

Dream and delirium as desecrating tools in the writing of Giannis Skarimbas¹

Gaia Zaccagni²

Giannis Skarimbas (1893-1984), writer, poet, theatrical author, *karagiozopaichtis* (shadow theater puppeteer), created in his oeuvre a universe inhabited by beings that are not always human, or at least not entirely human. This dreamlike prose, in which the subconscious is inserted by finding masks and skirmishes to conceal one's strength, is very close to poetic expression. In Skarimbas' writing, this nearly achieves a kind of marked modernism and hermetic lyricism, the level of reality and that of the dream-thought alternate with often unpredictable rhythms, capable of immersing the reader in a deep descent into the subconscious, where everything can be said, expressed and desecrated. This article aims to find stylistic elements that can be traced back to the influence of the world of the dream on the written page.

Keywords : Dream, Delirium, Author's notes, Lyricism, Subconscious

1. Biographical notes

Skarimbas was born in Agia Efthymia near Amfissa (now part of Delphi municipality). He went to school in Aigio and Patras, completed his military service in the 5/42 Evzone Regiment and was then appointed head of the customs office in Eretria (then called Nea Psara). In 1915 he moved to Chalkida, where he spent most of his life. He had his first works published in newspapers in Athens and Chalkida under the pen name Kallis Esperinos (Κάλλης Εσπερινός). His first publication under his own name came in 1929, when he published his novel *O Kapetan Sourmelis o Stouraitis* (Ο καπετάν Σουρμελής ο Στουραίτης) in *Ellinika Grammata* (Greek Letters) magazine. He died on January 21, 1984, in Chalkida.

In 1932 he published *The divine goat* (*To Θείο Τραγί*). The story follows a certain plot and is therefore divided into a sequence of episodes. But the plot is nothing more than an opportunity for

¹ To cite this article : Gaia Zaccagni, « Dream and delirium as desecrating tools in the writing of Giannis Skarimbas », in May Chehab et Beatrice Barbalato (dir.), *Auto/biographie : prémonitions, rêves, cauchemars*, in *Mnemosyne o la costruzione del senso* n. 14, PUL-Presses universitaires de Louvain, 2021.

² University of Cyprus, Special Scientist.

Skarimbas to pursue his anti-heroic, anti-social, non-conformist intentions and to employ an equally anarchic and extravagant language, to mock the use of language of educated people, in a confusion of syntax and logic. In this way Skarimbas achieves the disarticulation of the institutions that are at the base of the narration.

« We wish the experiment undertaken in 1932 by this writer on linguistic structure to be considered as an anticipation (to what extent this was undertaken consciously we do not know) of the linguistic solutions that would come about with Surrealism » (Vitti M. 1999 : 288).

This story was written before the expressive modes that aimed to subvert the traditional linguistic form were used in Greece, and at a time when Surrealism had not yet led to the composition of the discourse using free association.

The particular personality of this writer, which presents many surrealist elements, emerges in all the genres which he dealt with (prose, poetry, theater, satire, theater of the Karaghiozis...). His aversion towards the constituted values of Greek culture was very strong. He didn't travel a lot, but his mind and his soul remained restless. He rejected the realistic approach and moved the center from the narrative act to the linguistic tool of discourse.

His anarchic writing, in which a continuous mixture between the plane of reality and the plane of imagination is evident, gave rise to a way of writing that was totally unique and peculiar, and which F. Kontoglou defined as "Skarimbas's style". The mechanisms and functions of the dream are activated and put into practice. Ghiannis Skarimbas is an extremely particular writer, sui generis,

who lived on the edge of the literary world, a particular case that makes us neither hot nor cold. [...] As far as I remember, Skarimbas lived surrounded by a sort of snobbish aura: we are all westernized, that is, liars. He stands out from the crowd as the Great Self-taught. And this is precisely the fundamental difference between a recognized and affirmed poet, like Elytis, and one like him, snubbed by the intellectual elite. (Petropoulos E. 1996 : 232-223)

2. Language and dream - Dreamlike language

For Skarimbas, language is everything and everything emanates from language. The function of dreams can be manifold: dream activity can offer a glimpse of emotions, even linked to future events. Dreams can create new ideas by generating random thoughts. They activate connections in a safe place. As Alfred Adler said, « the feelings that our dreams have given rise to remain. Nothing remains of the images, there is no understanding of the dream, but only the sensations it leaves behind. The purpose of dreams must be in the sensations ». Skarimbas, with his poetic

prose, with his neologisms, gives us infinite sensations, as if he were immersing us in the dream with him. His language enchants, magnetizes. Its best value is its linguistic variety.

3. The dream

Neuroscience, only in alliance with psychoanalysis, can further enrich the current knowledge of the dream activity that only in recent decades has acquired, alongside 'wakefulness' and 'sleep', the dignity of a real state, revealing itself as a periodic phenomenon, no longer causal and not necessarily linked to an unresolved conflict, a contingent disturbance of the subject's lack of courage to face the common sense of everyday life. When the brain temperature drops below a certain threshold, the brain, stimulated and programmed by an endogenous generator, becomes blind and deaf, a brain that dreams: the eyes under closed eyelids begin to move in a flurry, although the dreamer is as if paralyzed. During the vigil all the information that comes from the outside world is processed, during 'sleep with dreams', as Heraclitus writes, our brain folds in on itself, disconnects, distracts itself from this 'common world' and departs into the 'Own world', devoting itself to information from within. Sleep with dreams allows us to systematically test all the circuits of our brain motor 'as if' it were a machine kept in the garage that needs to be turned on periodically in order to function.

Dreamlike thinking, which affects the processes of learning, memory and creativity, probably performs a function of maintenance and internal reprogramming. During sleep with dreams the different sensory channels, activated simultaneously by an endogenous generator, are hit by an overwhelming wave of mental, visual, auditory, tactile, kinaesthetic-vestibular, olfactory images, coming from different spaces and times, which are metabolized and reorganized by the creative Self into a narrative canvas thanks to the natural linguistic-narratological faculty of our mind-brain.

Skarimbas proceeds in his narrative technique as if he were translating the images and sensations that the mind produces in dreams into linguistic expression. Almost a stream of consciousness, in which each word has its specific weight and a prism with facets that recombine the sensory stresses on several levels simultaneously.

If articulated language, which refers to a code composed of conventional, abstract and shared signs, is used to communicate with others in the 'common world', dream language, as in the child's inner dialogue or self-centered language, seems to draw on a cuneiform, pictographic, ideographic, musical, intonational, figurative code that qualifies for the presence of mental images.

4. Examples of dreamlike writing

When we dream, we communicate with 'ourselves', as in inner language, through elliptical omissions, syntactic fragments, contractions, agglutinations of 'more' words condensed into 'one' compound. In any case, the dream is a communication addressed to 'oneself', and therefore elliptical, non-syntactic, timeless, condensed, incomprehensible to others, certainly not to the sleeper.

What is writing? Language is a kind of Nature that passes entirely through the word of the writer without therefore giving it any form, without even nourishing it: it is like an abstract circle of truth, only out of which the density of a solitary speech begins to settle. It encompasses all literary creation such as heaven, earth and their union sketch a family home for man. It is not so much a repository of materials as a horizon, that is a limit and at the same time a station, briefly, the tranquilizing field of an economy.

Language is not the place of a social bond, but only an unconditional reflection [...] It is by election, and not by choice, a social object. [...] (Barthes R. 1972 : 17)

In the same sense, language seems to be moving for Skarimbas: it becomes Nature itself, not a 'social' place (« not the place of a social bond »), but only 'an unconditional reflection' coming from deep within, what Skarimbas calls « cosmic reflections, as if they were inside a huge lens » (see infra).

The belief that the life we live is the dream and that reality is our dream prevails in many of Skarimbas' works and, evidently, connects to Phenomenology's belief that visible things, and everything that is a subject of human sensations, make reality false and that only what is taken under a visionary way can be considered as real.

Skarimbas writes, almost as a programmed premise of his poetic collection :

A short two-word note (prologue note)

I would like to say something about poetry - but I can't, this earthly and out of tune voice does not suffice. I would define it as a call of our enigmatic solitude, something like our protest, in our dark anxiety - Life.

This untouched and terrible area, our Self is an 'unknown land', where you don't know where the message will come from (the virgin number, the sign or the signal) from where its call will come ...

What, in a certain sense, is understood in a surrealist sense as 'third eye' (instinct), turned away from the human convention, no longer looks outward. It is closed (when we are awake), it

opens - when we sleep - towards our interior. And it sees ... It is extraordinary - amidst confusion - the luminous flood (βλεψιγή φωτοχυσία) of his gaze, his cosmic 'reflections', as if they were inside a huge lens. Oh, what a huge and terrible curtain has opened! His 'associative' scripts (from the monkey to the quadruped-man and from this to the spirit) instead of the wind's wings, can only be measured in light years! And we call this DREAM. Now, if this really is a 'dream' and not only real life and destiny (which life we live prone ...), while waking (awake life) belongs to the dream, it is not pertinent to this note, and does not fall within my [evaluation] skills ... The misfortune is that even dreams are not as beautiful 'dreamlike'. The form is fake. Because there is no reason for man to have beautiful dreams. His history on earth, from the protozoan dawn to his painted Cherubim, from that quadruped man to his elevation on 'two feet / biped', his merciless struggle (of survival) in nature, has not left him in inheritance nothing pleasant, so that he can forget where he came from ... For this reason, he sleeps and wakes up ... For this reason, he raves sleeping - while, when he's awake, he does nothing but lying. For this reason, he continuously sends that SOS to NOTHINGNESS ... Since then (I repeat it) I close my eyes (Skarimbas G. 2016: 13-15)³.

³ **Μια ταχεία συντομία μου δυο λόγων (προλογικό κείμενο)**

Θα' θελα κάτι για τη ποίηση νάλεγα- μα δεν μπορώ, δε φτάνει τούτη η χουμάτινη και παράχορδη φωνή μου. Θα τόλεγα σαν κάλεσμα της αινιγματικής ερημιάς μας, κάτι σαν διαμαρτυρία μας, στη στυγερή διαταράχτριά μας – τη Ζωή. [...]

Αυτή η απάτητη και τρομερή περιοχή, ο εαυτός μας- είναι μια terra incognita, όπου δεν ξέρεις πούθε θα σουρθεί ένα μήνυμα (ο παρθένος αριθμός, το σημείο ή το σύνθημα) από πού θα σ'έβρει αυτηνής το κάλεσμά της...Το σουρρεαλιστικά –πως- νοούμενο και «τρίτο μάτι» λεγόμενο (το ένστιχτο), αναστραφέν απ'την ανθρώπινη σύμβαση, δεν θωρεί πια στα όξω. Κλειστό (ξυπνοί όντας μας) ανοίγει –κοιμιστοί- προς τα εντός μας. Και βλέπει... Είναι καταπληκτική –εν τοις μπερδέμασι- η βλεψική φωτοχυσία του, αυτοί, οι σαν τεράστιου φακού, συμπαντικοί «κατροπτισμοί» του. Οποία παμμέγιστη και φοβερή αυλαία που εσύρθη! Οι «συνειρμηκές» σκηνοθεσίες του (απ'τον...ουραίο έως τον «τετράνθρωπο» και απ'αυτόν μέχρι το πνεύμα) αντί – όπως θα λέγαμε – επί περύγωβ ανέμου, αυτές μετριούνται μόνο με έτη – του φωτός! Κι εμείς το λέμε τούτο ό ν ε ι ρ α. Τώρα, αν πράγματι αυτό είναι «όνειρο» και όχι μόνο αληθινή ζωή και πεπρωμένη (που την ζούμε εμείς στα προύμντα...) ενώ η ξύπνια είναι τ'ονείρου, ου της παρούσης συντομίας μου, και ου των ικανοντήτων των δικών μου. [...]

Το δυστύχημα είναι ότι και τα όνειρα ποτέ δεν είναι «σαν όνειρα» ωραία. Το σχήμα είναι ψεύτικο. Διότι κανέναν δεν έχει λόγο ο άνθρωπος να είναι ωραία τα όνειρά του. Η επί της Γής ιστορία του, από το λυκαυγές των πρωτόζωων έως τα ζωγραφιστά Χερουβείμ του, από τον ποτέ του «τετράνθρωπο» μέχρι της ύψωσης του «στα δυο», ο ανελέητος αγώνας του (της επιβίωσής του) στη φύση, τίποτα δεν του κληροδότησε ευχάριστο, ώστε να ξεχνάει- πόθεν ήρθε... Γι'αυτό κοιμάται και πετάγεται ... Γι'αυτό παραμιλάει στα όνειρά του- ενώ στα «ξύπνια» του όλο ψεύδεται... Και γι'αυτό όλο εκμέμπει εκείνο το SOS προς το ΤΙΠΟΤΑ... Έκτοτες (για να το- ξαναπιώ) κλείω τα μάτια...

The third eye – or instinct – is the quintessence of the ability to penetrate the unfathomable. The gaze is capable of, pervaded by an ‘optical pouring of light’ (the expression βλεπτική φωτοχυσία is an image that is difficult to translate, precisely because of the particular language-making technique of which Skarimbos is a master). Through the dimension of sleep / dream, the gaze spreading from the third eye illuminates cosmic distances - or an inner world made of unusual depths. The unknown ego-land seems to come to life and turns into its real ultra-human dimension only when the third eye turns its gaze inwards, that is, when we sleep, when the alert and censorious consciousness is put out of play by the state of sleep.

A sort of truce, therefore, the dream, as a balance to the ‘misfortune of living’, an oasis of truthfulness in a context of lies that make man ‘prone’, a ‘quadruped’, a sort of primitive animal, not at all evolved.

The dreamlike pace of Skarimbos’ ‘style’ is predominant in both poetic and narrative production, and also dominated by an extremely lyrical and visionary rhythm. According to Barthes’ definition,

[...] style, however refined it is, always presents something raw: it is a form without a goal, it is the product of a push, not an intention, it is like a vertical and solitary dimension of the thought. Its references are found at the level of a biology or a past, not of history: it is the "property" of the writer, his greatness and his prison, it is his solitude. Indifferent and invisible to society, the closed action of the individual, it is not at all the product of a choice, of a reflection on Literature: it is the private portion of the ritual, emerging from the mythical aims of the writer and goes beyond his meaning of responsibility (Barthes R. 1972 : 18).

Referring to Barthes’ idea that style is a form without a predetermined purpose, the product of an inner push and not an intention, I present as an example of Skarimbos’ dreamlike style of writing (our translation), two prose passages from the novel ‘The divine goat’, where the border between prose and poetry becomes increasingly blurred.

In the first, we witness the ‘epiphany’ of the protagonist / anti-hero, who is described with dense and evanescent stylistic brush strokes. As in a dream, in which the contours of reality appear fluidly, so the language of Skarimbos becomes elliptical, poor in verbs and therefore in action, and instead extremely full of images, full of that sense of the ‘vague’ and the ‘indefinite’ of Leopardian origin. Philosophical and metaphysical concepts, such as eternity, are juxtaposed to the human dimension, alternating the macrocosmos and the microcosmos, and calculated on the basis of the measure of man's gait (the step).

1.

Men had misunderstood him: the dust had turn him all white and the road - oh, my God - the road would never end. He felt nothing: neither joy nor pain. He was indifferent and calm: why? was not creation in its place? or did something happen by chance against the law of attraction? silence knew him, nights knew him, he was the desert flower...

The world... slowly: things left to go: horizons are created, time - places - seasons - are born. Do you know how they walk on earth? they just go, nothing else, the limits are meeting with you, the streets are behind you - the cities - they sing for you from the depths. Chaos has a beat, emptiness has a pulse, and only the hours are silent, and only the times don't speak. Eternity looks at you and thinks, latitudes, distances, are dedicated to your going, the earth emanates with reverence under your steps.

So they go: all forward and straight, on the edge of the rails, on the rivers, on the edge of the beautiful beaches, always in the main road and the countryside, steps don't go up and down, streets do not go obliquely, the mountains shall pass on the right and on the left for you, the seas follow each other, or a curve or a straight line, but what curve? As big as the earth. And what straight line? As infinite as the boredom of birds and the point of arrival of the trains that carry the wind of snow... and the world slowly: eternity gives credit. (Skarimbas G. 1993: 15)⁴.

In this second piece, the narration is held in the first person: it does not report events, the objective and tangible facts of a story, rather it flows like a long sequence-plane that reproduces the dreamlike atmosphere of a state of mind in which the contours of the 'Ego' become liquid and no longer separate the individual from the nature which surrounds him.

⁴ Τον είχαν παρεξηγήσει οι άνθρωποι: η σκόνη τον είχε κάμει ολόασπρο, κι ο δρόμος – αχ, θεέ μου- ο δρόμος ποτέ δε θα τελείωνε. Δεν αιστανόταν τίποτε: μήτε χαρά μήτε λύπη. Αδιάφορος ήταν και ήσυχος: γιατί; μήπως δεν ήταν η δημιουργία στη θέση της; ή μην είχε αντίρρηση για τον νόμο της έλξης; η σιωπή τον αγνόριζε, οι νύχτες τον ξέραν, ήταν της ερημιάς αυτός άνθος...

Ο κόσμος αργά, τα πράγματα αφημένα στο πάει τους. να δημιουργούνται οι ορίζοντες. α γεννιέται –μούλος- ο χρόνος. οι τόποι, οι εποχές να πηγαίνουν. Ξέρετε πως περπατάνε στη γη; να, πηγαίνουν, τιποτ' άλλο, πηγαίνουν, σε προϋπαντάνε τα όρια σε ακολουθάν πίσω οι δρόμοι- οι πολιτείες- σου τραγουδάνε βαθιά. Έχει ένα χτύπο το χάος, έχει ένα σφυγμό το κενό, και μόνο οι ώρες σωπαίνουν, και μόνο οι καιροί δε μιλούν. Η αιωνιότη σε κοιτάζει και σκέφτεται, τα πλάτη, οι αποστάσεις, είναι αφιερωμένα στο βάδι σου, αναθυμιάζει μ'ευλάβεια κατ' απ' το βήμα σου η γη. Έτσι πάνε: όλο ίσα και ντρίτα, άκρη-άκρη στις σιδηροτροχιές, στα ποτάμια, άκρη-άκρη στους ωραίους γιαλούς, πάντα δημοσιά κι όλο κάμπο, δεν ανεβοκατεβαίνουν τα βήματα, δεν παν οι στρατές λοξά, για σένα δεξιά ή ζερβά να διαβαίνουν τα όρη, να εξελίσσονται οι θάλασσες, ή καμπύλη, ή ευθεία, αλλά τί καμπύλη; Όση η γη. Και τί ευθεία; Όσο ατέρμονη είναι η πλήξη των όρνιων και το τέρμα των τραίνων που κουβαλάν το χιονιά... κι ο κόσμος αργά, η αιωνιότη πιστώνει.

The character's perceptive abilities are amplified to the maximum and the writer's style allows us to immerse ourselves totally in the hero's point of view.

2.

I've quickened my pace. My thoughts hovered like restless butterflies against the wind: I felt my life in a strange way, like a landscape over time, like an improbable form, I perceived my idiosyncrasy. Did I know what I was looking for? I pitied the stones that are lifeless and cannot feel!

Gradually the night began to come down. Mysterious and passionate, the plain stretched out in the nocturnal silence; the wasp of the night looked at me, shyly, in silence. Eyes fixing as nails upon me one by one, the stars, found their place within the night. Oh!

When the night covers, that's when all things speak, when beings come into agreement. In the dark my thought has no limits. I open my ears and perceive the breath of the desert, as the most sensitive receptor, I catch the most imperceptible noise from miles away. Then I sneeze... (Skarimbass G. 1993: 21)⁵.

My last example is the poem *Friends (H Φλόγα / The Flame, 1935)*, where the images vanish into thin air as dreams and where the poet clearly flirts with the idea of dream-reality and illusion.

3.

FRIENDS

Lonely clouds travelled in the twilight
the mountains, silent, in the atmosphere
my - taciturn-friends traveled
in the wind.

I said: my friends! ... My life is trembling

⁵ Τάχυνα την περπατησιά μου. Σαν στον άνεμο αντίθετα πεταλούδες ανήσυχες, φτερούγιζαν οι σκέψεις μου: ένιωθα τη ζωή μου παράξενα, σαν 'να τοπείο στο χρόνο, σαν 'να σχήμα απίθανο, ένιωθα την ιδιοσυγκρασία μου άνιση: μηδά ξέρω τί ζητάγα; λυπόμουνα τα κοτρώνια πουν'άψυχα και δεν μπορούν να αιστάνονται!

Άρχισε σιγά-σιγά να νυχτώνει. Μυστηριακός μυστικόπαθος μεσ'στις βραδυνές σιγαλιές απλωνόταν ο κάμπος: η σφίγγα της νύχτας με κοίταζε, δειλά, σιωπηλά. Μάτια που καρφώνονταν πάνω μου ένα ένα τ'αστέρια, παίρναν μεσ'στη νύχτα τη θέση τους. Χα!

Όταν η νύχτα σκεπάσει, τότε είναι που μιλάνε τα πράγματα, που συμφωνούνε τα όντα. Μεσ'στο σκοτάδι δεν έχι όρια η σκέψη μου. Στένω αφτί κι ακουρμάζουμαι την αναπνοή της ερήμου, σαν ο ευαισθητότερος δέχτης, πιάνω και τον παραμικρότερο θόρυβο από μίλια μακριά. Τότε φτερνίζομαι...

the last places go alone,
impalpable my acquaintances winds
and men.

It was a dream, it was an illusion that
we live, as long as our life has friends,
alone or together we go,
even alone.

Like lonely clouds in the twilight
the mountains silent in the atmosphere
Like taciturn my friends go
in the wind...

(Skarimbas G. 2016 : 43)⁶.

⁶ ΟΙ ΦΙΛΟΙ

Πήγαιναν τα σύγνεφα έρημα στο δέιλι,
τα βουνά βουβά στην ατμόσφαιρα,
ταξίδευαν μου- αμίλητοι- οι φίλοι
στον αέρα.

Είπα: οι φίλοι μου!...Η ζωή μου τρέμει-
οι τελευταίοι παν' μονάχοι τους οι τόποι,
άπιαστοι οι γνωριμίες μου άνεμοι
κι οι άνθρωποι.

Όνειρο ήταν, ήταν πλάνη το πώς
ζούμε, φτάνει η ζωή μας φίλους νάχει,
χώρια ή αντάμα πάμε, όπως
και μονάχοι.

Όπως τα σύγνεφα έρημα στο δέιλι,
τα βουνά βουβά στην ατμόσφαιρα,
όπως αμίλητοι πάνε μου οι φίλοι
στον αέρα...

The evocative and desecrating force of Skarimbas' writing has the ability to overturn and alternate the spheres of dream and reality, creating a dimension entirely *sui generis*, in which free will and freedom of expression reach a level of identity that only Surrealism seems to have achieved.

The language, a malleable and visionary tool in the hands of Skarimbas, winds through a thousand nuances, swaying between *dimotiki*, the archaizing language and dialects, flanked by the creation of crackling and sonorous neologisms.

Skarimbas' poetics, according to which «joy is a right, while work is a sin» finds its natural place in the reality of dream.

Bibliography

Roland BARTHES (1972), *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture. «Nouveaux Essais critiques»*, Paris, Editions du Seuil.

Elias PETROPOULOS (1996), *Υπόκοσμος και καταγκιόζης*, Athens, Nefeli

Mario VITTI (1999), *Storia della Letteratura neogreca*, Roma, Carocci

Ghiannis SKARIMBAS (1993), *Το Θείο Τραγί*, edited by Katerina Kostiou, Athens, Nefeli

– (2016), *Άπαντες στίχοι 1936-1970*, edited by Katerina Kostiou, Athens, Nefeli

Simeon STAMBOULOU (2006), *Πηγές της πεζογραφίας του Γιάννη Σκαρίμπα*, Athens.