the Aegean islands with their white cottages and bare rocks, the olive trees and the crickets, ancient amphorae and



Elytis receiving the Nobel prize from the King of Sweden in 1979. (Ioulita Iliopoulou Archive)



Odysseus Elytis with Louis Aragon, Paris 1980. (Ioulita Iliopoulou Archive)

ruins, summer high noon and the etesian winds define the scene where life is liberated and triumphant, mystical and deeply meaningful. This free functioning of the human self against all restraints imposed by moral, social and aesthetic conventions, the creation of “a countryside of the open heart”, is the young poet Elytis’ debt to surrealism. But, as he put it, he did not serve surrealism, he asked surrealism to serve him.

In 1940 Elytis was called up as a second lieutenant and served on the Albanian front, where the Greek army checked the Italian invasion. His experience of war marks a departure from the sunny atmosphere of his early youth and poetry, colouring his long poem *Heroic and Elegiac Song for the Lost Second Lieutenant of Albania* (1943). The figurative language still retains the wealth and boldness, the unexpected metaphors and startling images of his previous works, but the tone is sorrowful, albeit proud, and the context wider: the poet identifies himself with the lost lieutenant and the lamenting voice is the voice of his suffering nation.

The attempt of Elytis to identify himself with his nation and speak for himself and also for his country reaches its peak with *Axion Esti* (1959), his central and most ambitious work. This is a poetical *Bildungsroman*, a three-part composition of intricate formal structure, aiming to present modern Greek consciousness through the development of a first-person narrator who is simultaneously the poet himself and the voice of his country. It is at once an interpretation of the world as it is and the valiant proclamation of a belief in what it might be. Its three parts are named characteristically ‘The Genesis’, ‘The Passions’ and ‘The Gloria’, and it culminates in a glorification of all ephemeral things, of what is *Axion* – that is, Worthy – in “this small, this Great World”. Elytis’ poetical theory as regards “the view of things” is fully realized in this work. As he said in his address to the Swedish Academy on receiving the Nobel Prize, “apart from the physical side of objects and the ability to perceive them in their every detail, there is also the metaphorical ability to grasp their essence and bring them to such clarity that their metaphysical significance will also be revealed”. In *Axion Esti*, a major poem by any standards, these ideas are materialized poetically.

Elytis’ later work consists of ten collections of poems and a substantial number of essays. Outstanding among them are *The Monogram* (1972), an achievement in the European love poem tradition, and *The Oxopetra Elegies* (1991), which include some of the most difficult but profound poems written in our times. It is significant that in these mature works the tone is no longer jubilant. Melancholy, reflection and solemnity gradually prevail, although the poet’s faith in the power of imagination and the truth of poetry (a belief that brings him close to the Romantics) is still unshakeable.

In all his poetry Elytis has consistently emphasized man’s primary innocence, dismissing guilt and fate, and professing the redeeming quality of light, the ‘Judicious Sun’. He criticized the vulgarity of contemporary society and culture; showed the possibility of a different relation with the things of this world; corrected our reading of nature and our concept of love; reformulated the fundamental, minimal essentials of life, insisting that History can be written anew, reaffirming



Yannis Tsarouchis' frontispiece for *Sun the First* (Ikaros, 1963).

Shelley’s famous dictum that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

In the art of poetry he restored the high romantic expression in a modern and most convincing way, gave fresh vigour to metaphor, image and alliteration, and created his own original forms of versification. Above all, he brought to Greek poetry a clarity and sharpness which it had not known since Solomos.

An ardent apologist of the poet’s vocation, Elytis never ceased from exploring poetry’s role in these materialistic times and it is perhaps apt to conclude this appreciation by quoting a concise

statement he once made concerning the aims of his poetry :

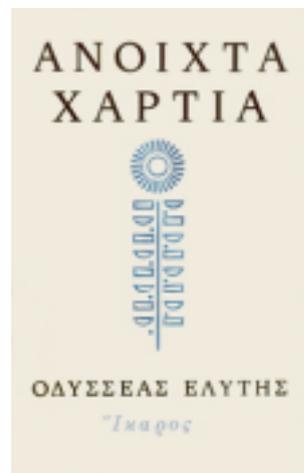
“I consider poetry a source of innocence full of revolutionary forces. It is my mission to direct these forces against a world my conscience cannot accept, precisely so as to bring that world through continual metamorphoses into greater harmony with my dreams. I am referring to a contemporary kind of magic which leads to the discovery of our true reality... In the hope of obtaining a freedom from all constraints and the justice which could be identified with absolute light, I am an idolater who, without wanting to do so, arrives at Christian sainthood.”



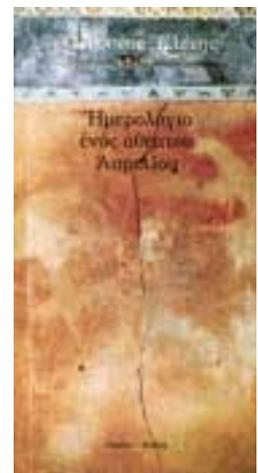
Greece 1959



Greece 1962



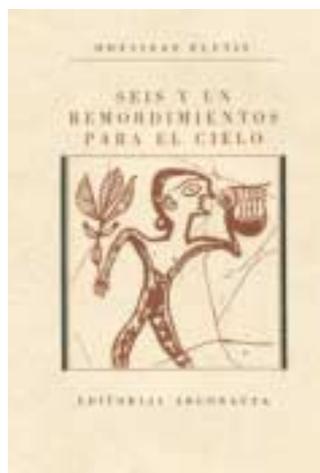
Greece 1987



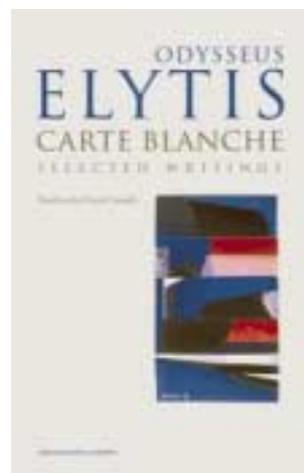
Greece 1984



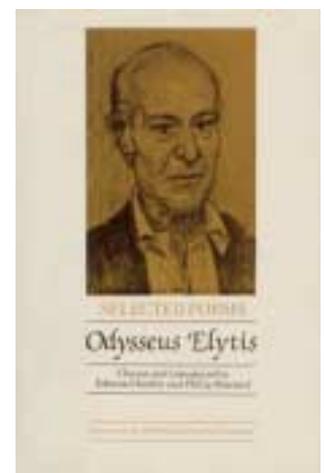
France 1996



Buenos Aires/Barcelona 1983



England 1999



U.S.A. 1974



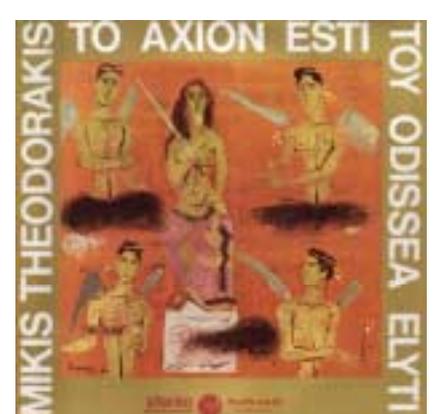
Argentina 1986



France 1982



Sweden 1979



Mikis Theodorakis' music on the *Axion Esti*

Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990) was without doubt the most prolific modern Greek poet and among the most prolific poets of his time world-wide. His poetical works, impressive in their sheer bulk and number, comprise some two-hundred collections (unities or verse compositions). To this must be added eleven volumes of translations (he translated Alexander Block, Romanian poets, Attila Jozsef, Mayakovsky, Nazim Hikmet, Ehrenburg, Czech and Slovak poets, Tolstoy, Sergei Yesenin and others) and also a volume of essays and a series of prose poems under the general title *Iconostasis of Anonymous Saints* (1971-1986).

Born into a well-to-do family of landowners that was soon to lose its property, Ritsos had a difficult childhood, marked by the death of his elder brother and his mother, as well as by his own three-year bout, from the age of 17 to 20, with tuberculosis. His first three collections, *Tractors* (1934), *Pyramids* (1935) and *Epitaphios* (1936), were published just after he joined the ranks of the artistic and journalistic circles of the Left. (It should be noted that in the early 1930s he worked as an actor and a dancer at various private theatres in Athens, while he later took up copy-editing.) The above collections gave voice, in a traditional way, to the death-infused spirit of the period between the two World Wars, and also to the progressive transition of the poet from the family network and from personal protest to social engagement – a direction he steadily followed, infatuated with Mayakovsky, Marx and the corrosive satire of Karyotakis. The crowning achievement of this early poetic period was *Epitaphios*, in which, by transforming the laments of the mother of a young worker killed in a demonstration into a message of optimism, Ritsos showed, for the first time, his propensity for giving vent to the voice of the people. The book caused a critical uproar within the dictatorship imposed on Greece in August of 1936, and every last copy was burned, along with copies of books by other authors, at the Temple of Zeus.

The twenty-year period from 1936 to 1955 was a definitive one for Ritsos' overall ideological and intellectual development. During this period momentous events took place, both in the historical arena and in his private life – events such as the Greco-Italian War in Albania, the German Occupation, the Liberation, the Civil War in Greece and the Cold War on an international level, as well as his own experience of exile and imprisonment. At the beginning of this period he became an adherent of the practice of free verse, with the composition of *The Song of My Sister* (1936-1937), in which he expressed his sorrow over the psychiatric illness of his sister (she was admitted to a state psychiatric clinic in 1936 and would be joined there two years later by his father), whereas the poems *The Last One Hundred Years B.C.* (1942), *An Old Mazourka to the Beat of the Rain* (1943) and *The Eve of the Sun* (1943) were the products of what he now felt to be the integral relationship connecting him to the historical and social events of his times. These poems are directly linked to the revival of hope that had swept over him as a result of his involvement in Resistance activities. Out of this same involvement in the events of the period and the related change in his psychological, intellectual and emotional state, as well as painful

YANNIS RITSOS

Yannis Ritsos



Yannis Ritsos with his publisher Nana Kallianesi at Kedros publishing in the 1960s. (Toula Voyatzi Archive)



Yannis Ritsos with Louis Aragon, Athens, 1977.



Yannis Ritsos drawing on stones.

experiences in his personal life, came the compositions *Romiosyni*, an epic version of Greece's historical course, and *The Lady of the Vineyards* (1945-1947) as well as *The Smoke-charred Cooking Pot* (1949), an obviously autobiographical poem filled with memories from the Resistance.

Between 1948 and 1952 Ritsos was constantly in exile, moving from place to place, persecuted for his political beliefs, together with thousands of like-minded activists, by the post-Civil War governments. Beginning in 1956, however, until the onset of the Colonels' dictatorship in 1967, he entered into what was, according to the general consensus of opinion, the period of his highest achievement and greatest maturity. During these years some thirty-five poetic compositions and collections were written, in which he delved still further into contemporary issues of ideology and world view, and also into questions concerning how these same issues related to the personal responsibility of an individual towards society, himself and, above all, the memories that attend and define him. To this period belong *Testimonies A, B and C* (1957-1963, 1964-1965 and 1961-1967 respectively), in which he undertakes to examine through dramatisation the deeper relationships created and developed between man and the things that surround him; the dialectic compositions *The Old Women and the Sea* (1958), *The Chorale of the Sponge-divers* (1960),

The Tree of Imprisonment and *The Women* (chorale, 1963), in which he attempts to record recent historical experiences from the point of view of common people; and, above all, the cycle of the *Fourth Dimension* – a cycle comprised of seventeen poems composed for the theatre that begins with *Moonlight Sonata* (1956) and ends with *Phaedre* (1974-1975). These poems are dominated by the painful feelings of solitary people in the face of the pervasive and intense ravaging of everything that surrounds them, including people, things and love itself, and also of their fear of loneliness and their tragic sense of defeat.

Particularly productive for Yannis Ritsos were the years of dictatorship from 1967 to 1974. During this period he was subjected to renewed persecution and confinement – to repeated exile and also rigorous isolation on the island of Samos, which provoked mass protests among intellectuals in all fields of art throughout the world. Under such circumstances, he could not help but confront everything he became conscious of as merely a replay of an all too familiar and previously experienced story. This comes through in most of his poems, such as *Stones, Repetitions and Railings* (1968-1969), *The Blind Man's Writ* (1972-1973), *Eighteen Short Songs of the Bitter Homeland* (1963-73), *Hymns and Laments for Cyprus* (1974), and other poems where he attempts to take up

Ἐπιτάφιος

I

Δε με, σπέρνο λότ σπέρνοτ με, καρδία λιτ καρδία με,
 πύρι λιτ φλωκία εὐχία, χερά λιτ ὄρμια με,
 Πύρ κρῖσων λὼ μαλῶμα σὲ τὸ δὲ δωροίτ πὲ κρῖσων
 τὸ δὲ σαφῆμα, δὲ γρῖκῆσ λὼ πὲ μικρὰ σὲ γέω.
 Πύρ με δὲ πὲ μῆδερῖεσ κερῶμα δὲ πὲ πῶμα,
 πὲ δὲ δωροίτ πὲ δερνῆμα τὸ κρῖσων σὲν κῶμα.
 Δὲν ἀρῶμα δὲν κολῶμαίτ πὲ δὲ πρῶμα κῶμα με γῶμα
 τὸ σὲ σκεπῶμα λιτ κῶμαίτ λὼ κῶμαίτ κρῖνο.
 ὄρμια λὼ κῶμαίτ σὲ κῶμαίτ πὲ σκεπῶμαίτ
 πὲ τῶμα δὲ λὼ με δὲ μῶμα τὸ ἀρῶμαίτ κῶμαίτ
 Δὲ με κῶμαίτ ἢ ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ λὼ κῶμαίτ, δὲν, δὲ τῶμαίτ
 τὸ δὲ πύρ λὼ πὲ κῶμαίτ, λὼ κῶμαίτ, γῶμα με, κῶμαίτ

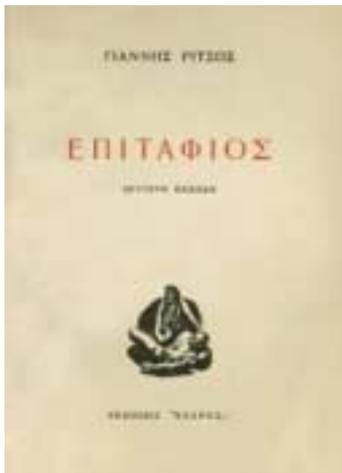
IV

Δὲ με, πῶμα κῶμα δὲ μῶμαίτ τὸ πῶμα με λὼμα γῶμαίτ
 λὼμα κῶμα, λὼμα φῶμα δὲ δὲ δὲ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ.
 Πῶμα-πῶμα με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ, με πῶμαίτ, με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ,
 πῶμα δὲ μῶμαίτ λιτ δὲ μῶμαίτ ὁ κῶμαίτ κῶμαίτ.
 Πῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ σκεπῶμαίτ ἢ τὸ κῶμαίτ
 τὸ δὲ μῶμαίτ σὲ κῶμαίτ τὸ κῶμαίτ σὲ τῶμαίτ.
 ὄρμια λὼ κῶμαίτ, σκεπῶμαίτ λὼ κῶμαίτ
 ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ δὲ μῶμαίτ σὲ κῶμαίτ, λὼμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ
 τὸ δὲ μῶμαίτ ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ
 σκεπῶμαίτ λὼ κῶμαίτ κῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ
 με-με με κῶμαίτ σὲ, κῶμαίτ, τὸ λὼμαίτ σὲ δὲ μῶμαίτ
 με δὲ μῶμαίτ τὸ κῶμαίτ σὲν κῶμαίτ κῶμαίτ.
 Δὲ δὲ κῶμαίτ δὲ μῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ δὲ μῶμαίτ
 λὼ δὲ μῶμαίτ με τὸ δὲ μῶμαίτ λὼ δὲ μῶμαίτ τὸ κῶμαίτ.
 τὸ δὲ μῶμαίτ δὲ μῶμαίτ, με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ λὼμαίτ δὲ μῶμαίτ
 με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ τὸ κῶμαίτ τὸ κῶμαίτ με ἢ δὲ μῶμαίτ

Manuscript from the Epitaphios, one of Ritsos' best-known works. (Aspasia Papathanasiou Archive)

familiar issues yet again, in a more complex and of course deeply probing manner. Finally, Ritsos' penchant for assuming the same subject and themes can be seen in his final creative thrust during the years between 1974 and 1986. During this period, in poetic works that are for the most part more elaborate, he became extremely confessional, as well as more lucid in developing the themes of his poetry, more immediate in expounding his poetics, and he shed more light on the hidden sides of his personal mythology. Yet he was never able to rid himself of the characterisation that would forever brand him – that of the poet committed to the service of man and of his times, the poet who succeeded in combining on the

same plane, in the form of a vast mosaic, his social portraits and his personal, almost physical identity, while speaking with complete depth of feeling and compassion equally about grand collective passions and about his own personal anguish, undiminished to the end. Ritsos' work was an ideal combination of two elements: the qualities of the engaged citizen committed to his public duty, and the expression of the naturally restless and 'libertarian' artist who knows how to expand his horizons on every occasion. And it is this two-fold character of his work that is perhaps his most important contribution to modern Greek literature.



Greece 1955



Greece 1940



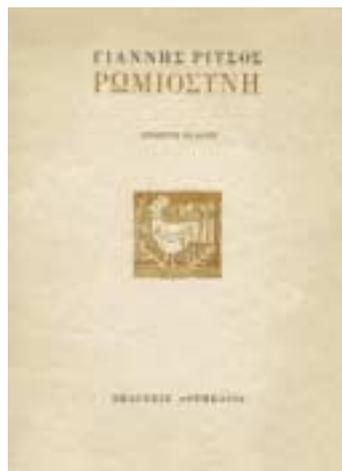
Greece 1956



Greece 1957



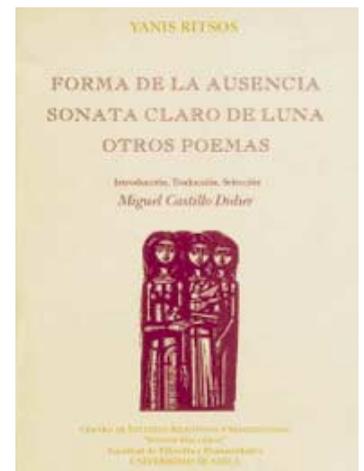
Greece 1993



Greece 1966



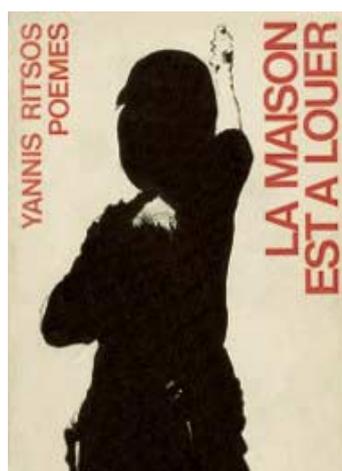
Greece 1937



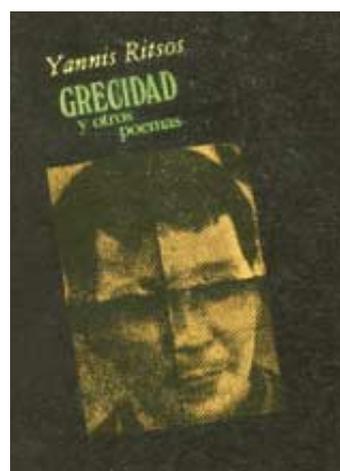
Chile 1993



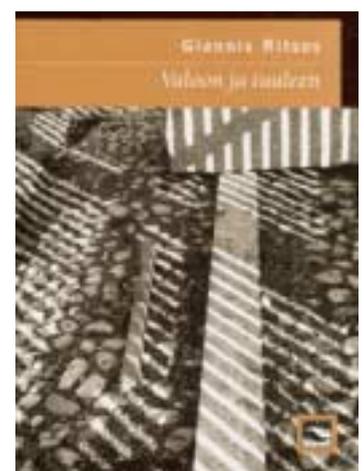
Italy 1981



France 1967



Spain 1979



Finland 1998



Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas, *Large Landscape of Hydra*, 1938, oil on canvas, 114 x 162 cm. (Private collection, Benaki Museum - Ghika Gallery, Athens)

TAKIS PAPTSONIS

While Takis Papatsonis (1895-1976) belongs, chronologically, to the Generation of the 1930s, his poetic style and character nevertheless remained somewhat outside the core trends of the decade. In contrast to the feeling of pessimism and decay that marked much of the writing of his friend George Seferis, Papatsonis (who had an Italian background and was a devout Roman Catholic) found strength and inspiration in his religious faith. His first poems, published in the middle of the second decade of the twentieth century, gave the first indications of his intensely personal and innovative style. He often refers to the Latin Mass, and the presence of Dante is frequently close to the surface of his poems. He was the first to translate T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* into Greek, a work whose allusions and obscurity influenced him greatly. His long poem *Ursa Minor* (1944) has often been associated with Seferis' *Thrush*, since both works turn to mythology for their symbols and through them profess faith in the love that can arise from out of the ruins of destruction.

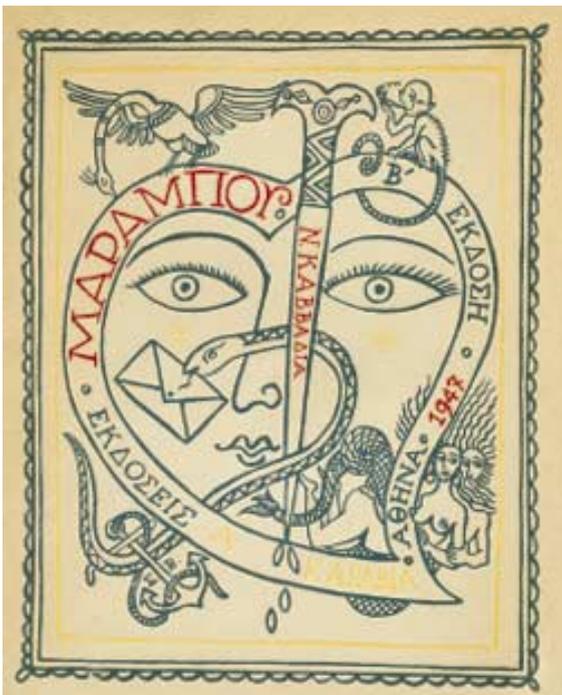


(E.L.I.A. Archive)



The poet Nikos Kavvadias, signalman, 1960s. (Kavvadias Family Archive)

NIKOS KAVVADIAS



Second edition of *Marabou* (1947/1933).

Nikos Kavvadias (1910-1975) is a representative of a poetry of introverted exoticism, which projects the agony and spectres of a permanently restless and wakeful conscience onto alien and often mysterious seascapes.

Kavvadias was born in a small town in Manchuria, but his family returned to Greece when he was still a small boy. A committed seaman and writer, he encountered some extremely difficult moments, facing them with the courage that is the preserve of those rare individuals who have absolute faith in what they do. He was in every sense a poet of the sea.

The difficult life of the sailor, the daily grind of work, but also the freedom of the eye to travel over new horizons opened by the increasingly longer and bolder voyages he undertook mark Kavvadias' entire poetic output. The poet constantly transforms external observations of the environment into a subdued, internal drama, often of a deeply existential nature. Indeed, critics described him as the 'poet of internal exile', and were not slow to identify in his verse and in his imagery the tendency to displace straight realistic description with scenes of reverse images which represent, in a particularly eloquent manner, the poet's journey from the open seascape into the closed and dimly lit realm of the conscience.

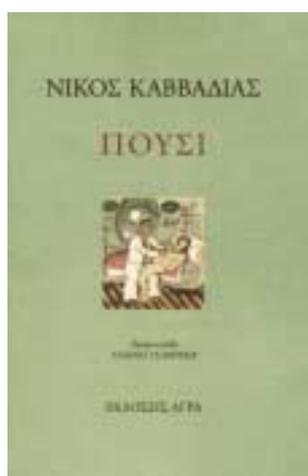
Kavvadias was greatly inspired both by Baudelaire and the *poètes maudits* and observed his marine environment from

precisely this viewpoint. His characters frequently descend into apathy, decay, decadence and self-destruction, and the space they inhabit has a suffocating effect on them. Kavvadias also enjoyed the cosmopolitan life (the constant journeying from port to port, country to country, ocean to ocean) which was equated with the pleasures of opportunistic love and the paralysing effects of hallucinatory substances. From these kinds of motifs emerged his overwhelming passion for travel, which he identified as the fate of the absolutely free yet totally defenceless artist.

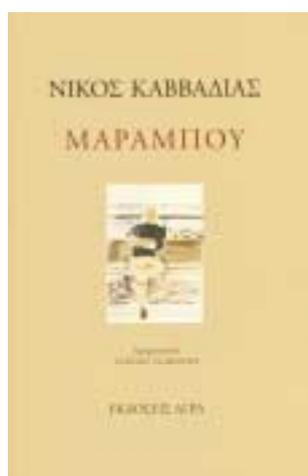
A poet who deliberately wrote little, Kavvadias directly addressed the metrical tradition, but always managed to take liberties with its strictures. He exploited tradition for his own purposes, adapting metres and rhyme schemes to his own linguistic and musical codes. His work consists of three collections of poems (*Marabou, Poussi, Traverso*), a novel (*The Watch*) and two novellas.



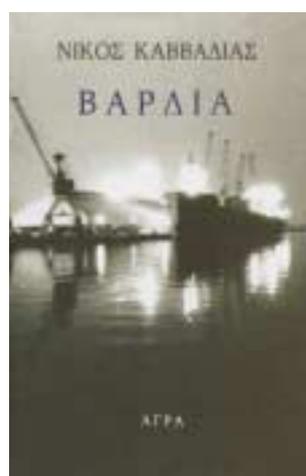
Frontispiece for Kavvadias' *Traverso* by the artist Yannis Moralis. (Agra Publications, 1989)



Greece 1989



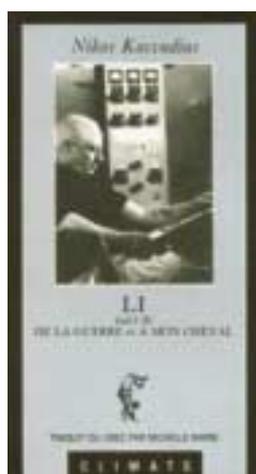
Greece 1989



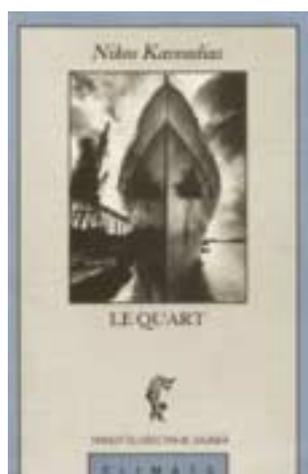
Greece 1990



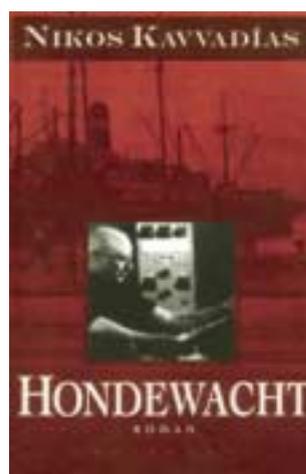
Greece 1987



France 1990



France 1988



The Netherlands 1993



Spain 1994



KOSMAS POLITIS

Kosmas Politis (1888-1974) is considered one of the most important prose writers of the generation of the '30s, although in age he was older than the rest of the authors in the group. He was already forty-two when his first novel, *The Lemon Grove*, was published in 1930, during a period when Greek prose, as well as poetry, was desperately seeking new subject matter and new forms of expression. Only a year before, a young intellectual and novelist named Yorgos Theotokas – one of the main spokesmen of his generation – had published a small book called *The Free Spirit* in which he sought to advise his fellow countrymen about the new “common goals in intellectual endeavours” being attempted by the peoples of Europe, and he called upon them to join in this new “Renaissance” and to abandon their provinciality and their pessimism. Literature needed to express a new spirit, since what Greek “realist” authors had been doing until then was merely a “dry imitation of forms and an exposition of facts”. However, he wrote, a work of art is “an outpouring of inner life, the most individualistic of phenomena...the more deeply individualistic it is the closer it comes to Man”.

The Lemon Grove, like Politis' second novel *Hecate*, appears to follow the basic lines of this new pursuit, in which the individual, the central hero, has the dominant position. Politis is considered the spokesman for a new type of novel along the lines of “urban realism”, as the new movement has been called, where the action shifts to big cities, mainly Athens, or to large cities abroad. Politis' first two novels contain protagonists with existential problems. They move within a middle-class environment, are financially well off and have active social lives. What is shown is an environment in which the middle class is on the rise, with all the privileges of modern life, its amenities and luxuries – an environment where the sexual liberation of women is also clearly in evidence. Left behind are scenes of poverty in city neighbourhoods, and descriptions of life on the farm. Nature, however, as for example the magical lemon grove in Poros, still plays an important role. It is one good that can still be enjoyed by these sensitive, cultivated heroes. There is also an intense



Smyrna was one of the oldest and finest Greek cities of Asia Minor, and very likely the birthplace of Homer. Following the defeat and withdrawal of the Greek forces in 1922, it was razed to the ground. The destruction of the city and the subsequent eradication of every aspect of Hellenism after so many centuries was the climax to a long drawn out tragedy. Seferis, himself a native of Smyrna, explains how when he visited the city thirty-six years later in 1950 that the city ‘has lost its shadow’, and that what is preserved from the past are the ‘remains of an old and crumbling prosperity’. But Smyrna will always stay alive in the hearts and minds of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled to Greece, bringing with them the liberal and cosmopolitan spirit and the traditions of Asia Minor in trade, the economy, the arts, literature, music and cookery.