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MODERN GREEK STUDIES
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)

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SECTION THREE
 SPECIAL FEATURE

KATHERINE CASSIS

The University of Sydney

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH GIORGOS SARANTARIS
 (1908–1941)

*Αγαπούσα αφειδώς, χωρίς προνοητικότητα, χωρίς υστεροβουλία, χωρίς να ζητώ ανταλλάγματα,
 είμουνα δηλαδή ένας άνθρωπος με τέλεια αναξιοπρέπεια στα μάτια του πλήθους.
 Και μια μέρα κατάλαβα πως δε μ' έπαιρναν στα σοβαρά.¹*

A slight and solitary figure with a prominent Italian accent and a child-like honesty and innocence that is somehow in keeping with a flagrant inattention to the fundamentals of good grooming – this is the portrait painted by relatives and friends of the poet Giorgos Sarantaris.² The portrait is, at the very least, romanticised. The poet's slightness and lack of “manly” beauty, his sometimes brutal frankness and his disinterestedness towards practical affairs are conveniently transformed into indicators of his status as prophet³; his slightness testifies to his Stoic frugality, his lack of physical beauty to his exclusion from earthly distractions and pleasures, his Italian accent (in so far as it indicates life outside the parameters of Greek society) to his detached and even “objective” perspective on Greece (though his Italian background could just as easily be perceived as an obstacle to a true appreciation of the “Greek *geist*” if his criticism were to fall below the mark of flattery), his frankness to an unwavering commitment to some “absolute truth” and, finally, his immunity to practical concerns (like using his law degree to earn a living or to enter the political arena) to his prophetic other-worldliness.

Though this portrait is the result of an overwhelming consensus, it is hard to ignore the fact that there is a silence of almost two decades between the poet's death and the testimonies that constitute this consensus. There is also the somewhat brief account of Sarantaris and his work offered by the two literary historians, Linos Politis and Mario

Vitti. Indeed, it is interesting to note that, although Sarantaris is included in the famous generation of the 30s⁴, Linos Politis concludes a very short account of the poet and his work with the assertion that his untimely death prevented him from exercising any influence on his contemporaries⁵, while Mario Vitti emphasises the linguistic weaknesses of Sarantaris' work, attributing these to his bilingualism⁶. Finally, aside from Zisimos Lorentzatos' *Dioskouroi*⁷ (which presents a detailed analysis of Sarantaris' philosophical essays) and Olympia Karagiorga's *Giorgos Sarantaris – O Meloumenos*⁸ (which is essentially a biography based on interviews with Sarantaris' relatives, friends, acquaintances and fellow artists, with occasional commentary from Karagiorgas) and a short litany of articles, there is very little in the way of secondary criticism on Sarantaris' work.

This silence seems to compete most rigorously with the sympathetic portrait of the poet that emerges in Odysseus Elytis' "To Hroniko mias Dekaeτίας"⁹ ("Chronicle of a Decade") and in Lorentzatos and Karagiorgas (as presented in summary in the previous paragraph). If the various attributes of the latter portrait were to be viewed from within the context of this silence, then a whole series of questions would need to be raised.¹⁰

Firstly, how would critics and fellow artists, obsessed with the quest for an elusive "Greekness", have perceived Sarantaris' own fascination with and interpretation of the Greek *geist*? Sarantaris, although born of Greek parents (Dimitrios Sarantaris and Mathilde Sotirou) in Constantinople (in 1908), received all of his education (primary, secondary and tertiary) in Italy. In spite of this, the bulk of Sarantaris' poetry and literary criticism and all of his philosophical essays are written in Greek. Of course, his father, who was born in Piraeus, and his mother, who was born in Constantinople to Greek parents, would have spoken to the young Sarantaris in Greek.¹¹ This may account to some extent for Sarantaris' need to express himself poetically in Greek. It is tempting at this point to employ the commonplace argument that the language through which a child first explores and discovers the world beyond is destined to become (in adulthood) the language of its imagination and emotions. Sarantaris' Greek philosophical essays, however, necessitate a different argument. The language of Sarantaris' reason would have found its voice in Italian, especially since he received all of his schooling in Italy. Sarantaris insists though on expressing himself philosophically in Greek. He seems to provide an explanation for this in the first of his three philosophical essays *Symvoli se mia Philosophia tis Iparxis* (*Contribution to a Philosophy of Existence*):

I think that contemporary Greece is in a position to judge so-called Western Civilization; it can and must judge such a civilization, if it wants to be saved from the influence that Europe has exercised upon us for an entire century, or if it wishes to discover the purity of a virginal view and the

pristine beauty of our own country and its people; a criterion of truth for all the people of the world.¹²

Certainly, the view expressed here by Sarantaris could have been looked upon favourably by Greek critics, except that firstly, Sarantaris was viewing “Greekness” through “Italian eyes”¹³ and secondly, he was positing the relationship between Greece and Europe in a way that ran contrary to the mainstream view (as epitomised by Seferis’ *Mythistorema*). Whilst Seferis and other poets of his generation were struggling to adapt their concept of “Greekness” exclusively to European concepts (Marxism, as in the case of Rantos; surrealism, as in the case of Rantos, Embirikos, Engonopoulos and Elytis; symbolism, as in the case of Ritsos etc.), Sarantaris, a European no less, was adapting his own European ideas (symbolism and [proto]existentialism), at least in his later years, to Eastern (Orthodox) strands of thought. Sarantaris, therefore, unlike his contemporaries, did not seek to prove Greece’s greatness by aligning its thought and culture with the concerns prevalent in the West but by defiantly posing different (“non-European”) questions.¹⁴ Greece’s voice was, in short, relevant to the West through the language of difference and not through the language of sameness.¹⁵ So, Sarantaris spoke a strange kind of Greek not only because of his Italian accent but also because of the views that his Greek articulated.

Sarantaris’ child-like innocence and honesty, which many of the poet’s contemporaries in Karagiorga’s book liken to a Christ-like perspicacity and which Lorentzatos associates with the poet’s belief in the power of faith (in God’s Logos)¹⁶, and his indifference to politics need to be viewed against the atmosphere of disillusionment, angst and scepticism that pervaded the Greek climate in the aftermath of the first World War and, in particular, the Asia Minor Catastrophe.

Sarantaris came to Greece in March of 1931 to complete his military service (his parents had declared in his papers that he was born in Piraeus) and settled there until the end of his life (he died in a hospital in Athens from typhus, a disease he had contracted in the Albanian War) in 1941.¹⁷ His family had lived briefly in Piraeus. The poet’s father had established himself in several enterprises, one of which was a company that sold chemical products and which Dimitrios Sarantaris had named ‘Sarantaris & Sons’. When the family business came close to bankruptcy, an uncle, Marianos Sarantaris, who had been living in Italy for some years, invited Dimitrios Sarantaris and his cousin, Andreas Sarantaris, to work with him. In 1912, therefore, the poet, then around four years of age, moved with his family to Bologna of Italy. It was in Bologna (at the Institute of Saint Ludwig) that Sarantaris received his primary and secondary education. After completing high school, he entered the University of Bologna to study Law. Three years into his degree, in 1929,

however, the family permanently moved into their holiday home in Montappone. Consequently, Sarantaris finished his final year of Law at the University of Macerata, graduating in November of 1930 after the completion of his thesis 'Il diritto come norma tecnica' ('The Law as a technical canon').¹⁸ Sarantaris' studies in Law, the financial hardships that his family would have endured with the rise of fascism in Italy and constant exposure to a highly shrewd and business-minded father seemed not to have evoked in Sarantaris an interest in practical matters, much to the former's chagrin. Sarantaris managed to maintain his commitment to poetry and philosophy throughout his life.¹⁹ This meant a rejection of the ideal of the "action man" who worked tirelessly in the factory or office to bring about social revolution. Sarantaris was never employed. He relied entirely upon his inheritance, a percentage of some small rental income.²⁰

Sarantaris' innocence and honesty (which Lorentzatos has connected with his faith in God) and his virtual indifference to politics²¹ at a time when Greek artists were grappling with the horrors of World War I and the Asia Minor Catastrophe would have made him seem like something of an anomaly to his contemporaries in Greece. Artists of the 30s were very much embroiled in the struggle between art and social/political action. Kariotakism, which maintained a stranglehold over Greek literature long after Kariotakis' death in 1928,²² addressed the problem of an artist's social responsibility through its nihilistic belief in death as the absolute (freedom of) escape from an unbearably disheartening social reality. Surrealism, which in France had culminated in the movement's allegiance to the Communist Party, had manifested itself in Greece as an intellectual movement that sought to affect a social revolution through a (literary) subversion of the world-view inherent in (a conventional use of) the Greek language. The Marxist movement in Greece, on the other hand, endeavoured to harness the Greek language (and literature) to the service of the socialist ideal.²³ At the heart of these three movements lay the conviction in the concept of the death of God (an idea originally conceived and expounded by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who had influenced many writers of the Generation of the 30s)²⁴ and in the need for the individual to assume full responsibility for his/her existence. Although Sarantaris himself was influenced by (proto)existentialism (mainly Kierkegaard's version of it), his existentialist ideas had nothing in common with Marxist existentialism or even the brand of existentialism that was later expounded by Sartre. While Sarantaris, both in his philosophical works and in his poetry, displays a "typically" existentialist interest in the nature of being and existence, the question of death and time (as *dasein*), the geometry of self-consciousness and the burden of responsibility and freedom, he, at the same time, espouses the metaphysical idea of God (that is, the God of Eastern Orthodox mysticism):

GOD OUR SKY...²⁵

God our sky doesn't speak to the soul
 from a colourless and clamorous time
 which we laid upon a forgotten lake
 of the universe
 which from the years and from the corrosion of silence
 will certainly have become infertile

God should speak again to the soul
 so that we can mould our mortal existence
 in the sun
 without looking any more at the invisible essence
 which God will refine for us
 wakeful within our soul
 and invisible but diffused within existence.

(January of 1934)

Metaphysical terms like “God”, “eternity”, “authentic reality” and “absolute truth” could not have been part of the vocabulary of the intellectuals of that time, especially if one considers that the first World War and the Asia Minor Catastrophe still burdened the public psyche as the most bleak picture of a social myth in ruins. The utter devastation of human life and environment together with the ensuing political and social strife provoked a vote of no confidence, a complete loss of faith in any transhuman value system, so that Greek artists now looked either within themselves (Kariotakism, [proto]existentialism and surrealism) or outside themselves (Marxism) for the bricks and mortar that would build the new world. Sarantaris, on the other hand, delved into his inner consciousness only to find that the key to the new world lay hidden in the forgotten tertium between time/humanity (άνθρωπος) and eternity/divinity (Θεός), the tertium, that is, of faith (in God):²⁶

CENTURIES²⁷

Far from the cosmogony,
 they left me alone
 like a corpse
 or an animal

And the days passed over me
 bringing ash and smoke

They were passing, and from sleep
 when I was drowning,

I would see the faint songs
 the tears that had become sky
 and the silence of time

The death and morbid solipsism that pervaded the works of Kariotakis and his followers as the unmitigated negation of existence in a dying world becomes in Sarantaris' work (poetic and philosophical) an opportunity for palingenesis. Rather than see in the obvious decline of the West the complete subversion of everything once considered real by the western mind, Sarantaris sees it as the "faint song" that will rouse the latter from a centuries-old slumber. The real problem for the European and the Greek is the question of Christianity, as the poet himself insists:

In any case, even today, the problem of Christianity is the common problem *a priori* of all European peoples.²⁸

Having diagnosed the condition, Sarantaris then prescribes a cure: a return to the roots of Christianity, the (Hellenic) Eastern Orthodox Tradition. One might well ask what connection there is between Sarantaris' antidote and the worship of death by Kariotakis and his disciples. Sarantaris provides a surprisingly simple answer in his philosophical works: the logical principal of non-contradiction ($A \neq A$). For the poet, Western Christianity is trapped within the very fragile framework of Knowledge. In defying the mystical faith of the Eastern Tradition in order to (logically) define God, the Europeans exposed (the knowledge of) God to the possibility of (logical) negation. In doing this, Europeans forfeited the affirmative/inclusive doubt inherent in Faith for the negative/exclusive doubt inherent in Knowledge. The consequence of this exchange is that the ego, which would have transformed the present moment into a struggle between time/damnation (*άνθρωπος*) and eternity/salvation (*Θεός*) through the quintessential doubt of faith, is banished to the (Cartesian) threshing floor of self-doubt.²⁹ Faith is, therefore, that which will rescue Europe from the inevitable death of non-contradiction. Thus, in embracing the doubt intrinsic to the Christian faith, the knowledge that one can never fully know the reality that is God, every moment becomes an opportunity for reconstituting the relationship between the human and the divine and of realising the harmony of the *Θεάνθρωπος*.

In poems that are characterised by a simplicity and brevity reminiscent of Mallarme and Ungaretti, Sarantaris transubstantiates the sensory world that is sacrificed on the Cartesian altar of self-consciousness into the architecture of the soul, poetry:

SOLITUDO³⁰

The earth becomes a poem
 within my vision
 now that I have withdrawn
 the gods beside me become silent
 no other being no other poem
 captivates my imagination.

The poem becomes the glorious outcome of the alchemical process that transforms the distance between the “interiority” of the poet’s eye and the “exteriority” of the physical world into a sensory and, therefore, historicised image of the universal. The act of poetic creation for Sarantaris is inescapably a meeting with solitude because it necessarily involves an intensification of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness, however, never manifests itself as a sterile solipsism because the body of the poem, the sheer physicality of its words and the evocative surfaces of its images, always functions as a reminder of the essential interdependence between inner vision and outer world. The poet sees the world and in seeing the world (s)he becomes aware of the self that sees, but the insights that emanate from the emotions that are embedded in this act of seeing can only be appreciated as insights in the form of a spectacle or image. Heavily influenced by the Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce (who saw art as the result of intuition’s transmutation of particular emotions into images that reach out to us from the banks of the universal), Sarantaris sees poetry as a kind of two-way invocation, the particular’s impression of the universal spirit and the universal spirit’s impression upon the particular.³¹ Though Sarantaris’ view would not have been incompatible with the vitalistic theories (in particular that of Henri Bergson) that were in vogue in the 1930s, his application of a framework (that is, the Christian framework, albeit an Eastern Orthodox one) that still had very strong associations with the perceived “decline of the West” to the more indeterminate concept of a universal *geist* would have been. Sarantaris set out to prove that this so-called universal *geist* spoke through the very historicity of the Greek *geist* while his contemporaries were still trying to demonstrate that the Greek *geist* could speak through a (somewhat nebulous) universal.

Finally, although the portrait painted by the patchwork of interviews in Karagiorga’s book is very flattering to the poet, it is really the silence, the text behind the knowing glances and smirks of his contemporaries that captures more faithfully the enigmatic beauty of Giorgos Sarantaris.

NOTES

- 1 “I loved without caution, without purpose, without seeking anything in return, I was, in other words, completely devoid of dignity in people’s eyes. And one day, I realised that they didn’t take me seriously.” This is my translation.
- 2 Cf. Olympia Karagiorga, Giorgos Sarantaris – O Meloumenos, Ekdoseis Diavlos, Athina, 1995 and Odysseus Elytis, Anoihta Hartia, Triti Ekdosi, Ikaros, Athens, 1987, in “To Hroniko mias Dekaeτίας”.
- 3 I am thinking here of Giorgos Marinakis’ description of him: “Perhaps he himself knew that when he spoke that Other, which existed within him and which spoke through him, was Celestial God. Perhaps he knew that he had uncovered God’s gift, the gift of having Him within you.” Giorgos Sarantaris, *Poemata*, Protos Tomos, Epim. Giorgos G. Marinakis, Gutenberg, Athens, 1987, p. 18’. This is my translation.
- 4 A generation made famous by the fact that two of its members, Giorgos Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, are Nobel Laureates.
- 5 Linos Politis, *Istoria tis Neoellinikis Logotehnias*, Pempti Ekdosi, Morfotiko Idrima Ethnikis Trapezas, Athens, 1993, p. 300: “Although he had made his debut very early on, Sarantaris remained until the very end an isolated instance of someone who never got to evolve fully or to exercise some influence...” This is my translation.
- 6 Mario Vitti, *I Yenia tou Trianta*, Ermis, Athens, 1979, ch. 2, p. 90: “And indeed the loose correspondence between the lofty goals Sarantaris set for his poetry and the level of the Greek that he had at his disposal was one of the great dramas of his life, perhaps the greatest when we consider that he wasn’t always aware of it. The most current indication of this lack of correspondence (between his goals and his Greek) is a sense of effort, which becomes more intense in his youth when he endeavours to express in just a few words a moment of brilliance.” This is my translation.
- 7 Zisimos Lorentzatos, *Dioskouroi*, Domos, Athina, 1997.
- 8 Olympia Karagiorga, *op. cit.*
- 9 Cf. Odysseus Elytis, *op. cit.*, pp. 343–346.
- 10 Of course, not all questions can be addressed in this paper, nor can the few that are addressed be dealt with in any exhaustive way. Perhaps a more comprehensive coverage can be achieved in a paper that deals exclusively with the reception of Sarantaris’ work by the critical community in Greece.
- 11 In fact, Marinakis informs us that: “Giorgos Sarantaris learned his first words at the crucial age of 4–6 from his mother and the two chambermaids she had brought with her from Greece. The Greek which his mother taught him and spoke to him in was the Constantinopolitan idiolect, an idiolect which she had learned when living in Constantinople.” Giorgos G. Marinakis, *op. cit.*, p. 1η’. This is my translation.
- 12 Giorgos Sarantaris, *ERGA*, Epim. Sofia Skopetea, Vikelaila Vivliothiki, Heraklion, 2001, in “Symvoli se mia Philosophia tis Iparxis”, p. 135. This is my translation.

- 13 The critic Andreas Karantonis identifies Sarantaris' bilingualism as the cause of his inability to express himself poetically in Greek: "We can discern a great and almost insurmountable writing difficulty. At the root of this difficulty is his dual descent: the true artist's struggle to find the ultimate poetic expression but, simultaneously, the tragic absence of the [appropriate] linguistic means." Mario Vitti, *op. cit.*, ch. 2, p. 90. This is my translation.
- 14 Cf. Olympia Karagiorga, *op. cit.*, p. 40: "Western peoples [...] drive themselves to death. And if they drive themselves to death, they don't have the right to present themselves as teachers and leaders to other peoples." My translation. Sofia Skopetea also suggests that while Sarantaris was more preoccupied with submitting his European ideas to (what he considered to be) Greek influence, his contemporaries in Greece were more interested in adapting their "Greek" ideas to European frameworks: "And as for the relationship with Greece, we will observe that, unlike the Greek intellectual who looks towards Europe, it is the European, who refined in the art of expression and philosophy, endeavours to realise that which he is by virtue of descent, to become [...] a Greek from the very beginning, starting with a Greek poet." Giorgos Sarantaris, *ERGA.*, *Epim.* Sofia Skopetea, Vikelaila Dimotiki Vivliothiki, Heraklion, 2001, pp. λα'-λβ'. This is my translation.
- 15 Within a Freudian framework, this may perhaps be interpreted as a vindication of his right as an "outsider" to put forward his own view of "Greekness".
- 16 Zisimos Lorentzatos, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–111: "Sarantaris discerns with his 'speech' that stage of logos through which the individual passes conditionally/potentially and the person actively in the individual-person relationship, until the moment when they arrive at Logos: at God-Logos or God-Anthropos. Arrival at this point is what Ioannis Damaskinos calls *logosis*..." This is my translation.
- 17 Although Sarantaris had spent most of his life in Italy, he felt an intense sense of loyalty to Greece (which he believed was superior in *geist* to Italy): "Italy ... was the most representative 'country of pleasure' in Western Europe, with indeterminate boundaries and hazy ideologies from the time of Ancient Rome until the time of Fascism ... Giorgos Sarantaris once again saw 'Italy' as a country that needs to 'sit on the lap of Greece...'" Giorgos G. Marinakis, *op. cit.*, pp. λβ'-λγ'. This is my translation.
- 18 Cf. Giorgos G. Marinakis, *op. cit.*, pp. τθ'-κ'.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. λε': "But he never worked or, which is the same thing, he couldn't work because he was so far removed from practical existence and totally devoted to poetry and philosophy. According to the ideology of middle-class society, but also of socialist society, labour is an ideal." This is my translation.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. λθ': "In this way, without any occupation, he lived the rest of his life in Greece. He lived on a small income, a percentage of rental income from his inheritance, devoted wholeheartedly and completely to Poetry and Philosophy." This is my translation.
- 21 Marinakis maintains that Sarantaris' interest in politics was confined to his participation in the theoretical discussions initiated by the sociologist and historian, Demosthenes Danilidis: "Many of the young people subscribed to Demosthenes Danilidis' sermons and participated in the meetings that he initiated and organised. Giorgos Sarantaris' participation in Danilidis' meetings was the only occasion where he concerned himself with some policy." Giorgos Marinakis, *op. cit.*, p. μγ'. This is my translation.

- 22 Kostas Kariotakis (1896–1928) is considered one of the most important poets of the Generation of the 20s. The small body of poetry that he produced before his suicide in 1928 is saturated in feelings of inconsolable disillusionment, futility and melancholy. His poetry is characterised by a tone of intense sarcasm and pessimism and mirrors the atmosphere of extreme disappointment and shock that prevailed subsequent to the Asia Minor Catastrophe. If the Generation of the 30s is considered the voice of Greece's triumph over the despair and adversity of the post-war period, the Generation of the 20s can be considered the voice of the agonising struggle towards that triumph.
- 23 In fact, Mario Vitti himself cannot resist drawing a comparison between a politically apathetic Sarantaris and a politically active Rantos: "Sarantaris' experiences occurred within a context that was consciously and obstinately kept narrow for the sake of intensity. His experience appears all the more limited and stifling when we compare it to the breadth of interests and combative vigour of Nikita Rantos, the social revolutionary who discarded Kariotakism using entirely different means." Mario Vitti, *op. cit.*, ch. 3, p. 94. This is my translation.
- 24 Consider what Sarantaris says about Nietzsche in his notes: "The poison of the very civilised French moralists flowed into his veins without him ever realising it; this made him too an author of decadence, of a decadence which here and there reveals a rare and completely surprising vigour but which nevertheless is undoubtedly still decadence." Giorgos Sarantaris, *ERGA*, Epim. Sofia Skopetea, Vikelaia Dimotiki Vivliothiki, Heraklion, 2001, p. 217. This is my translation.
- 25 This is my translation of the Greek poem by Sarantaris. Cf. Giorgos Sarantaris, *Poemata*, Tritos Tomos, Epim. Giorgos G. Marinakis, Gutenberg, Athens, 1987, p. 156.
- 26 Giorgos Sarantaris, *ERGA*, Epim. Sofia Skopetea, Vikelaia Vivliothiki, Heraklion, 2001, p. 255: "...the loftiest passion in a human being must be love, needless to say, however, only if we believe in the Theo-Anthropos first, and remove from within ourselves the possibility of regression into the state of no faith." This is my translation.
- 27 This is my translation of the Greek poem by Sarantaris. Cf. Giorgos Sarantaris, *Poemata*, Tritos Tomos, Epim. Giorgos G. Marinakis, Gutenberg, Athens, 1987, p. 176.
- 28 Giorgos Sarantaris, *ERGA*, Epim. Sofia Skopetea, Vikelaia Dimotiki Vivliothiki, Heraklion, 2001, p. 136. This is my translation.
- 29 *ibid.*, pp. 135–147.
- 30 This is my translation of the Greek poem by Sarantaris. Cf. Giorgos Sarantaris, *Poemata*, Tritos Tomos, Epim. Giorgos G. Marinakis, Gutenberg, Athens, 1987.
- 31 An interesting topic for a paper would be the relationship between Sarantaris' poetry and philosophy, but against the background of the critical orientation of the model of poet-philosopher and the famous dialogue between George Seferis (the poet) and Constantine Tsatsos (the philosopher).