



**ΓΕΩΡΓΙΑΔΗΣ, Ν. (2014). ΚΩΣΤΑΣ ΚΑΡΥΩΤΑΚΗΣ:  
ΑΠΑΝΤΗΣΕΙΣ ΣΤΑ ΕΡΩΤΗΜΑΤΑ ΓΙΑ ΤΟΝ ΊΔΙΟ ΚΑΙ ΤΟ ΈΡΓΟ  
ΤΟΥ [NEARCHOS GEORGIADIS, KOSTAS KARYOTAKIS:  
ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FOR HIM AND HIS WORKS],  
ATHENS**

Nearchos Georgiadis was a prominent author who wrote several prose works and critical studies. In his book *Kostas Karyotakis: Answers to Questions for him and his Works* (Athens, 2014), Georgiadis deals with the well-known Modern Greek poet Kostas Karyotakis (1896-1928) and more specifically with the assumption that his poetry is a reflection of his life. While other critics saw this identification between life and poetry in Karyotakis' poetry before, Georgiadis makes it clear that Karyotakis' poems cannot be read without a focus on the poet's biography. In the past, some attempts have been made to analyse Karyotakis' poems as independent entities<sup>2</sup>. By isolating the poems from their biographical, social and political background, the goal was to show that Karyotakis' poems can be interpreted as independent bodies<sup>3</sup>. However, through his analysis Georgiadis shows that such an approach does not denote the meaning of the poems.

As Georgiadis writes in the introduction of his book, life and poetry are inseparable in Karyotakis' poetry and his verses cannot be interpreted without his biography. Thus, the poet's works on syphilis and suicide can only be read properly with a

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<sup>1</sup> PhD student at King's College London.

<sup>2</sup> For example through semiotics (Μπενάτσης, Α. (2004). «Τι νέοι που φθάσαμεν εδώ...»: Κώστας Καρυωτάκης από τα πρώτα ως τα τελευταία ποιήματα [Apostolos Benatsis, 'So young we landed here...' Kostas Karyotakis from the First to the Last Poems], Athens).

<sup>3</sup> In a previous article following the basic principles of New Historicism, I discussed extensively how such a formalistic approach gives only one dimension of the poems (Menelaou, I. (2017). 'My Verses Are the Children of My Blood': Autobiography in the Poetry of Kostas Karyotakis', *International Journal of Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*, Vol.5, No.3:5-17).

parallel focus on his personal experience. When Karyotakis writes poetry, he expresses his feelings, thoughts and experiences of the time. Although he mocks suicide, he is one of the suicides of his poem ('Imagined suicides'), while similarly to Michalios (the hero of 'Michalios'), he sought a permanent discharge from the army.

Georgiadis declares that while in some poems Karyotakis possibly uses imagination, in the poems 'Do you remember' and 'The dance' the poet refers to his relationship with Anna Skordyli. Generally speaking, Karyotakis' first poetic collection (*The Suffering of People and Things*, 1919) is not based on random inspiration, but on his relationship with and separation from Skordyli. Georgiadis sees this relationship as an integral part of the poet's first poetic collection, since the experience of a previous love permeates the whole of the work.

Focusing on Karyotakis' second collection, *Nepenthe* (1921), Georgiadis refers to the poem 'My verses' as a clear biographical statement; 'a part of his heart and body'. Similarly, the poem 'Ballad for the unknown poets of the ages' is characterised by a confessional tone and character. In this poem, the poet reveals his personal experiences and events from his everyday life. This is an element, as Georgiadis says, which led to the realism that describes his poetry overall.

While the first and second collection are discussed from page 1 to page 88, in the rest of the book (pages 89-270) Georgiadis focuses on Karyotakis' last poetic collection: *Elegies and Satires* (1927). According to Georgiadis, *Elegies and Satires* is not just a poetic collection, but a 'life scenario'; it alludes to Karyotakis' past and future. When the poet writes 'my flesh and blood I'll put in the folio form of a book'<sup>4</sup> is not a just a metaphor, but a 'summary' of his life as he refers to his syphilis, some political events he was involved in, death and suicide. Georgiadis even characterises Karyotakis' poetry as a 'curriculum vitae'. Especially in those poems revolving around his career as government clerk, poet, soldier and lover, one sees the poet's personal voice. In 'Michalios', what we see is Karyotakis' destiny if he was forced to serve in the army.

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<sup>4</sup> Using the translation from Karyotakis, K. (2006). *Battered Guitars: Poems and Prose*, tr. W. W. Reader and K. Taylor, Birmingham.

Especially the poet's satires are presented as a plan of life and death. It is his own story; he invented, staged and played it. Even his death-suicide alludes to the 'imagined suicides' of his poetry. In the poem 'Spirochaeta pallida' he sees himself suffering together with those people who had the disease (syphilis). A mistake of former critics is that they did not see syphilis as an important component of Karyotakis' poetry. Certain critics misunderstood his poems and some of his confessions, like syphilis, remained encrypted. Another poem that revolves around syphilis is 'So young when we landed here...'. Georgiadis is very descriptive on the symptoms and stages of syphilis in these poems and gives a full account. Special attention is paid to the last stage of syphilis: madness. The fact that Karyotakis visited the poet Romos Philyras (1898-1942) at the psychiatric hospital shows his preoccupation with his own condition. Georgiadis also explains the 'vulgar action' Karyotakis was accused of and mentioned in his last note – before his suicide. As Georgiadis inclines to believe, this 'vulgar action' is Karyotakis' desire to watch a prostitute having intercourse with other men. As he could not have intercourse because of syphilis, he wanted to be a bystander.

Nearly at the end of the book, Georgiadis asserts that it is wrong to consider that Karyotakis' relationship with Charilaos Sakellariadis changed through the years. While former critics saw an estrangement between the two men, Georgiadis persists in the fact that they remain close friends until the poet's suicide in 1928. As Georgiadis says, Sakellariadis was waiting for Karyotakis at the pier when the latter went to Preveza.

Concluding, Georgiadis' book is an enjoyable read with a clear goal: to show the close relation between life and work in Karyotakis. Indeed, one could say that Karyotakis' poetry belongs to that literary genre in which poetry and life are interwoven and any attempt to interpret those poems outside their biographical, social and political background deprives the reader of the charm to decode certain meanings. Georgiadis is right that Karyotakis' poetry is biographical and frequently depicts his real emotions and psychological state.

Nevertheless, certain questions arise when the author refers to Karyotakis' friendship with Sakellariadis. While Georgiadis sees almost everything in Karyotakis' poetry as a realistic depiction of his life, he does not focus on poems like "To

an old college friend', 'Life story' and 'The garden of ingratitude', which definitely show the change in their relationship. While they were really close friends once – during their student years, their different interests led them to different routes. Karyotakis was a poet who attacked the political and social system, whereas Sakellariadis was a philologist who worked for a conservative journal (Greek Letters) that criticised Karyotakis' poetry in very negative way. Besides, it seems that Georgiadis ignores totally the correspondence between the two men, which shows Karyotakis' disappointment when his friend did not support him during an argument he had with the journal<sup>5</sup>. While Karyotakis and Sakellariadis continued sending letters to each other, the friendly climate of their early correspondence does not appear in their later correspondence. A biographical approach can be especially enlightening when looking at other writings, like letters and personal notes. While Georgiadis sees biography as a vital element for the interpretation of the poems, some of Karyotakis' letters have not been discussed at all.

In addition, while Georgiadis' analysis is interesting and productive, sometimes he cannot avoid exaggerations. For example, when he characterises Karyotakis' poetry as a 'curriculum vitae', Georgiadis intends to stress the nature and character of Karyotakis' poetry. However, since he showed effectively the relation between poems and biography, he could steer clear of such overstatements.

Similarly, the assumption that Karyotakis wanted to watch intercourse, using as evidence poems, is another exaggeration. While Georgiadis gives a very detailed and valid description of syphilis with some medical information that sheds light on certain verses, such a surmise is rather misleading and lacks more serious arguments.

Concluding, although some overstatements, Georgiadis' book is strongly recommended to students and academics of Modern Greek Studies and Biographical Studies. Focusing on a poet that constitutes an ideal example, Georgiadis shows how personal life intervenes in writing. Georgiadis clarifies that the

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<sup>5</sup> I deal extensively with the way that their relationship changed in another article (Iakovos Menelaou, 'The Intervention of Biography in Poetry: The Representation of Karyotakis' Friendship with Sakellariadis', *Agathos: an International Review of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, Volume 8, Issue 2/2017).

reason for the misinterpretation of Karyotakis' poems is the fact that biographical details have been overlooked and decodes the poems with a parallel reading of the poet's life story. However, the poet's letters could make Georgiadis' argumentation even stronger and the misreading of some poems could be avoided.