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The Land of Teucer

Introduction.

Seferis' *Helen* (*Logbook III*) is mainly a monologue by Teucer but sometimes the poet makes his voice heard speaking of his present times, so that myth and modern history get confused[1]. Euripides' *Helen* was the main influence on this modern poem, but probably we can better understand their relationship if we consider some critical works about Euripidean tragedies, which were collected in Seferis' library. This kind of approach is particularly interesting, since we are face to face with a mythical episode – Teucer's exile to Cyprus – that was well attested in both Greek and Latin antiquity, while we can't find any trace of it in western European modern literature[2].

Seferis' *Helen*: Form and Cultural Background.

Ancient Greek literature is an important presence in Seferis' poetry (Marcheselli 1966; Benedetti 1970; Stevanoni 1976; Alexopolou 2006; Tachopoulou 2013). He seemed to love the *Odissey* and, as for the tragedy, Aeschylus and Sophocles, but in his *Logbook III* Euripides becomes a stronger influence. When this book was first published in 1955, its title was ...Κύπρον, οὖ μ' ἐθέσπισεν..., a quotation of Euripides' *Helen* (v. 148), and three poems referred either to this ancient tragic poet – Ευριπίδης, Αθηναίος – or to his works – Πενθεύς, being Pentheus one of the main characters in the *Bacchae*, and Ελένη.

The main source for Seferis' *Helen* was the Euripidean tragedy with the same name, *Helen*: we are sure of it, not only because of the title, but also because of the epigraph attached to this modern poem, that is a quotation of some verses taken from three different sections of that ancient play. Moreover, scholars have found in Seferis' *Helen* many reminiscences of the text written by the Athenian dramatist (Savvidis 1961, 340-7; Pontani 1963, 335; Krikos-Davies 1994, 42-50).

The lines quoted in the epigraph give the impression of a dialogue among Teucer, Helen and the Messenger, that we don't actually find in Euripides' *Helen*. On the other hand, Seferis derived quotations and echoes from words that were spoken by different characters in that tragedy – Teucer, Helen, the Chorus – and he rearranged these elements within his poem, so that it mostly takes the form of a soliloquy. The memory of a direct speech by Helen (vv. 29-31) and the refrain (vv. 1, 9, 53)[3] – «the poem's choral

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[1] Later a similar situation is also in I.M. Panaytopoulos, *Sunday of the Aegean* (1970) (Gumpert 2001, 243).

[2] Scholars usually focus on the character of Helen, even if Teucer is sometimes considered more than a narrator, i.e. the main character in this poem: «Seferis's Teucer is the hero in what is, in effect, a Cratylean tragedy» (Gumpert 2001, 247 f.). Possibly we can find traces of the so-called «Teucer's paradigm» (Bittarello 2007) in some modern novels by J. Conrad or E. Salgari, but the ancient mythical character is never mentioned.

[3] Peron 1976, 149, suggested a parallel with T.S. Eliot, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, vv. 13 f., 35 f., but I consider the parallel with *The Waste Land*, "A Game of Chess", vv. 141 = 152 =

part» (Krikos-Davies 1994, 45), probably a translation of the nightingales' song into human language – don't undermine its structure as a monologue.

The most natural question that arises at this point is: who is speaking in this poem? The answer is quite easy: Teucer. Telamon's son had already been an Homeric hero and, after his brother Ajax died, their father condemned him to exile: thus, according to Apollo's oracle, Teucer sailed to Cyprus in order to found a new city with the same name of his motherland, Salamis. This mythical tale was quite famous in Greek and Latin literature, both in tragedies and in lyric poems (Bittarello 2007; De Poli 2008), but today we come to know it mainly thanks to the *Helen* by Euripides: in the prologue of this drama Teucer arrives to Egypt and he meets Helen there, or rather – according to his final opinion – a kind woman whose aspect looks like Helen's one. The memory of their meeting is evident in the central part of the modern poem (vv. 13-37).

Anyway, we must be careful while looking at Seferis' *Helen* just as «Teucer's monologue» (Krikos-Davies 1994, 45). This poem, in fact, gives a fair example of the so called "mythical method", that we find in several works by Seferis: the interfusion of mythical and contemporary details «distances Teucer from his Homeric reality enough for him to be as much a man of our time as a mythical hero – in short, a contemporary hero» (Krikos-Davies 1994, 48; see also Kapsomenos 2003; Tachopoulou 2012).

Reading the first seven lines of the poem, we may understand that the speaking person is Seferis. But afterword he talks about an «exacerbated slave» (v. 8): who is she? Is she one of the below mentioned «Spartan slaves» in Egypt (v. 25)? Is she Helen, who is among them (v. 26)? Or is she a personification of the modern isle of Cyprus, still constrained under the British control after the World War II, when Seferis wrote this poem? The stress on the tourist resort of Platres, the description of a fresco in the church of Asinou and the word ποιητάρης referred to the nightingale: all these elements lead the reader into a modern age and we know that the poet went to Cyprus twice in the early 1950s. Moreover, it has been noted that both Teucer's brother and Seferis' brother died far from their country and their families (v. 51; Pontani 1963, 336). So it is very difficult to say when the modern poet stops speaking and the voice of the mythical hero begins to be heard.

Search for Sources and Reading Mistakes.

In Seferis' *Helen* the presence of a double voice, mixing the one of the poet and the one of the hero, has been deeply analysed in every single verse. Anyway, while scholars were just searching for literary sources, they have sometimes fallen into inaccuracies, both when they focused on the similarities and when they stressed the differences between Euripides and Seferis.

For example, N. Nikolaou (2000, 108 n. 13) observed that the summary of the ancient tragedy, we find in the notes to Ελένη, which was published in the ninth edition of Seferis' *Ποιήματα* (1974) and which is still re-printed today (Seferis 2004, 338), is incorrect or, at least, misleading. It reads that «στο έργο του Ευριπίδου, ο

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165 = 168 = 169, as a more appropriate one. Such a structural feature was also used by Kavafis (Savvidis 1961, 341).

Τεύκρος, ταξιδεύοντας για την Κύπρο, συναντάει στην Αίγυπτο την Ελένη, η οποία τού λέει ότι ο Πάρις είχε κλέψει το φάντασμά της, ενώ η ίδια είχε μεταφερθεί από τον Ερμή στην αυλή του Πρωτέως»: this situation is fairly assumed in Seferis' poem, but at the end of the Euripidean prologue, when Teucer leaves the stage and goes to Cyprus, he is still unaware of the εἴδωλον-deceit[4].

Similarly, the claim that in this poem Teucer is just a «Seferis' hero», who «shows sympathy for both Greeks and Trojans» and who is «modelled [...] according to his own (i.e. the poet's) tastes», so that he is «very much a Teucer-Seferis» (Krikos-Davis 1979, 64), is not completely correct. In the Euripidean play Teucer doesn't feel sympathy for both Greeks and Trojans, but Greeks and Trojans had already been coupled together in their tragic destiny of death by both Helen and the Chorus several times (e.g. vv. 38 f., 239). Thus this «Seferis' hero» is very coherent with Seferis' general rearrangement of the ancient model.

Finally, a Spanish scholar (Cuenca 1976, 376) stated that Seferis took whatever sounds amazing and fantastic by Euripides and converted it into troubled question and «tragic predicament». But is it true at all? Obviously it depends on which opinion about this Euripidean tragedy we have. Someone underlined the comic effects of some situations throughout the play: the general evaluations suggested by Jebb (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, ed. 11, quoted by Campbell 1950, 157, «more than fantastic ... well-nigh grotesque») and Cuenca are very similar. More recently someone else focussed his attention, for example, on the theological matters, that are implied in the dramatic work (Susanetti 2007, 153-83), so that Euripides' *Helen* is more likely to be a real tragedy. Allan (2008, 46) is probably right when he argues that «much of the play's brilliance lies in its creation of a dramatic world whose at times humorous and domestic surface [...] can have a serious philosophical import»: so the label of «tragedy of ideas» fits it well.

Anyway, we have to consider Seferis' own view of such a problem and we can try to reconstruct it with some plausibility through a survey on the editions of the Euripidean text that the modern poet had in his library.

Seferis as Reader of Euripides' *Helen*.

The Κατάλογος βιβλιοθήκης Γιώργου καί Μαρώς Σεφέρη (Giannadakis 1989) shows that at the beginning of the 1950s the poet could read Euripides' *Helen* in three different editions[5]:

a. Grégoire 1950

Euripide, VI, *'Hélène', 'Les Phéniciennes'*, ed. and transl. by H. G. – L. Méridier – F. Chapouthier, Paris 1950.

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[4] Perhaps this mistake depends on the verses quoted in the epigraph, which are taken as a real dialogue among Teucer, Helen and the Chorus.

[5] It would be interesting to examine any kind of marks and notes, particularly written by Seferis on the first and the third of these books, but unfortunately all the volumes of his collection are today stored in boxes in a warehouse because of the static restoring of the Βικελαία Δημοτική Βιβλιοθήκη of Iraklion: Mr Dimitrios Savvas, Vikelaia's Library Director, made me aware about this situation via e-mail (8 March 2011).

b. Warner 1951

The 'Helen' of Euripides, transl. by R. Warner, London 1951.

c. Vellacott 1954

The 'Bacchae' and Other Plays: 'Ion', 'The Women of Troy', 'Helen' and the 'Bacchae', transl. by Ph. Vellacott, Baltimore 1954.

I think it is particularly useful to read the introductions to these books, in order to see how they present Euripides' *Helen* and how they could influence Seferis, when he was reading that play.

Henri Grégoire (1950).

The most important «image» in Seferis' Helen is the πουκάμισο αδειανό, the modern version of the Euripidean εἴδωλον. This «empty blouse» is just a symbol for the non-sense of the war, and *Le pacifisme de l'Hélène. L* Ἐΐδωλον is the title of a chapter in the *Notice* by H. Grégoire (1950, 23-24), who immediately put side by side the idea of peace and the εἴδωλον. In this section, the French scholar observed that we may give to this play by Euripides the title *La grande illusion*[6], that fits both the ancient tragedy and the ode by Seferis.

Grégoire claimed that Euripides was disgusted by the war, Athens was fighting against Sparta, and «pour lui [...] toutes les guerres sont, come la plus fameuse [i.d. the Trojan war], des erreurs sanglantes, des folies». The same idea is well expressed by Seferis' *Helen*: the modern poet was disgusted by the horrors of World War II and he was disappointed by the British policy in Cyprus. So in his poem the Trojan war and the foundation of a new Salamis are just the «signifier», wheras the vanity of conflicts and human actions in general, and the inconstancy of fate, both in the past and in the present days, are the «meaning» (Kapsomenos 2003).

As for the sources of the Euripidean tragedy, and particularly for the εἴδωλον-theme, Grégoire went back to Stesichorus' *Palinody*, focusing his attention on the first three lines, as attested by Plato's *Phaedrus* 243a[7], «le seul fragment connu de cette 'Palinodie'» (Grégoire 1950, 31): οὐκ ἔστ' ἔτυμος λόγος οὗτος / οὐδ' ἔβας ἐν νηυσὶν ἐϋσσέλμοις / οὐδ' ἵκεο Πέργαμα Τροίας, which Seferis (*Helen*, vv. 29-31) fairly rearranged in modern Greek: 'Δεν είναι αλήθεια, δεν είναι αλήθεια' [...] / 'Δεν μπήκα στο γαλαζόπλωρο καράβι. / Ποτέ δεν πάτησα την αντρειωμένη Τροία'.

Rex Warner (1951).

Also Warner in the introduction to his translation of Euripides' *Helen* stressed the

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[6] On the same year, Campbell 1950, 161, wrote: «It is war itself that is a mistake; war is "the Great Illusion"».

[7] We have followed the normal convention of referring to passages in Plato, which is to refer to the page numbers and column letters of the standard edition of the works of Plato, edited by Stephanus. These page numbers and column letters are repeated in all modern editions of Plato's works.

relationship between the works by Euripides and Stesichorus, mainly as far as the literary invention of the phantom for whom «the Greeks go on fighting year after year at Troy» is concerned (Warner 1951, 7). Even though this introduction is very short, less than three pages, it is very meaningful: in it Warner dealt with the usual interpretation of the play «more like a romantic comedy than what we usually think of as "tragedy"» (Warner 1951, 8). But near the end he suggests that «perhaps Euripides is more serious still in his treatment of the whole idea of war, and this play [...] is among the most "pacifist" of his works» (Warner 1951, 9). Warner considered the audience of the drama in ancient times: the themes of war and unnecessary sufferings must have been applied to the contemporary situation, namely to the Athenian disasters in Sicily. At the very end of this introduction Warner claimed: «there is a keen edge to much that might appear as merely humorous, and it is easier, perhaps, for us in our days to appreciate this than it was for nineteenth-century critics» (Warner 1951, 9). So, once again, he suggested the possibility of considering World War II and the following events as a situation not far from the Peloponnesian war and the Athenian collapse, i.e. as a situation not less impressive than the ancient one. And Seferis seems to have perfectly caught on this «keen edge», which he mainly developed in his poem.

Moreover, Warner clearly claimed that in the Euripidean tragedy unnecessary sufferings happen both for «Greeks and Trojans alike» (Warner 1951, 9), as we have already suggested before referring both to the ancient play and to the modern poem.

Philip Vellacott (1954).

Perhaps it is not a mere accident that Vellacott's translation of the Euripidean *Helen* was collected in the same volume as the *Bacchae* and that a short poem of Seferis' *Logbook III* is dedicated to *Pentheus*[8].

In his general introduction to the volume, Vellacott admitted that he may «put forward somewhat arbitrarily the view» he presents, but he justified this effect with the attempt «to make the problem itself seem interesting enough to persuade at least an occasional reader to weigh in his own mind the accepted evidence and to read further in search of evidence hitherto unnoticed». He was against the idea «too often assumed that understanding of the main works of Classical literature is now complete» and – what is most important – he considered the Euripidean plays as «a world whose mysteries are infinite because they are the simple ones of common human experience; whose life and language offer a touchstone for the vitality of our modern world» (Vellacott 1954, 7). The past can speak to the present and give it an impulse. Past and present can be confused and their confusion will produce a strange, vague atmosphere, such as the one we find in Seferis' poem, which is ruled by the «absolute kingdom of the memory» (Nikolaou 2000, 160), both the personal memory and the literary one.

Vellacott believed that «it is possible to enjoy a work of art for the succession of moving or delightful moments it provides, together with a vague impression of design and a strong sense of atmosphere, without troubling to acquire that knowledge

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[8]   Anyway, one of the most famous editions of the Euripidean *Bacchae* with introduction and commentary by E.R. Dodds (1953) was in Seferis' library and also this book was noted by the poet.

of detail, association and source which was assumed by the author as necessary to its full comprehension» (Vellacott 1954, 20) and, in order to explain what he meant, he suggested the example of *The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot as a parallel for such a reading. According to Vellacott, this approach – a great enjoyment in the text, which allows numerous questions to remain unanswered – works well also with Euripides' *Helen* itself, because «it is [...] a play full of puzzles» (Vellacott 1954, 21). For example, in the prologue Teucer plays a mere dramatic role, emphasizing the power of appearance, but he just gives Helen «news which she might in fact have got from Theonoe any time in the last seven years», and then he «departs [...] into the nebulous exile from which he appeared» (Vellacott 1954, 22).

In the 1950s Seferis well knew *The Waste Land*, which he translated in the years 1933-1936 (Loulakaki-Moore 2010): so Vellacott's suggestions and considerations might have led Seferis to face the strange and troubling character of Teucer and try to go deeper into his mystery, after having shared a similar life experience with him. Hence, there is nothing surprising if – in the modern poem – the border line between Teucer's soliloquy and Seferis' one is not immediately clear, at least not everywhere.

Conclusions.

Such a quick survey on this range of editions of the Euripidean *Helen* was intended to focus on the relationship between Seferis' ode and its main source in a more complete cultural context. Our opinion about the ancient tragedy is less important than the interpretations offered by scholars like Grégoire, Warner and Vellacott, since Seferis had their editions, published in the early 1950s, in his library: so they are likely to have somehow led him into his personal reading of Euripides' *Helen*. And Seferis' one is indeed a personal reading, as for both the general situation, i.e. the setting at Cyprus (Nikolaou 2000, 119), and the adoption of Teucer's point of view.

Ancient texts talk about the arrival of Teucer at Cyprus, where he founded a new Salamis and established his kingdom (Nikolaou 2000, 105-8; but he avoided to mention the important allusion to this myth in Pindar's *Nemean Ode* 4.75-7). The happy ending of his trip erases – as far as we can understand – the sufferings of the exile. Surely, this is not what we read in Seferis' poem. In this text Teucer's mood looks more like Helen's mood in Egypt, as for what we read in the Euripidean drama, and his monologue takes some themes from her tragic monologue: they both go through the main steps of a sorrowful life, so that Teucer's soliloquy supplies Helen's one.

As for this shift in the point of view, it is obvious that a male speaking character could make the poet's identification with him easier and lead to the confusion between their voices[9]. But again, this choice could also depend on the Euripidean criticism and another book we find in Seferis' library could be relevant to such a choice: Murray 1947, 148, clearly claimed that «Helen, in her thorough process of rehabilitation has emerged that most insipid of fancies, a perfectly beautiful and blameless heroine with no character except love of her husband, whom, by the way, she has not seen for seventeen years». Hence the innovation in Seferis' ode, still named

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[9] Also Teucer's monologue in Horace's *Odes* I 7.21-32 might be an influence on Seferis' *Helen* (Cuenca 1976, 378; De Poli 2008, 108 f.), but this is another matter: we won't deal with it here.

Helen: Teucer takes the main role. And he is not just an Euripidean but also a Sophoclean character: in *Ajax*, he is an important figure indeed and he utters a long monologue while standing beside the corpse of his brother (vv. 992-1039). Seferis loved Sophocles' tragedies: so the choice of Teucer and the substitution of Helen's soliloquy with Teucer's soliloquy were probably quite easy.

In this analysis we have shown once more, how the history of classical studies may be useful to investigate Seferis' poetry, mainly referring to a myth – such as Teucer's exile to Cyprus – which is completely absent from modern western European literature (Nikolaou 2000, 108).

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Abstract: Euripides' *Helen* was the main influence on Seferis' *Helen* (*Logbook III*), but probably we can better understand their relationship if we consider some critical works about Euripidean tragedies, which were collected in Seferis' library.