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NOSTOS AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF 'A RETURN TO THE SAME': FROM HOMER TO SEFERIS

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> *Home is where one starts from.*
>
> T. S. Eliot*, East Coker*

The notion of return (*nostos* in Greek) is explored with varying elaboration throughout much of Greek literature. The earliest Greek tradition included several variants of the *nostos* story, in both epic and in lyric versions. The *Odyssey* is the most famous example, but other examples of this theme were also well-known in antiquity, such as the *Nostoi* ascribed by Proclus to one Agias of Troezen and the three fragments of the Hesiodic catalogue that treat various features of the story of Agamemnon's fatal return, while Stesichorus wrote a poem called *Nostoi* and a poem called *Oresteia*.[1] Thus it is clear that the Returns of the Greek veterans from Troy was a magnetic theme in poetic tradition, both epic and lyric.[2] There are ample instances of the treatment of the classical themes in modern Greek writing. The following study therefore is far from comprehensive; I attempt to comment only on the particular kind of *nostos* that seems to be at work in one of Seferis' poems, 'The Return of the Exile' [*O gyrismos tou xenitemenou*], relating it to the classical tradition and to the folkloric elements of Greek culture. The particular theme I will explore here in brief is how the Odyssean *nostos* with its traditional feature of recognition becomes a great metaphor for the concept of change and serves to characterize Seferis' vision of a contemporary Greek reality.

Seferis' poem can be read within a literary system that well demonstrates how the poet merges the present with the past. His new perspective on the treatment of *nostos* in literature can be illustrated by comparing his themes, motifs, and language with those of his forerunners who dealt with a *nostos*-story in Greek culture. In particular Seferis' poem proceeds from that of Homer and elements of the folksong tradition especially a popular ballad in a version collected in Politis (1914) 'The return of the long-absent husband', no. 84 [*O gyrismos tou xenitemenou*].[3] The title makes obvious the connection between the two modern Greek poems. I choose to translate *xenitemenou* as 'exile' in Seferis' title but as 'the long absent husband' in the folksong version because a different waiting person welcomes the returning hero. In particular, in both poems the returning hero comes back after a long absence, in Seferis' poem he is welcomed by his old friend but in the demotic song, he is received by his estranged wife.

Here I examine important points of convergence and divergence between the modern text and its sources on the subject of homecoming. In the *Odyssey*, the *locus classicus* of return, the recognition signs reconcile Odysseus and Penelope. The element of testing and tokens is associated with a happy ending in the Homeric model and in the modern Greek ballad. However in Seferis' poem there is no question of marital recognition, only the failed 'recognition' of homeland. To explore further Seferis' manipulation of *nostos* one should take into account the treatment of this theme in the Homeric return and the popular ballad. The demotic song exhibits interesting similarities with the *Odyssey*, with reference especially to the pairing *nostos-anagnorisis* [homecoming-recognition]. The long absent husband of the modern Greek ballad, like Odysseus, achieves his return through tokens and testing of

recognition. Nikolaus Politis (1914)[4] was the first to suggest that this demotic song is related to the recognition-scene of Odysseus and Penelope.

Let us consider the basic elements of this demotic song. A man meets a woman, and after getting into conversation reveals that he is her long-absent husband; she asks for tokens and she eventually recognizes him. I will quote the lines that refer to the dialogue between the returning husband and his wife:

— My good stranger, if you are my husband, my beloved man,
tell me of marks in the courtyard, and then I will believe you. (30)
— An apple-tree grows by your door, a vine grows in your courtyard;
excellent are the grapes it bears and Muscat is their wine,
and he who drinks it is refreshed and asks to drink again,
— There are marks in my courtyard and everybody knows them;
a passer-by you were and passed, you tell me what you saw, (35)
Tell me of marks inside the house, and then I will believe you.
— Right in the midst of the bedroom there burns a golden lamp;
it gives you light while you undress and while you plait your tresses;
it gives you light at sweet daybreak, as you dress in your best.
— A wicked neighbour it must be, who told you what you know. (40)
Tell me of marks on my body, give me tokens of love.
—You have a dark spot on your chest, a dark spot in your armpit,
and between your breasts you wear your husband's amulet
— Good stranger, you are my husband, and you are my beloved man![5]

In the *Odyssey* the number of marks are, as in the demotic song, three and of the same kind: apple trees and vines (Politis 30: 24.340 ff), description of the bed chamber (Politis 35: 23.184ff.) and the scar of Odysseus from a wound on his thigh (Politis 40: 24.327 ff.). Apart from these affinities between the marks of the modern Greek ballad and the Homeric recognition-scenes there is also a linguistic similarity. The modern Greek *semadi* [token] (see Politis 30) of the modern Greek ballad is named after the ancient Greek *sema* [token] of the *Odyssey* (for example, *Odyssey* 24.329).

Whatever the degree of the connection between the *Odyssey* and the demotic song it is clear that the theme of the return is a very old and panhellenic one, and the similarities between the two works provide a common frame of reference useful for studying the treatment of the *nostos*-theme in Greek literature. In particular, this demotic song illuminates the Homeric scenes of recognition and offers a valuable way of interpreting the use of the treatment of a return in disguise that involves deceit. Elaborate recognition sequences presuppose an audience/readers attuned to appreciate variation on the familiar patterns of this theme. Seferis is conscious of being part of a long-lived poetic tradition. In producing the 'The Return of the Exile' he is continuing the theme of the return as far as motif and language goes. This traditional theme of return helps to shape his perspective on *nostos* as an image of the present times. Apart from adopting the title of the demotic song Seferis exploits thematic features of *nostos* whose presence is clear in the *Odyssey*.[6]

In particular, as in the *Odyssey*, a *nostos*-plot requires two typical roles: the absent male figure and the waiting (usually female) figure. The *nostos*-theme in Seferis' poem is related to the returning exile, who has been absent from his country like Odysseus, and his old friend.[7] The exile in Seferis' poem meets his old friend and hopes to find the place of his childhood: '— I'm looking for my old house, the tall windows darkened by ivy;' ('The Return of the Exile', 22-24).[8]

His old friend tries to welcome the exile home and asks by what signs he will recognize it. In the demotic song, the narrative tension leads to the happy reunion of husband and wife—as in Homer. In Seferis' poem, although the sequence of 'marks' sought by the returning exile (the old garden, the old house) follows the demotic song of the same name, *nostos* and recognition are mutually rejected. The happy reunion of the returning husband and the waiting wife has been inverted. The *nostos*-theme does not assimilate the element of recognition, as in the poetic forerunners of Seferis' poem; the returning exile and his old friend remain two separate persons who are by no means reunited. The exile's friend merely repeats the reassuring words: 'you'll get used to it little by little', ('The Return of the Exile', 15–33). As the poem proceeds there is an undertone of loss and death. Instead of a happy reunion between the exile and his friend the exile notices that the voice of his friend becomes distant and that as he speaks he grows smaller: 'as though you're sinking into the ground' ('The Return of the Exile', 43).

Thus the progress of Seferis's poem reveals that the recognition-scene is not reciprocal, as in the *Odyssey* or in the demotic song. As the narrative proceeds there is an undertone of death that breaks down the traditional pairing of *nostos*-recognition. This is well illustrated by the two final lines of the poem: 'Here a thousand scythe-bearing chariots go past / and mow everything down' that underline the prospect of war associated with the date (spring 1938) that Seferis has appended at the end of the poem. By putting his extra-poetic information, the date, at the bottom Seferis has made a statement here about his own times. The prospect of war is what frustrates the *nostimon hemar* [the day of the homecoming]. *Nostos* serves here to characterize the poet's vision of a contemporary Greek reality. The destructive effects of war are added to the misfortunes of the journey home. Specifically, in the final lines of the poem the old friend says to the returning exile that he has allowed nostalgia to prevent the attainment of *nostos*: 'your nostalgia has created / a non-existent land, with laws / alien to the earth and man.' ('The Return of the Exile', 46-48).

The memory of a lost home or the hope of a homecoming can enact the feeling of nostalgia. This word in its normative Neohellenic usage reflects the essence of yearning to return. *Algos* is suffering. So nostalgia is the suffering for an unappeased yearning to return. This particular kind of yearning for the homecoming is not fulfilled by the exile who, like Seferis, has been absent for a long time and has created an image of home that does not meet his expectations on his return. One may think here that the idealistic nature of *nostos* was part of the poet's personal experience. It is noteworthy that Seferis, a Greek from Asia Minor, could not return to his birthplace, Smyrna. Most importantly at the time of the poem's composition Seferis was experiencing his own *nostos* to Greece. He was appointed as a vice-consul in London in 1931, and in 1938 he moved to Athens in order to work for the Press Office of the Greek government. His feeling of the impossibility of *nostos* as a return to a place of fixity is depicted in the poet's personal diary: 'Suddenly I faced—whether war or peace awaited—a world that was changing from moment to moment and acquiring wrinkles different from those one had foreseen. Like your own child, that you left when he was young, and you meet him again after many years but you cannot recognize him anymore'. (*Meres* [*Days*] 1984: 104). Thus, I would like to suggest that the sense of loss and change experienced by the poet at the time of the poem's composition has affected his writing. The poem reveals the misfortunes of the journey home to a place that is not the same and ends with the threat of the imminent World War II.

We have seen so far that in Seferis' poem the two traditions of Homer and the folk songs are intertwined in a form with sinister associations, drawing attention to the politics of the poem's composition. However, unlike the happy reunion of Odysseus with Penelope and the marital recognition between husband and estranged wife in the demotic song, the homecoming of the returning exile in Seferis' poem turns into disillusionment. This treatment

of *nostos* by Seferis provides an interesting analogy to the essence of *nostos* in Greek tragedy. Unlike Odysseus, who eventually adjusts to the life of Ithaca, the return in Greek tragedy is linked with a sense of loss and death (see Alexopoulou 2004). One may think here of the welcome-scene of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' text, where Clytaemnestra receives her long-absent husband and conceives his death in a manner which functions as a variant of the typical motif of the bath. The commonplace and innocent event of the bath (see *Odyssey* 23.153–5; cf. Scheria *Odyssey* 6.216 ff.) is transformed to Agamemnon's own ritual of death (Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 1128–9: 'she gores him and gores him / butting and butting with blood-crusted horn / slumps into bath blood bloodsplash').[9]

In particular the welcome-scene in Aeschylus' text with its ominous effect clearly demonstrates that the husband and the wife of this *nostos*-story will not be reunited as in the Homeric model (cf. Sophocles' *Trachiniae* where Heracles is received by a fatal ceremonial robe sent by his wife, Deianeira). One may feel that tragedy is undercutting the utopian notion of *nostos* that one can return to the same, unaltered place. In the same way the frustration of *nostos* in Seferis' poem reminds us of the souring of tragic *nostoi*. Although the old friend promises to the returning exile that he will be soon welcomed back by his friends and relatives at his homecoming ('The Return of the Exile', 32–37) it is the feeling of nostalgia and loss that prevail in the final lines of the poem. The returning exile is not tenderly received as he is promised but he is faced with the disappearance of his last friend: 'Now I can't hear a sound. / My last friend has sunk' ('The Return of the Exile', 49–50).

All this suggests that there is an undertone of death in the conclusive *nostos* of the returning exile. Seferis exploits the theme of *nostos* to illuminate an image of the present. *Nostos* with its traditional feature of recognition is frustrated not only as a homeward journey to a place that has changed but also by the destructive effects of the imminent World War II. This treatment of the theme of *nostos* with its traditional feature of recognition may especially bear comparison to the tragic accounts of Orestes' return which contain a recognition with death along the way. As in Seferis' poem so also in the Orestes-plots the text may entertain a return to the same but cannot achieve it. The emotional impact of the modern poem and the tragic treatment of Orestes' return is distinct. Yet both the modern and ancient account of the homecoming-theme is structured around the effect of absence and the return and in all cases the homecoming is more tragic than it had been anticipated. This notion of the return in terms of nostalgia is embodied in all *nostos*-stories but especially in Orestes-drama and in Seferis' poem the recognition-theme that normally fulfills the hero's return is inverted and leads to disappointment. Thus the theme of recognition that would normally signify the reintegration of the returning hero in the *Odyssey* and the demotic song is presented as perverted in Orestes-drama and Seferis' poem.

In particular all three tragic accounts of Orestes' return (namely Aeschylus' *Choephori*, Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra*) contain a flawed *nostos* of the returning hero. Orestes' return occurs with varying elaboration but in each of the Orestes-plays the sign that proves the identity of the returning hero figures at the end of a carefully prepared dramatic development which somehow seems to move toward the recognition as its natural *telos* [conclusion]. However, the expectations aroused by the recognition scene between Orestes and Electra, with its simple movement towards achievement of the return of the absent hero, are modified. Electra expects Orestes to come home, in Sophocles' play, precisely so that he can murder their mother. He is specifically expected as an athletic victor (for example, Sophocles *Electra* 48–50; 682 ff), where the *Paidagogus* of Orestes narrates a deceptive story about the supposed death of the hero as a charioteer (Euripides *Electra* 614, 751, 761–2). However, he is polluted after the murder-plots of Clytaemnestra and her lover Aigisthus and so he has to leave again. This suggests that in Orestes-drama the ironic treament of the athletic imagery reinforces the reading of *nostos* as the impossible-return-to-the-same. The

longed for victory (see *Choephori* 148, 866–8) turns out to be no victory at all. Orestes is not enviable, as one would expect in the case of a victorious athlete, since he is polluted, 'I've won this bout but the laurels are blood-smirched' (Aeschylus *Choephori* 1017).[10]

The ironical treatment of the returning hero brings Seferis' poem and Orestes-drama in close relation. Both Aeschylus and Seferis exploit the homecoming theme which is normally accompanied by a series of disguises and deceits. However, unlike Odysseus, Orestes and Seferis' returning exile are not restored to their house. In the Orestes-drama Orestes' *nostimon hemar* [day of his homecoming] is frustrated by his act of revenge. The momentary rejoicing of Electra when she recognizes her brother is followed by the murder-plots. This use of the returning hero in Orestes-drama reminds us of the exile in Seferis' poem. Odysseus' Ithaca becomes in his poetry the symbol that cannot be seen as the home of our dreams. In the same way, although Orestes' return in Orestes-drama is expected with an optimistic feeling by Electra (see for example, *Choephori* 138) and the Chorus (see for example, *Choephori* 115), the notion of the heroic victor returning seems to be undermined in the Orestes-plays. The Orestes-figure comes forward as a poetic symbol on other occasions in Seferis' work. Tragic influence was crucial in the creation of his poetry. One may think here of the Poem 16 in his collection *Mythistorema* (Fiction) where Seferis exploits the athletic imagery of Orestes' representation in Sophocles' *Electra* (see especially Sophocles' *Electra* 694). This suggests that Seferis was aware of the Hellenic tradition both in regard to the epic and the tragic representations of Orestes.

To conclude, the treatment of *nostos* in Seferis' poem under consideration demonstrates that 'a return to the same' is only an ideal. I have argued that Seferis in producing the poem 'The Return of the Exile' is continuing the theme of *nostos* as the impossible-return-to-the same, which is central to the tragic *nostoi*, especially the return of Orestes whose happy reunion with his sister is marred by his act of revenge. The knowledge of the classical themes deepens one's appreciation of Seferis, and Seferis' reception of Homer and tragedy tells us important things about Homer and Greek tragedy. There are ample instances of this dialectic relationship in Greek poetry but here continuity is demonstrated within Seferis' treatment of the classical theme of *nostos*. Seferis is invoking the feel and the image of the well-known motif of recognition in order to comment upon the political conditions of the time (see Maronitis 1984, and Ricks 1989:156).[11] 'He (sc. Seferis) lives with the emotional life of the poetic texts he loves, and searches for an equally live presence in his own poetry and the Greece of his own day.' (Padel 1985: 92).[12] The poetry of Homer and elements of popular poetic tradition are here incorporated in order to illustrate that *nostos* cannot be fulfilled. This treatment of *nostos* by Seferis provides an analogy to the essence of *nostos* in Greek tragedy. *Nostos* becomes in Seferis' use of tragic themes a great metaphor for the concept of change in life and illustrates that return cannot be a return to a place of fixity.

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NOTES

[1] The importance of the hero's return is not confined to the *Odyssey* and the stories mentioned above. Teiresias' prophecy, in Homer's narrative, alludes to some later adventures of Odysseus and his death. The *Telegony* (Bernabé 1987: 100–105 and Davies 1988: 71–4) credited to Eugammon of Cyrene as the closing part of the Epic cycle deals with these adventures. Odysseus' death at the hands of his son Telegonus results from the latter's ignorance. In the same way that Odysseus in the *Odyssey* is thought to be far away and possibly dead, unrecognized by the suitors and his wife in his own house, Telegonus fails to recognize his father. The *Odyssey* also alludes to the *Argonautica* (Argo, *Odyssey* 12.70; Circe, sister of Aietes, *Odyssey* 10.137–39).

[2] Cf. Euripides, *Troades* 78–83; Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 627, 635, 650–57; Euripides, *Helen* 407–10.

[3] I use the variant of Politis (1914: No. 84, Introduction) of the demotic song of the 'Return of the long absent husband' in order to compare this type of song with the *Odyssey* and Seferis' poem.

[4] In Politis' opinion this ballad has a superficial connection with the corresponding scene of book 23 of the *Odyssey*, while it has many more similarities with homecoming-ballads of other countries. At a later date, S. Baud-Bovy (1936) rejected any connection of this demotic song with the recognition-scene of Odysseus and Penelope. I am convinced by Rhomaios' argumentation that the *Odyssey* and the modern Greek ballad are closely related. On the close connection between the *Odyssey* and the demotic song see Rhomaios, (1952: 334–54); cf. Kakridis (1971: 156–63); contra Baud-Bovy (1936: 227–33). The *nostos*-theme is not confined to the Greek tradition. It was as prevalent among other cultures; see Thompson (1955–8: N 681). The theme of return remains to this day a recurring motif in literature. Its survival depends on the fundamental importance of *nostos* as a life event, especially in the case of the overlapping and related theme of exile; see for example the description of the feelings of the returning exile in M. Kundera's novel *Ignorance* (2002: 70): 'He had the sense he was coming back into the world as might a dead man emerging from his tomb after twenty years: touching at the ground with a timid foot that's lost the habit of walking; barely recognising the world he had lived in but continually stumbling over the leavings from his life...'

[5] Politis, (1914). I quote the translation of these lines from Kakridis, (1971: 153).

[6] Clearly, the *Odyssey* is the most influential poetic forerunner for versions of a homecoming-story in Greek literature from antiquity to the present; see e.g. Νικολαρε ζης, (1962). Ricks (1989) has discussed thoroughly the use of the Odysseus-figure by Seferis as the archetype of the poem's exile. Maronitis (1984) has also recognized the affinities between the exile and the Odyssean-figure and he has advanced our understanding of the connection of Seferis' poem with folklore elements.

[7] We might adduce the view that the two interlocutors are two halves of the poet himself; see Mario Vitti, (1978: 132–3).

[8] Seferis (1995: 163–5), O gyrismos tou xenitemenou (*The Return of the exile*), 1. The quotations from Seferis' poem included in this paper are translated by Keeley and Sherrard.

[9] The translation is by Tony Harrison.

[10] The translation is by Tony Harrison.

[11] Cf. the use of *nostos* in Ritsos' poem: *Penelope's Despair*, (see Keeley 1996: 94). The Homeric reunion between Odysseus and Penelope is the landscape into which the new poem adventures but in Ritsos' poem the long waiting of Penelope is not made to appear vindicated by Odysseus' return. As Keeley points out 'It is the blood-soaked, white-bearded hero himself who frightens her and brings upon her the kind of bitter recognition that we don't find in Homer: a sudden perception of the years that have been used up by Odysseus's absence and those desires of hers that have been killed in the process, here brilliantly evoked in an image that compares them to the dead suitors on the floor in front of her.'