

The mist around Lala: A return to Seferis's *Six nights on the Acropolis*

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In memory of Andronike

Seferis's novel *Six nights on the Acropolis* is not one of his most popular works. It has even been described as "a bad novel by a very good poet". I shall not enter into this kind of discussion, which entails a number of theoretical presuppositions about the nature of the novel in general. I would rather point out a very "modern" feature that characterizes it, namely its Barthian "scriptibility", that is the elusive and constantly transformative interplay of two of its main personae-signifiers, Salome and Lala, and the attendant indeterminacy of meaning of the novel as a whole, an indeterminacy that has proved a constant source of attraction for repeated readings.

In this paper we shall be mainly concerned with Lala, one of the two enigmatic female figures with whom the protagonist, Stratis, falls in love. He describes her as a young girl, not more than twenty two years of age. There is something "blurred" about her. According to Stratis, you feel that you need to remove a "mist" (αχλύ) "not only from the eyes but also from the body, if one believes that the body can see" (p. 40).

In the course of this paper I shall attempt to dispel some of Lala's mist, a process which will, I believe, provide a better understanding of the novel and a greater insight into Seferis's worldview and poetic work.

Let me remind you of the basic story. A group of friends, Stratis, Nikolas, Nondas, Kalliklis, Salome, Lala and Sphinga (Sphinx), decide to visit the Acropolis on six consecutive full moons to enjoy not only the view but also the benefits of the "magnetic" powers of the full moon in their communication with each other. The peculiar idea that the power of the moon facilitates communication refers to the literary, and not only

literary, tradition about the magic powers of the moon that has survived since antiquity and has been exploited and played upon by countless poets, dramatists and novelists, including Dante, Shakespeare and *par excellence* the Symbolists in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth. I shall not go into detail about Seferis's use of the moon in this novel, as the subject has been explored in another paper.¹ Suffice it to say that Seferis does have the symbolist tradition in mind and in fact plays with it intertextually, particularly the Salome tradition, with special reference to Oscar Wilde's play *Salome*.

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During the visits to the Acropolis and the intervals between them, Stratis falls in love with Salome. The full moon meetings function as signposts for the progress of Stratis's love affair with Salome, and as occasions for its furtherance.

The first visit to the Acropolis marks the end of the group's introductory phase and the initial stage of Stratis and Salome's love affair. Coming down from the Acropolis, Salome gives Stratis the key to her apartment, a gesture that symbolizes the start of a far more involved and sexual phase in their affair. It also marks Stratis's first acquaintance with Lala, who is Salome's closest friend.

The second visit to the Acropolis accentuates the difficulties in Stratis and Salome's relationship. Since the first night on the Acropolis, Salome and Stratis have grown closer, despite Salome's attachment to Lala and Stratis's nostalgia for the love affair he had abroad a couple of years previously. However, Salome's late arrival on the appointed night, coupled with certain remarks made by Sphinga, makes Stratis doubt the

¹ Nadia Charalambidou, "Μια εξερεύνηση γύρω από το φεγγάρι, τις Έξι νύχτες στην Ακρόπολη και την επικοινωνία: Μια περίπτωση διακειμενικότητας", *Πρακτικά Συμποσίου Σεφέρη (Αγία Νάπα, 14-16 Απριλίου 1988)* (Nicosia: Morfotiki Ypiresia Ypourgείου Paideias kai Symvoulio Veltioseos Agias Napas 1991), pp. 79-147. All references to *Six nights on the Acropolis* in this paper are to the sixth impression (1993) of the first edition (Athens: Ermis 1974). All translations of quoted passages are mine.

sincerity of her feelings. After a bitter exchange they separate. In the meantime, Lala has taken advantage of Salome's absence to approach Stratis and to talk to him about herself.

The interval between the second and third nights on the Acropolis is the most difficult for Salome and Stratis's relationship. Stratis becomes infatuated with Salome, but she does not want to give her whole self to him (p. 113). He is jealous and they quarrel frequently. Salome goes away for a short holiday with Lala (p. 117). Stratis misses her terribly, but when he meets her on her return, remembering the pain he has experienced during their relationship, he gives back her key. When they go up the Acropolis with the rest of the group shortly afterwards in order to enjoy the full moon, he suffers a crisis. Feeling emotionally confused, he has a delirious outburst in which he babbles his own version of the biblical story of the beheading of John the Baptist at Salome's behest. According to Stratis, after the beheading, Salome felt perplexed as to what to do with John's head: it didn't easily fit amongst her other household decorations. At the end of his story, Stratis collapses, the group disperses, and Nikolas takes him home in a taxi.

However, this is not the end of Stratis's relationship with Salome. Sphinga, in her effort to prepare Lala for Longomanos (Λογκομάνος), the pompous poet she admires and is in love with, has made a plan to initiate her into sexual life through Stratis. Part of her plan is to expose Salome as being involved in a lesbian relationship with Lala, hoping to make Stratis disillusioned with Salome and more appreciative of Lala and her physical attractions. But her plan backfires. Stratis, as arranged by Sphinga, witnesses the almost lesbian encounter between Salome and Lala, but realises that Salome is deeply in love with him. So no sooner is the meeting over than Stratis goes to meet Salome. It is a Sunday, and they are finally together, wholly together. They go up the Acropolis at midday, the sun blazing on the dazzling white marble. Stratis feels that they have now reached total fulfilment: "For one dense moment, I was there and she was there. Whole, without anything left in the shadows" (p. 165). When they go to the Acropolis on the next full moon (Tuesday night), the moon does not look as impressively magical as it did before. "The round moon shone with a watery, easy light" (p. 166). It has been outshone by the sun.

Stratis feels Salome close to him, at one with him: "I felt that the thirst was not separating us any more. – Salome, this is the first time I've felt a human being beside me... a human being of my own race". At this very moment, Salome discloses to him that she is not called Salome, but Bilio (Μπίλιω) (p. 166). (This is a play on words, Μπίλιω-ήλιος; μπίλια is a small round ball, a marble, but also a reference to Malakasis's poem, "Το Μεσολογγίτικο".)²

Most of what we are told about the period up to the fifth full moon concerns Lala. After Lala's refusal to play along with Longomanos and her thwarting of his sexual demands when they pay him a visit, Sphinga makes a ritual robe for her (p. 195) and asks Stratis to accompany them to the Acropolis on a full moon. In the meantime Bilio goes to an island for a holiday.

When they go up the Acropolis, Sphinga ritually removes Lala's dress. Lala is taken aback. In the embarrassment that follows, they visit a brothel, and Stratis and Lala abandon Sphinga there. The night comes to a close in Lala's garden where she and Stratis make love under her walnut tree.

By the time the sixth full moon comes round, not only has the original group of friends dispersed, but Salome/Bilio is now dead. She died suddenly while on a visit to Athens, following a period of bliss with Stratis on the island. On the night of the full moon, Stratis and Lala place carnations in front of the Caryatids in her memory. Throughout the period following Bilio's death, Lala has stood by his side, substituting for Bilio, as if the two of them were interchangeable. In fact, a series of allusions suggests that Lala may in fact embody Bilio (pp. 236, 241, 250), culminating in Lala's explicit statement that "souls do sometimes abolish death and become flesh and lips again" (p. 252). This is in the final scene, which is narrated in a discourse that recalls descriptions of icons of the Resurrection and accounts of metaphysical or religious visions.

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² In the collection *Τα Μεσολογγίτικα* (1920, 1929?), in: *Τα άπαντα*, Α, επιμέλεια Γ. Βαλέτα (Athens: Alvin Redman 1964) pp. 211-12.

What does all this mean? Why is Salome so important to Stratis? And if she is so important how could she be replaced by someone else, Lala? And who is Lala? In what way can she replace Salome?

In a previous paper,³ after examining the various characteristics that are attributed to them, I suggested that both personae function as multiple symbols; that is, they symbolize idealized feminine archetypes – Salome in her negative aspect the *femme fatale* and Lala the Holy Virgin/Virgin Mary or Heavenly Aphrodite – as well as poetic and existential or metaphysical ideals. I shall not deal here with all these symbolizations, but shall concentrate on one particular aspect, even though they are all interrelated.

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In order to understand Lala's significance, let us first see in what way Salome has helped Stratis.

During one of their conversations on the island, Stratis sums up how Salome-Bilio has helped him. He claims that she has helped him to find himself, to stop being a Narcissus (p. 228), to start believing in other human beings; and that she has helped him to bring his body and soul together (p. 231).

Κοίταζα τον εαυτό μου, έψαχνα: ποιος είμαι; Προσπαθούσα να γυμνώσω την καρδιά μου όσο μπορούσα να πάω πιο βαθιά, ακόμη πιο βαθιά. Στο τέλος δεν έβρισκα τίποτε άλλο παρά μια επιφάνεια ίσια, στρωτή, λεία, χωρίς καμιά προεξοχή όπου να μπορεί να σκαλώσει το μάτι. Το απόλυτο κενό και μια φοβερή διαύγεια του μυαλού. [...] Ξέρεις ποιος ήταν ο Νάρκισσος; Ένας άνθρωπος που έβλεπε τον εαυτό του να πνίγεται χωρίς να μπορεί να κινηθεί για να τον σώσει. [...] Προσπαθούσα να κρατηθώ από ένα αντικείμενο του εξωτερικού κόσμου, ένα οποιοδήποτε αντικείμενο, όσο μηδαμινό κι αν ήταν. Έπρεπε να αποκοπώ από το φοβερό μέσα, σαν τα μωρά.

I looked at myself, searching: who am I? I tried to bare my heart as much as I could, to go deeper, ever deeper. In the end I found

³ See n. 1.

nothing but a straight surface, smooth, without any bulges to catch the eye. Absolute emptiness and a terrible clarity of mind. [...] Do you know who Narcissus was? A man who saw himself drowning and could not move to save himself. [...] I tried very hard to cling to an object from the external world, any object, however unimportant it was. I had to cut myself loose from the terrible *inside*, just like babies have to. (pp. 227-8)

This is not the first time that the reader learns of Stratis's psychological problems. But this is the most analytical explanation we get of them. On other occasions when he is upset, insecure and under great pressure, his psychological state is presented by internal focalisation, by means of mostly consonant psychonarration, in a discourse that reverberates with aquatic and marine imagery, for instance: "In the bus, in the evening, while I was looking at the new moon, I had the impression that I was being moved, together with other aquatic creatures inside an aquarium" (p. 115); "I told myself that we were all a sunken ship whose wreckage still affected the surface. [...] I realized that I alone, out of all the crew, must be the drowned sailor, lying amongst the huge white pebbles" (pp. 132-3).⁴

It is significant that the kind of discourse used to describe his emotional states, as well as the sea and water imagery used, recalls the manner in which Carl Jung describes what he calls the processes of "individuation" and "transformation" in his book *The Integration of the Personality* (1940),⁵ a copy of which Seferis had in his library.

According to Jung, who believed in the importance of getting in touch with the unconscious:

People generally believe that whoever descends into the unconscious lands himself in the oppressive confinement of egocentric objectivity and exposes himself in this blind alley to the attack of all the ferocious beasts the cavern of the psychic underworld is supposed to harbour. (p. 69)

⁴ The similarities of the marine and aquatic imagery to Laforgue's poetry are discussed in the article cited in n. 1.

⁵ C.G. Jung, *The Integration of the Personality* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co. 1940).

The meeting with oneself is the meeting with one's shadow:[...] the shadow is a tight pass, a narrow door, whose painful constriction is spared to no one who climbs into the deep wellspring. *But one must learn to know oneself in order to know who one is.*

For what comes after the door is, surprisingly enough, a boundless expanse full of unprecedented uncertainty, with apparently no inside and no outside, no above and no below, no here and no there, no mine and no thine, no good and no bad.

It is the world of water, where everything living floats in suspension; where the kingdom of the sympathetic system of the soul of everything living begins; where I am inseparably this and that, and this and that are I; where I experience the other person in myself and the other, as myself, experiences me. (p. 70)

[...] the unconscious is the wide world, and objectivity as open as the world. I am the object, even the subject of the object. (p. 70)

"The goal is illumination, whereby the initial situation is surmounted and a higher level is reached." According to Jung, "The development of personality is synonymous with an increase of awareness," and he suggests that "That is why, in mythology, the birth of the hero or the symbolic rebirth coincides with sunrise." "For the same reason," he claims, "most heroes are characterized by solar attributes, and the moment of the birth of their great personalities is called illumination," (p. 302) for the sun "is a symbol of the wellspring of life and of the final wholeness of man" (p. 122).

From the above it follows that it is not without significance that when Stratis and Bilio finally come together and they go up the Acropolis, at midday, with the sun blazing down on the white marble, Stratis experiences the strange feeling that "suddenly the marble swallowed all the light and tumbled down with it in absolute darkness":

«Μα ποιος είμαι;» αναρωτήθηκα όπως μέσα σ' ένα όνειρο. Τότες ένας ήλιος τυφλωτικός άστραψε κρατώντας στα πλοκάμια του αυτή την αγάπη.

"But who am I?", I wondered, as if in a dream. At that very moment a blinding sun flashed, holding their love in its tentacles. (p.168)

Significantly the imagery associated with Lala often refers to the semantic field of light, particularly the sun and the stars. It would seem, then, that if she represents an archetype, she stands for illumination and the final wholeness of human beings.

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Let us see in what ways she may function as an archetype. To begin with, how does Lala replace Salome? It is important to note that, even though Salome loves Stratis passionately, she feels that Lala is more suitable for him than herself. She tells him that Lala can give him far more than she can (p. 64) and wonders if she, Salome, is the right woman for him (p. 118).

Lala herself is eager to point out to Stratis that she understands him and that she can help him: when Stratis recites his poem on the Acropolis, "Lend me your ear and listen to the sounds that boil in a house full of darkness" (p. 54), she is the only one who has a favourable comment to make. She praises its imagery, imagery which she later uses to show Stratis that she identifies with the kind of existential or psychological experiences he is undergoing: "Last night I dreamt that I was *a house full of darkness*. That's all. I thought it might help you" (p. 80). Later on, she tells him that she has actually been through a time of absolute darkness herself, an experience which recalls Stratis's own period of darkness and loss of self. The way in which it is phrased suggests that for her too it was a period of questioning and psychological or spiritual self-awareness: "Do you know what it means to see yourself naked in a flood of thick darkness – your arms flung wide, but being unable to grab hold of anything?" (p. 241). She indicates that she also needs him to help her in some ways, for she feels the need to cling to something outside herself, to Stratis.

Stratis himself feels Lala as a help (p. 125), and she is only too willing to oblige whenever the occasion arises. When he says that he needs a tree, and that if a tree could be a woman, that is what he would have wanted (p. 127), she tells him that she has often thought of herself as a tree, a tree in pain (p. 127). Later on, when they finally make love on the night of the fifth full moon, she tells him that she is the woman whom Salome has offered him and that she may be the tree he has been looking for (p.

213). Significantly, after her return from the brothel where she has ritually offered herself for money, Stratis concludes that all the events that have taken place are as natural as the strong, deeply rooted trunk of a tree, and as the brightness of her face (p. 251). It is important to note in this respect that in Jungian psychology, the tree symbolises the archetype of the mother for the son, whose libido has the mother as object; it symbolises therefore a return to pre-conscious wholeness. Sometimes it symbolises the process of individuation, or the gradual ascent of individual development.

The symbolic language Lala uses and the experiences she alludes to – the experience of darkness, for instance, a kind of mystical *κατάβασις εἰς ἄντρον* (descent into a cave)⁶ – have a lot in common with the Jungian discourse about the descent into the self as part of the process of inner development and the Jungian discourse about the *anima*. Such a perspective seems to clarify the way Stratis interprets certain incidents, as, for example, when he makes love with Lala on the beach on Bilio's island, when she is lying on the beach and he feels as though he is making love with the earth. According to Jung, the earth implies fertility and descent into the collective unconscious (p. 15).

Similarly, this perspective seems to provide an explanation for why the others find Lala's behaviour and appearance unusual, if not strange. She is described as being initially in a dormant state, "and you might say that she is still asleep" (p. 45), and emphasis is laid on the aura of strangeness that surrounds her (p. 162). Extraordinary as these states may appear to be, they share many similarities with the manner in which archetypes make their presence felt. According to Jung,

archetypes seem to be functions of instincts which appear in a personal form when aroused from their dormant condition. But contrary to the functions attached to consciousness, they are always strangers in the conscious world. (p. 24)

They also "permeate the atmosphere with a feeling of uncanny foreboding".

⁶ See Jung, op. cit., p. 242.

A sense of strangeness surrounds many of the descriptions of Lala in terms that recall descriptions of statues, a kind of discourse that enhances the impression that she is not of this world and that she belongs to another dimension. Some of these descriptions echo passages from the *Greek Anthology* (for instance the depictions of Aphrodite by Christodorus of Thebes), or the Homeric Hymns – the *Hymn to Demeter* in particular. Others recall Platonic discourse: for example, the description of Lala on the Acropolis wearing the dress Sphinga has made for her:

Η Λάλα κάθουνταν στη μέση· ο Στράτης την εκοίταζε μέσα στη συγκαταβατική νύχτα· τα μάτια της ήτανε στιλπνά, τα βαριά μαλλιά της ένα μουντό χρυσάφι. Μια άλλη δημιουργία από φτερούγες απαλές και δροσερό λινό τον εκέρδιζε.

Lala was sitting in the middle, Stratis watching her in the acquiescent night. Her eyes were bright, her heavy hair a dull gold. He was being won over by another creation, one of soft wings and cool linen. (pp. 201-2)

and wearing the same dress later that night in her garden:

Το φόρεμά της είχε γίνει ένα με το φως και κυλούσε μαζί του, γλείφοντας τα μέλη της. Ο κορμός έμοιαζε κιάλας ελεύθερος. Ανάμεσα στα γόνατα ένας καταρράχτης από φεγγάρι και λινό, κι έπειτα οι δροσερές πλάκες. Ο σεβασμός εκείνος που ένωσε όταν η Λάλα ακούμπησε στην καρυδιά, φάνηκε και τον μαστίγωνε ως την ψυχή.

Her dress had become one with the light and flowed with it, lapping her limbs. Her torso seemed free already. Between her knees a cascade of moonlight and linen, and then the cool paving slabs. The reverence he felt when Lala leaned back against the walnut tree appeared and scourged him to his very soul. (p. 212)

Stratis's reverence for her brings to mind the reverence a recent initiate feels when he beholds a godlike face or a physical form which truly reflects ideal beauty (*Phaedrus*, 251). The wings in the first passage recall the wings of the souls that

have tasted of divinity, as also the wings the initiate gradually grows through his love for the divine face.

It seems relevant here to correlate Salome's feeling that she has "lost her way" (p. 69) and her conviction that Lala is the better or the ideal lover for Stratis with the passage from *Phaedo*, 107-8, which Seferis translated in *Μεταγραφές*, to the effect that souls are led, once they are dead, by other souls, who function as guides towards Absolute Good. Souls that have sinned in some way feel they no longer know the way.

From this point of view, Lala may be viewed metaphorically as functioning as such a guide for Stratis: that is, in Jungian terminology, as a psychopomp, indicating or furthering Stratis's progress towards individuation.

Lala's platonic features enhance her status as an *anima* and remind us of Jung's allusions to the possible interrelations between his archetypes and the platonic *εἶδη*, the word archetype being, according to him, St Augustine's explanatory paraphrase of the Platonic *εἶδος*.⁷ The ancient echoes do not detract in any way from Lala's status as a Jungian *anima*. Quite the opposite in fact. For, according to Jung,⁸ in studying the psychic constituents of archetypes – that is, the imaginative material manifested through them – we find any number of archaic and "historical connections, contents and archetypal images that we call mythological themes", which "live or function in the deeper layers of the unconscious mind, in the phylogenetic substructures of the modern mind, the so-called collective unconscious"; and they strike us as strange because "they bring into our ephemeral consciousness an unknown life belonging to a remote past", that is the mind and feelings of our remote ancestors.

Knowing Seferis's desire for a language of common symbols, it is understandable that he would eagerly endorse in this novel the Jungian schema that presupposes belief in a universal consciousness and a collective unconscious. Jung's hypothesis of a universal similitude or identity of the basic structure of the human psyche, and his hypothesis of patterns, or archetypes common to the whole of humanity, provided Seferis with a schema according to which he could classify a number of

⁷ Op. cit., pp. 53, 82.

⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

diachronic experiences he was interested in, experiences undergone by mystics and poets (Dante, St John of the Cross) and by ordinary mortals too, such as the stages of love, whether for a human or a divine being, the period of Darkness or mystical visions, or such phenomena as Adonis's and Christ's deaths. At the same time, this schema allowed him to express his strong belief in the identity of "time present and time past". It also explains why *Six nights on the Acropolis* reverberates with allusions to other stories, the story of Adonis, Christ's passion, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*, and so on, giving the impression of one long story made out of many other stories, or one long story crossing the paths of many others.

According to this reading, *Six nights on the Acropolis* is the story of Stratis's process of individuation and transformation. The various references to stairs and staircases in the novel, and primarily to the marble steps up to the Acropolis, seem to subtly underline this aspect. They are not to be viewed as mere realistic elements of the setting. Rather, if we follow a Jungian interpretation, they seem to have a polysemous function indirectly symbolising both *ascent* and *descent*, that is, the stages of progress or lack of it (*stasis*?) in Stratis's process of individuation. Salome and Lala, then, represent amongst other things *animae* in Stratis's mind, Salome's *anima* gradually merging with Lala's during the battle between the conscious and unconscious elements of his psyche.

Lala, the woman surrounded by a mist, seems accordingly to stand for the "veiled woman" in the dream of one of Jung's patients,⁹ who gradually uncovers her face, which, like Lala's once the mist has cleared, shines forth like the sun. For Jung this kind of apparition signifies that *solificatio* is being accomplished in the *anima*:

This particular ritual denotes that present-day consciousness and the collective psyche are in the process of being linked, i.e., that a lightening of the unconscious is in preparation.

Lala's shining face seems therefore to denote that a process of illumination is taking place in Stratis's psyche.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

Clearly, this process of illumination could be seen not merely as a stage in Stratis's progress to maturity, but also as a particularly apt metaphor for the process of poetic inspiration. Following this premise, Lala is the poetic idea, initially veiled in a mist, an idea that gradually becomes clearer and assumes through the poet's efforts a clearer and more concrete poetic form.

According to this interpretation, then, Seferis employs the Jungian analogy in order to express his ideas about the stages of poetic writing, stages that involve a period of creative darkness followed by illumination, in a manner similar to accounts of mystical illumination. Lala represents both a poetic idea and an ideal of the perfect poetic form by which a poet is inspired and towards which he also aspires.