

## Nanos Valaoritis

### A Memoir

When I arrived in London in Sept. 1944, I had two letters of introduction from the poet George Seferis, known then mainly in Greece, apart from a translation in John Lehmann's *New Writing* and 'Daylight' by George Katsimbalis and five poems of Lawrence Durrell, one to the aforementioned J. Lehmann and another to Cyril Connolly both of whom he had met on a mission to London from Cairo, where he served in the exiled Greek Government. I had chosen to go to London when in Cairo earlier. Seferis had given me a choice: to return to Athens with the Government, or to go to London in a minor position in the Greek Embassy and serve as an intermediary for the modernist Greek Poets unknown then in England.

While in Cairo I saw again my friend Bernard Spencer, and other poets and writers like Robin Fedden, who produced the magazine, *Personal Landscape*. I had missed Durrell who was in Alexandria. Bernard and Larry had introduced me while in Athens to the modernist English poets of *New Verse*, and supplied me with books by Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Cecil Day Lewis, Dylan Thomas and others. T.S. Eliot was the only poet already known in Greece mainly through the translations of George Seferis and his lengthy introduction to the *Waste Land*, which served as the modernist manifesto for Greek poetry of the Thirties.

I had been a junior member of this group since 1939 when I was first published in the prestigious modernist review *Ta Nea Grammata* (*New Letters*), at the age of 18. My knowledge of English and French was very advanced since I had learnt both languages as a young child from governesses and tutors. One of the reasons, apart from a sense of adventure, that I chose to go to England was to find out more about these poets I already admired, even though this meant facing, in those times of war, dangerous flights, and bombardments of rockets. I had spent three gruelling years in Athens under German Occupation, and in June 1944 my escape through the Aegean in a small boat from Greece to Turkey had been especially risky. To cut a long story short, I landed in a London that had not yet seen many of the young poets who had escaped from the occupied Continent, and I received a hero's welcome. John Lehmann immediately invited Stephen Spender to meet me, and he in turn introduced me to T.S. Eliot, in a memorable evening at dinner in his house.

I had carried with me from Cairo a volume of a translation of the *Waste Land*, in Greek, to give to Eliot. Armed with the book I turned up at the Spenders' house, and Eliot soon appeared. He was extremely impressive, taller than I had expected, dressed in a dark blue suit with a blue shirt and tie cleverly matching his pale blue eyes. We all sat down after some preliminaries at the round dinner table and I was seated next to Eliot. The others at the table were Humphrey Spender, and a French friend of his, and Stephen's wife Natascha. During dinner Stephen tried to engage Eliot in a

literary conversation by telling him that he was planning an anthology of poetry centred around Keats and Shelley. To this Eliot responded drily: 'Not a very good idea, Stephen.' I later found out that Eliot did not particularly favour the English Romantics, and wondered why Stephen had proposed this and whether it was even a provocation on his part.

In any case, Stephen blushed as he often did, and quickly turned the conversation to me. 'Don't you think, Tom, that Nanos' nose has a resemblance to yours?' Eliot turned and gave me a quick glance, and, rather embarrassed, replied, 'Perhaps.' Then it was his turn to address me. 'You know', he said, 'you are the second Greek I have ever met.' 'Ah,' I answered with curiosity, 'and who was the first?' His immediate response seemed prepared: 'The King of Greece!' 'In that case,' I said, 'I am the first because the present King of Greece hasn't a drop of Greek blood in his veins.' There was subdued laughter in the audience. It was evident that Eliot had tried to pull my leg. And the ice had melted. From then on he asked me about Seferis, his age, and other particulars. Seferis had been born in 1900, so at that time he was 44. I told him about the review and the modernist movement in Greek poetry, as well as Seferis' remarkable Introduction, which he was unable to read, not knowing Greek.

For some reason I did not dare to propose a translation. The atmosphere had intimidated me and the conversation had rolled on to other subjects which I have forgotten. When it was time to leave, Eliot and I left together, and as there were no taxis, we took the Underground. In the crowded compartment, we both stood hanging on, and I told him about the origins of modern Greek poetry in Byzantium. He listened to me with his great owl-like eyes towering over me, and when I had to change trains at Oxford Circus, he bent over to see the station, and turned towards me in an unforgettable moment, saying very dramatically: 'Alas, we must part.' I told him I hoped we would meet again, and he said, 'Yes, we shall meet. Not soon, but we shall meet.'

We never met again. I thought later that it had been such a perfect parting that I wouldn't have wanted to try to contact him again in any case. One evening I did come across him in Chelsea in a dark side street near his apartment. However, I didn't stop to greet him as I did not want to disturb him. But our previous meeting had encouraged me to go on and translate Seferis' poetry.

When the collection 'The King of Asine' appeared in 1948, after some translations of mine in *New Writing*, and the first more complete article on modern Greek Poetry in Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* in 1946, Eliot wrote me a note appreciating the poems and praising the translation. I knew he had a sense of humour behind the solemnity of his major poems, especially in the *Quartets*, as shown in his correspondence with Groucho Marx, as well as in some of his shorter poems. Modernism without humour is unthinkable, as a general point.

I regretted not having pursued a meeting with him again. He did make a comment about me being very 'pious' to Durrell, when my name came up.

By this, he could not have meant religious piety. What he did mean, though, I have no idea. Perhaps he was referring to the Byzantium that I had brought up in the Underground, a very 'Waste Land' kind of setting. I do remember him as being very courteous and not at all condescending to the 23 year old that I then was.

The next poet who welcomed me was Louis MacNeice. I had read some of his work and the 'Journey to Iceland' sequence that he had written with Auden. He invited me to his house for drinks, and his wife sang beautiful folk ballads. I also admired his translation of Agamemnon. Later he asked me to lunch at a Greek restaurant in Soho, and he told me about Yeats whom he admired. However, he could not agree with Yeats' mystical ideas and especially those expressed in *The Vision*. I hadn't read *The Vision* at that time and his vehement criticism of its ideas seemed to me somewhat dismissive. After all, we had a similar great poet, Angelos Sikelianos, in Greece who was an esoteric and hermetic philosopher. It's a pity they never met for he was more or less the same generation as Yeats, and started the Delphic movement with his American wife, Eve, staging Greek Tragedies. MacNeice used me also in BBC productions in which Dylan Thomas also participated. I did mainly foreign accents, and was paid three guineas for these small roles which helped as I had by then married and lost my job in the Embassy due to changes in the Government.

I lived at Paulton Square, Chelsea, with my wife, Anne Valéry, who worked for a while in the BBC and later in films, the most famous one in which she had a small part being *Kind Hearts and Coronets* with Alec Guinness. The landlord, Oliver Low, was a friend of John Hayward, Eliot's room-mate, who was paralysed. Once he took us to Eliot's apartment in Cheyney Walk, to help move the library. He then showed us Eliot's room which was large and overlooked the river.

Oliver hosted Auden for a month or so around 1948. I was living at the time in the basement and went up every morning to the ground floor to fetch milk for my baby son from the only fridge which was in the dining room. There I used to run into Auden who lived upstairs, and we would talk about Cavafy, whom Auden had helped translate in New York, with Ray Daelven. In his remarkable introduction, he discussed Cavafy's unmistakably unique style which was recognisable on sight. He told me he preferred the historical poems to the erotic ones which he considered too camp. However even the erotic poems were a breakthrough both in subject, since they were openly homosexual, and in style, as they used every-day objects like furniture, chairs, canapés, mirrors, shirts, ties, handkerchiefs, etc. which had never before been encountered in traditional Greek poetry. In this Cavafy was an early modernist as well as in his free style of versification. He also pointed out in matters of translation, that it was important to translate the last line of Cavafy's poem "Waiting for the Barbarians." These people (the Barbarians), he said, were some kind of a solution, as in the greek, and not simply a solution. This was a fine point, important both in the ironical sense and because of the particular nuances implied. Our conversations did not go

much further at the time. He looked puzzled when I explained to him I was a stand-in mother since my wife worked during the day. I did not ask him what he thought of the other Greek poets I had translated, but he told Oliver Low that he thought, rather cryptically, that Seferis didn't have "much meat", in his poems. Whatever he meant by "meat", I never asked him. We came across one another again in Ischia where he was staying with Chester Kallman, whom I had met in Oliver's house. We had been touring Italy in my second wife's car and, while making a stop to see a friend, Michael Luke, who was staying there, we visited Auden. It wasn't easy to talk to Auden and our conversation was trivial, about mutual friends. There was no real opening since, at that time, I was living in Paris and Auden disapproved of the surrealists, including André Breton, with whom I was associating. On matters of aesthetics I found it much more difficult to talk to English poets than, say, to French or Americans, although the opinions of the English poets were often very eloquently articulated in essays. I ran into Chester Kallman again in late 1966 or early 1967, a few months before the Junta came to power, in Athens. We had a drink in the famous café bar, Apotsos, where Katsimbalis, the *Colossus of Maroussi* of Henry Miller, Durrell, Bernard Spencer, Seferis, Miller himself, Patrick Lee Fermor, and other Philhellenes met at lunch time for drinks and mezedes (titbits). He inquired about the political situation in Greece, and I told him I thought there would be a military coup before the elections because of the ominous atmosphere of which I was aware. Three months later, after the coup, Chester arrived in Athens and I met him at the same spot outside Apotsos. "I say, Nanos", he said, "you know you have acquired the reputation of a prophet in Vienna". He had been visiting Vienna with Auden, and I answered, "Yes, always in Vienna but never in Athens. Who ever listens to you at home?" The Law-maker Solon had to pretend he was mad to be listened to by the Athenians. They had been discussing my prognostication it seems with Auden, and were astonished when it happened. Even though I had foreseen it, I was very shocked myself when it actually happened in April 1967. Auden somehow was always linked in my mind with something historical. Later another English friend, in California, a novelist, Maurice Rowden, told me how, when he was in the trenches before Monte Casino, he was sent to relieve another lieutenant, who was reading a book of Auden's poetry, and the young man said to him, "It's because of things like this", pointing at the book, "that we fight." I wonder what Auden's reaction would have been to this. Cyril Connolly had written somewhere that the main function of an intellectual was to think, not to fight.

Cyril also received me courteously, and asked me to write an article on contemporary Greek poetry, since John Lehmann had started to promote it through Demetrios Capetanakis, Durrell and Katsimbalis in his magazines. My article was published in 1946, in *Horizon* and was, as I have already mentioned, the first in Britain to focus on the modern Greek Poets, George Seferis, Andreas Embrikos who were both published later in London,

Odysseus Elytis, Nikos Gatsos and Nikos Engonopoulos who has only recently been translated and published in England by David Connolly.

At John Lehmann's I also met Rosamond Lehmann, the novelist, and the poet Edith Sitwell, an admirer of Elytis, some of whose poems I had translated, along with quite a few other writers and poets. I had bitter-sweet encounters with Roy Campbell and George Barker, in pubs, and with the brilliant critic friend of Dylan Thomas, John Davenport. My neighbour in Paulton Square was Kathleen Raine (long associated with *Agenda*) whom I often visited, and admired. Among others, I met Arthur Waley, the famous translator from Chinese and Japanese, and his companion, Beryl de Zoete who wrote a book on Dancing in Bali. Their house was more piled up with books and papers than mine is today. And of course I also met the picturesque Tambimuttu, in whose office of the review, *Poetry London*, I met my first wife, Anne Firth, later Anne Valéry. I was friendly, too, with Johnny Craxton, the painter whose frontispiece adorned my first book of poems in Greek printed in London in 1947. I also got to know the very successful and gentle Anglo-Indian poet, Dom Moraes. Alan Ross succeeded John Lehmann at the *London Magazine* and we often collaborated in special issues on Greek Literature and books. I was very happy when he published the complete poems of Bernard Spencer, a dear friend and collaborator, translations of the Greek surrealist poet, Andreas Embirikos, including my Introduction, reprinted recently by Green Integer Los Angeles, and the novelist, Kostas Taksis, both close friends of mine. The English pubs were rowdy places to meet people in those days, and, when drunk, they could at times be argumentative and even dangerous. However all this was illustrative of how very alive the early postwar years were, and I have few regrets of having lived them up to the hilt, so to speak.

I could mention many more details, some of which are included in my correspondance with Seferis and Katsimbalis, during the nine years I lived, wrote, and worked there, sometimes down and out, to survive, but always with many interesting friends and encounters in London. So much has happened since, yet it seems like yesterday.

*Extracts from a Postscript:*

The influence especially of Auden on my early poetry during the war was decisive. *Look Stranger* was a collection I had read and cherished, as well as the *Letters from Iceland*, the sonnets from China etc. More than any other English poet it was him I admired and I later read all his work and applied his kind of modernism rather than Eliot's to my work.

As for MacNeice, I was a great admirer of his modernist translation of Agamemnon, and his connection with Greece via the classics brought us close. He was a very good friend.

Both poets, although northerners, had a connection with the Mediterranean, Auden to Rome, and, via Cavafy, also to Greece.

The project mentioned by Anita Auden (Money) in her memoir in the *Lauds* issue of *Agenda*, linking Greek modernist poets with English poets

was exactly my mission, and I partly realized it with my article in *Horizon* in 1946.

**Marie Wilson**, Nanos's wife, whose two paintings appear on the home page, was a close friend of the Parisian surrealists, André and Elisa Breton, Benjamin Péret, Victor Brauner, Manina and Alain Jouffroy, Man Ray, Wilfredo Lam and art critic Charles Estienne as well as Saul Steinberg.

She travelled with André and Elisa Breton, visiting ancient castles and caves, and spending the summers with them in Saint Cirq La Popie, a 13<sup>th</sup> century historical village, where André Breton had a house of the époque. She took part in summer activities, such as surrealist games, collecting stones (see *Le surréalisme, memo 3*, 1957), studying birds and butterflies etc. She also visited with them grass-root artists such as Facteur Cheval and Raymond Isidore, as well as medium painters, Joseph Crepin and Augustin Lesage.

In 1954 she worked briefly in the studio of Picasso in Vallauris and has always regretted declining his insistent invitation to stay longer.

In 1960 she married the Greek poet, Nanos Valaoritis and they had three children.

Colour introductions of her paintings were used by the Greek poet and psychoanalyst, Andreas Embirikos. She illustrated poems of Octavia Paz, Mando Aravantinou and Nanos Valaoritis who also wrote French texts for a book of drawings. She hosted Marel Duchamp when he stayed in Greece.

Summers in Greece were spent on the historical island of Spetses and the private island of the Valaoritis family where some of the most important paintings and drawings were done. Due to the military takeover of Greece in 1967, the family moved to America (where Marie was born) and remained until 2004 except for two years in Paris from 1975-77. In America, she rekindled her activity in sculpture which took the same mythical forms as her drawings and paintings. She now resides with Nanos in Athens.