

Transplanting Surrealism in Greece- a Scandal or Not?

NIKA Maklena
University of Tirana, Albania
E-mail: maklenanika@yahoo.com

Received 26.01.2015; Accepted 10.02. 2015

Abstract

Transplanting the surrealist movement and literature in Greece and feedback from the critics and philological and journalistic circles of the time is of special importance in the history of Modern Greek Literature. The Greek critics and readers who were used to a traditional, patriotic and strictly rule-conforming literature would find it hard to accept such a kind of literature. The modern Greek surrealist writers, in close cooperation mainly with French surrealist writers, would be subject to harsh criticism for their surrealist, absurd, weird and abstract productivity. All this reaction against the transplanting of surrealism in Greece caused the so called “surrealist scandal”, one of the biggest scandals in Greek letters.

Keywords: *Surrealism, Modern Greek Literature, criticism, surrealist scandal, transplanting, Greek letters*

1. Introduction

When *Andre Breton* published the First Surrealist Manifest in 1924, Greece had started to produce the first modern works of its literature. Everything modern arrives late in Greece due to a number of internal factors (poetic collection of Giorgios Seferis “*Mythistorima*” (1935) is considered as the first modern work in Greek literature according to Alexandros Argyriou, *History of Greek Literature and its perception over years between two World Wars (1918-1940)*, volume A, Kastanioti Publications, Athens 2002, pp. 534-535).

Yet, on the other hand Greek writers continued to strongly embrace the new modern spirit prevailing all over Europe. They had to find a new fresh reality, contrary to the Greek one during the period between two World Wars. Transplanting the movement, philosophy and surrealist literature in Greece would shake once for all the stony and invincible foundations of the Greek traditional literature and perspective of the time.

2. Beginnings of modernism in Greece as a response to the reality of that time

Kostas Karyotakis, the decadent poet of 20’s would be one of the first writers to reflect the anxiety of his time, crossroad of the Greek society between two wars, with his latest work “*Elegy and*

Satyrs” (1927). The pessimistic poetry of *Karyotakis* would not last for long because modern poets realized very soon the need for a new dynamics, enthusiasm, a *vital elan* inspired by a new myth. To complete this new journey for Greek literature, they had to launch parallel steps to the latest developments of the western poetry and find the way to reconcile the present with the past and bring those two concepts to a modern synthesis (Elefantis Aggelos, *Promise of Impossible Revolution and bourgeois in Greece between two World Wars*, Athens 1976). Above all, the Greek had to be liberated from any standards “in order to penetrate the endless and latent depths of reality” (*ibid*, p. 73).

3. Initial reactions of the critics and press of that time for the emergence of surrealism in Greece

As it occurs in every aspect of life and not only in literature introduction of something new and unique causes a “scandal”. The same would also apply to surrealism in Greece. Transplanting it in the Hellenic Republic would cause various reactions which were naturally translated into the so-called “*surrealist scandal*” (Trivizas Sotiris, *Surrealist scandal, a chronicle of expectation of the surrealist movement in Greece*, Kastanioti Publications, Athens 1996, p. 27).

The official introduction of surrealism in Greece was the publication of “Furnace” by *Andreas Embirikos* (1935), although it was preceded by publications and occasional efforts for surrealist productivity. After the publication of this surrealist anthology, the Greek critics started to immediately react. In “*Free step*”, the journalist *N. Giokarinis* published a satiric chronogram titled “*New poetry*”, elegantly describing his reactions while reading the book: “*You read five sentences and suddenly you feel as if you have swallowed one after another two sea-urchins and the room walls draw nearer, they only approach each other to turn around your head...this man has instilled in me what all poets of Greece and the whole world have not caused to me. I cannot get this book out of my mind. I want to understand it well, to penetrate the meaning of its phrases, to ultimately resolve the enigma printed in thousands copies of the most elegant book published in recent years in Greece. I often become angry because I cannot understand Greek words put one after another. People, he is a wizard, he is the Satan, a medium, he is a terrible and dangerous person.*” (N. Giokarinis, *New poetry*, *Free Step Newspaper*, 9 November 1935).

One year later, *Embirikos*, member of the French surrealist group responded in this way to the daily newspaper “*Kathimerini*”, where a journalist called *Kostis Bastias* asked him to define the revolutionary character of surrealism: “ (...) *Other forms of art last for a long time. Surrealism is still new. At that time he launched a highly persisting research. To be more precise, he adhered to the revolution both in political theory and dialectic materialism....*” (*Kathimerini Newspaper*, 30 March 1936). His answer was not quite explanatory for the public when some years later, another poet, late admirer of surrealism posed the question: “*Is surrealism a communism art? Noone can answer this question*” (Papatsonis Takis, *Surrealism and I*, in the magazine *Nea Grammata*, Volume VII, 1945, No. 5-6, pp 340-346).

Greek criticism has generally believed that surrealism was nothing else but a work of absurd and paradox. Some even propose the creation of a common line to be protected from “*this tide that may destroy the intellectual life of the country and provoke even a deeper confusion*” (Note of the

Editorial Office of the Magazine *New Greek Literature*, No. 6, May 1938, p. 235). Some finally decided “*they did not have to waste so many efforts as it was about a transitory fashion, whose proponents were negligible*” (as above, No. 7, July 1938, p. 236).

A feature of all these texts was confusion, ignorance and doubt. At that time all writers who did not use expressive traditional tools were baptized as surrealists and were cursed. In the meantime, in absence of a reasonable seriousness, those texts were contradictory at a very low level because bad words, mocking or rude terms were used.

Yet, there were some who succeeded to understand the new atmosphere in Greek literature such as the critical approach of transplanting surrealism in Greece from the social perspective, of *Petros Orologas*, the critic from Thessaloniki published in 1940: “ (...) *Transplanting of surrealism in Greece occurred very late with the only concern related to the artistic adaption. Our literature has not encountered phases that can justify a similar reaction; (...) and our society did not have the experience of a psychic crisis to potentially cause a similar reaction as the one caused by surrealism. Surrealism in Greece is the late adaption of some souls and probably of some distinguished temperaments. It could be adapted to a group of narrow-minded intellectuals rather than an influence and diversity and a strict application of the theory.* (Orologas Petros, *A movement between two World Wars*, Thessaloniki, 1940).

In November 1935 the magazine “*Nea Grammata*” published for the first time the poetry of *Odyseas Elytis*, who “was close to surrealist without being a surrealist”, and whom it probably owed the only texts protecting at that time the surrealist movement from attacks of various philological and pseudo-philological circles.

Some months later, in March 1936 *Elytis* returned with the translation of eleven poems of *Paul Eluard*. This test of translation of *Elytis* concurrently corresponds to the first complete presentation of one of the pioneers of French surrealism for the Greek reader. His double presentation would be in his favor and criticism would be harsher with him. *Elytis* was baptized as a surrealist contrary to the fate of *Embirico*. Hence, *Kleon Paraskos* in “*Nea Estia*” and *Petros Spandonidis* in “*Macedonian Days*”, with the excuse of criticism of two books, spoke about surrealism and reached common conclusions: “*Surrealism is based on the musical concept of human personality and seeks to musicalize the word; it has nothing but the value of an effort, attempt, experiment, contradictory logics. Surrealism dissolves the social character of art. Surrealist poetry cannot reflect human unconsciousness but is a result of the conscious intervention of the poet* (Trivizas Sotiris, *Surrealist scandal, a chronicle of expectations of the Surrealist movement in Greece*, Kastanioti Publications, Athens 1996, p. 42).

In June 1938 it was published the first poetry collection “Do not speak to the driver” by *Nikos Engonopoulos*. Intellectual circles and official criticism were cold and indifferent to the book. However, that did not apply to various journalistic and pseudo-philological circles, who believed they had found in the person and work of *Engonopoulos* the Achilles’ heels of surrealist. That was the same reaction they had to “Furnace” of *Embirikos* but the latter seemed to be saved by his social and economic status while *Engonopoulos* surrendered defenselessly to his critics. The first reaction to the book of *Engonopoulos* emerged from an anonymous note of *To Brady*, titled “Fight, attacking

trauma of grace”: “*The outcry surrounding surrealist movement in France also influenced Greece, where different ignorant individuals attacked surrealism although they did not understand it at all. Those neologists had started to mock surrealism. Yet, a new poet arrived, Nikos Engonopoulos, to fight beauty for this noisy movement in the volume titled under the Greek reality “Do not speak to the driver”.*” (Kalamaris Nikos, *Letter addressed to the director of Nea Fylla*, in the magazine *Nea Fylla*, No. 3, 1937, p. 56).

4. Positive feedback of criticism

On the other hand, some of the critics managed to recognize and appreciate the qualities of surrealism and Greek writers. The first one who evaluated the book of *Embirikos* was *Stratis Mirivilis*: “*We should confess that to date poetry has been an exceptionally melancholic issue for all of us....a poetry collection that can dispel melancholy and suddenly and sufficiently cause joy to the man, had not existed to date. Accordingly, we do not have this collection in our hands. Its title is “Furnace” and the type of poetic use deriving from “Furnace” is “surrealism”. It is French because it is about a French kind. What is surrealism? I have to admit that I have not realized what it was about. However, I hope that poets who deal with this specialty do not know anything more. As far as I can draw a conclusion, surrealism means more or less the following: you are sitting in an office, grab a pencil and a piece of paper and let your hand write whatsoever... “Furnace” is a beautiful precious book as a book of pleasure. Anyone can spend endless hours of reading. Our time is so sordidly fatal...*” (Mirivilis Stratis, *Surrealism*, *Proia Magazine*, 30 April 1935).

The poet and critic *Mitsos Papanikolaou*, referring to the poetry of *Odyseas Elytis*, writes: “*Surrealism elicited words from their utilitarian definition, thus creating a wonderful poetic space where access was denied from logics and knowledge*” (Papanikolaou Mitsos, *Poet Odyseas Elytis*, in the literary magazine *Nea Ellinika Grammata*, Volume II, No. 72, 16 April 1938, p. 7).

Tellos Agras would adopt a different approach to surrealism. He appears to be one of the rare critics in Greece that had realized the significance of new movement and its revolutionary character, whose purpose was to destroy individualism, “*further exploring with the view of development of inner miracle for each of us but common for everyone*” (Interview with *Tellos Agras* in the literary magazine *Nea Ellinika Grammata*, Volume II, Number. 72, 16 April 1938, p. 12). Above all, he admires the surrealist for his efforts to liberate poetry from any rhetoric (from which the Greek poetry suffered) and recognizes in him the only really dynamic trend of modern poetry.

Another approach would be provided by *Giorgios Theotokas*, who had identified in surrealism the attributes and symptoms of “a crisis of Western civilization”. He had already written about this crisis a number of articles without any literary character in *Nea Grammata* (Theotokas Giorgos, *Social Issues*, in the magazine *Nea Grammata*, Volume II, 1936). Referring to this crisis, he seems to provide the following advice: “*Firstly, try to understand me and then wait because in Greece the news arrive always late. As a result, what is foreign and new should be rather considered as a theoretical inversion than a constructive manifestation; accordingly, creative effects are expected to occur*” (Theotokas Giorgos, *What is surrealism*, in the literary magazine *Nea Ellinika Grammata*, Volume II, 2 July 1938, p. 1).

For the great Greek poet *Giorgos Seferis*, surrealism is equal to a poetic school that applied changes at the level of esthetics through the application of automatic writing and reliance on the unconsciousness. In the translated work of *Thomas Eliot* “Waste Land” in Greek language in 1949 *Seferis* noted: “At all times *Eliot* has been paid the highest tribute that anyone can ever receive in Europe. I also believe that by most of the people he is not considered as an insane articulating irrational words or as a “surrealist” taken out of the insanity of fabrication of puns to disorient rational and wise persons”, (*Seferis Giorgos, Second Prologue (for Waste Land)*, in *Essays*, Ikaros Publications, Athens 1974, p. 25) where we can clearly understand that the poet of Generation of 1930s gives a definition of surrealism that the surrealist is someone ironizing everything and has only one purpose: to astonish the bourgeois.

Nikos Kalamaris would publish a key text clarifying the misunderstandings on the emergence of surrealism in Greece. It is particularly focused on the dual existence of surrealism as a theoretical and action movement, thus proving he was one of the few Greek creators who had understood the dual requirement introduced in principles of movement, revolution in art and in life: “Yet, surrealism is not only theory but also a practice and it is impossible to be perceived only through studies. There is no theory without practice. There are two sides of the same coin. Neither surrealism, nor an accurate assessment of the artistic past can exist without a surrealist movement. In 1933 I stressed in one of my lectures the need for embracing surrealism but the result I had achieved was external, namely it was realized in a way that clearly allowed the theoretical assessment of the importance of surrealist innovations but it was not sufficient to give me the pleasure caused by astonishment without which art remains dead. Only surrealism can fully demonstrate such an astonishment, therefore only surrealism produces works of art but the surrealist art also requires a surrealist atmosphere, namely there is a need for surrealist movement.” (*Kalamaris Nikos, Letter addressed to the director of Nea Fylla*, in the magazine *Nea Fylla*, No. 3, 1937).

5. Efforts of Greek surrealists to convince the reader and Greek criticism about surrealism values

Going through these dangerous paths, surrealism in Greece could not be registered as a “movement” or “group” and neither as a common creative-journey. Even in few cases where some creators had joined some magazines (for instance the case of “*Pali*” magazine 1963-67), the project was too hard to be defined as “shared” (*Valaoritis Nanos, Modernism, Vanguard and Again*, Konstandinios Publications, Athens 1997). On the other hand, there are no political and social visions with the military character of French movement and neither a Dada movement. However, in 1938 a collective publication titled “*Surrealism 1*” appears to fill the lack of a surrealist magazine in Greece. It is about a book of 67 pages containing translated texts of the poems of *Andre Breton* by *Andreas Embirikos*, of *Salvador Dali* by *D. Karapanou*, of *Paul Eluard* by *Odyseas Elytis*, of *Benjamin Peret* by *Nikos Kalamaris* and of *Tristan Tzara* by *Nikos Engonopoulos*. This small book intended to introduce surrealism in Greece also contains some part from the *First Manifest of Breton*, translated in Greek language. Furthermore, his second publication “*Surrealism 2*” will include selected poetry from Greek surrealist poets, as well as a bibliography of the surrealist literary products in Greece until 1938.

Further, the lecture organized by *Embirikos* two months prior to the book-lecture circulation, as reminded by *Elytis* “given in front of some rude citizens who were listening displeased, ...” (*Elytis* *Odyssey*, *Open Letters*, *Ikaros Publications*, Athens 2009, pp. 256) was not sufficient to prepare the ground. Theoretical support to such a daring attempt as the publication of a surrealist poetic collection was inadequate and the reaction of national elite was expected and to some extent, justified.

The “*Philological Surrealist Group of Athens*” (1935), in its effort to publicize this movement in Greece, decided to publish the literary magazine titled “*Art and Letters*” and a number of artistic books under the general title “*Surrealist Voice*”.

“*Nea Grammata*” continued with other poetry publications and surrealist texts evincing a new poetic concept striving to break and contradict the tradition. In an article dedicated to those poems, the Greek poet and critic *Nikos Pappas* wrote: “*The Greek poetic vanguard managed to transplant modern trends of the West (...) but on the contrary, it gave them “an Hellenic character, an Attic transparency (...) Greek landscapes, Greek subjects”* (Pappas *Nikos*, *Vanguard of Greek poetics*, in the daily newspaper *Kathimerini*, 12 October 1936.)

In the first post-war years, surrealists had been featured in the magazine “*Nea Grammata*” and “*Tetradio*”, founded by *Andonis Vousvounis*, in cooperation with a famous group of poets such as *Giorgos Seferis*, *Andreas Embirikos*, *Nikos Engonopoulos* etc. Criticism would continue to attack surrealists who were accused “*of discrediting Greek poetry abroad*”. Another serious magazine was published in 1946, this time in Thessaloniki, “*Koxyli*” to publish poetry from authors of that time, as well as poems by *Paul Eluard*, *Rene Char*, *Robert Desnos*, *James Joyce* etc. The presence of translations of surrealist authors in this magazine clearly demonstrates that its collaborators were well-versed with that movement. It lasted only two years but it basically constituted a literary event of special importance in Greek literature because its group was homogenous and was characterized by a major interest for the new poetic expression and world of unconsciousness.

6. Conclusions and suggestions

In conclusion, we can admit that Greek surrealism continues to be one of the most crucial esthetic and artistic provocations in the young Greek literature and still continues at present time. The surrealist scandal was caused due to two main grounds: on one hand there was a lack of theoretical information on surrealism and on the other hand surrealist poets wished that surrealism in Greece would acquire Greek dimensions, clearly based on the Hellenism myth. To further elaborate our analysis, we would state that these poets, rebelled from their social status and Western rationalism, despite their efforts failed to clearly formulate their poetical-ideological commitments because Greek poets misplace poetic identity with the national identity. That was exactly the origin of two major deviations of surrealism in Greece: absence of self-movement and return to national myths.

It is proven what the Greek poet and critic *Nikos Pappas* had stated “*The Greek poetic vanguard managed to transplant modern trends of the West (...) but on the contrary, it gave them “a Hellenic character, an Attic transparency (...) Greek landscapes, Greek subjects”* (Pappas *Nikos*, *Vanguard of Greek poetics*, in the daily newspaper *Kathimerini*, 12 October 1936.) and Prof. *R. Jouanny* when he drew the attention that: “*Greek coasts are for the Greek poets what Parisian boulevards were for*

the French surrealists: places where miracle could be produced ...” (Jouanny R., *Aspects of surrealism in the works of Odysseas Elytis*, in *Book abroad*, vol.49, No. 4, Autumn 1975, University of Oklahoma, pp. 685-689)

References

1. Argyriou, Alexandros. (2002). *History of Greek Literature and its perception over years between two World Wars (1918-1940)*, volume A, Athens: Kastanioti Publications.
2. Elefantis, Aggelos. (1976). *Promise of Impossible Revolution and bourgeois in Greece between two World Wars*, Athens 1976.
3. Elytis, Odysseas. (2009). *Open Letters*, Athens: Ikaros Publications.
4. Jouanny, R. (1975). *Aspects of surrealism in the works of Odysseus Elytis*, in *Book abroad*, vol.49, No. 4, Autumn 1975, University of Oklahoma.
5. Kalamaris, Nikos. (1937). *Letter addressed to the director of Nea Fylla*, in the magazine *Nea Fylla*, No. 3.
6. Mirivilis, Stratis. (1935). *Surrealism*, *Proia Magazine*, 30 April.
7. Giokarinis, N. (1935). *New poetry*, *Free Step Newspaper*, 9 November.
8. Orologas, Petros. (1940). *A movement between two World Wars*, Thessaloniki.
9. Papanikolaou, Mitsos. (1938). *Poet Odysseas Elytis*, in the literary magazine *Nea Ellinika Grammata*, Volume II, No. 72, 16 April.
10. Pappas, Nikos. (1936). *Vanguard of Greek poetics*, in the daily newspaper *Kathimerini*, 12 October.
11. Papatsonis, Takis (1945). *Surrealism and I*, in the magazine *Nea Grammata*, Volume VII, No.5-6.
12. Seferis, Giorgos. (1974). *Second Prologue (for Waste Land)*, in *Essays*, Athens: Ikaros Publications.
13. Trivizas, Sotiris. (1996). *Surrealist scandal, a chronicle of expectation of the surrealist movement in Greece*, Athens: Kastanioti Publications.
14. Theotokas, Giorgos. (1936). *Social Issues*, in the magazine *Nea Grammata*, Volume II.

15. Theotokas, Giorgos. (1938). *What is surrealism*, in the literary magazine *Nea Ellinika Grammata*, Volume II, 2 July.
16. Valaoritis, Nanos. (1997). *Modernism, Vanguard and Again*, Athens: Konstandinios Publications, Athens.
17. *Kathimerini* Newspaper, 30 March 1936.
18. The Magazine *New Greek Literature*, No. 6, May 1938.
19. The literary magazine *Nea Ellinika Grammata*, Volume II, Number. 72, 16 April 1938.