

I'VE LOOKED SO MUCH

I've looked on beauty so much
that my vision overflows with it.

The body's lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs.
Hair as though stolen from Greek statues,
always lovely, even uncombed,
and falling slightly over pale foreheads.
Figures of love, as my poetry desired them
. . . . in the nights when I was young,
encountered secretly in my nights.

(1917)

I WENT

I didn't restrain myself. I gave in completely and went,
went to those pleasures that were half real,
half wrought by my own mind,
went into the brilliant night
and drank strong wine,
the way the champions of pleasure drink.

(1913)

Each figure here is fixed in an edifying smile, yielding as much of mystery and of enigma as *mnemosyne* will allow. And the poet stands beside his hero's *apostrophe*, peering out in utter calm, infinitely patient at the slow revolution he is enacting with Eros at the center; repression is banished to the outskirts; and now memory takes its place as the floodlight of history. The philosophy which Cavafy wants as guide in this revolution is none other than his own persona as Socratic stance, at once the midwife and the sepulchral guardian, querying things that come to be and those that pass away.

NOBEL LAUREATE GEORGE SEFERIS
AND THE CONTINUITY OF THE GREEK
TRADITION

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I only met the late George Seferis once at his home overlooking the Olympic Stadium in Pangkrati in 1969 when I was in Greece with a study group from my university. I was, of course, aware of the tension that existed between Greece's first Nobel Prize laureate and the military junta that was ruling Greece at that time. Little did I realize that later on that year in the Spring, Seferis who had published nothing in Greece as a political protest against the military regime, would speak out against the military junta by declaring:

We have all learned, we all know, that in dictatorial regimes the beginning may seem easy. Yet tragedy waits at the end, inescapably. It is this tragic ending that consciously torments us, as in the ancient choruses of Aeschylus.¹

His protest was never printed in Greece but broadcast to the world over the BBC. It is probably no coincidence that, according to the correspondence published by his sister, Ioanna

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¹Time (April 4, 1969).

Tsatsos, former first lady of Greece, he went to Delphi first for a time before returning to Athens.² The ancients would have said to consult the oracle, but it was at Delphi that his favorite classical Greek author Aischylos in his *Eumenides* has Orestes flee for protection but where also Apollo reviles the Furies as evil forces of darkness and instructs Orestes to go to Athens to seek the help of Athena for his own deliverance. Though the Furies are driven out of the Temple of Apollo, they follow him to Athens pledging unrelenting pursuit. Athens is depicted as the place where justice will be meted out, where light will prevail over darkness, civilization over barbarism, the forces of good over the forces of evil, where we learn that the pattern of life is basically tragic, but wisdom comes from suffering. We learn through a study of Seferis' biography that it was a copy of Aischylos that he was able to take with him to South Africa in 1941 where he was posted (Johannesburg and then Pretoria) as part of his tour of duty with the Greek government-in-exile during World War II.³ Which is to say that George Seferis was not only aware of a Greek tradition that went back to his ancient forebears but one for whom that classical Greek tradition continued into the modern world and manifested itself in every day of his life. When on October 24, 1963 the Swedish Academy honored him with the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first time that award was to go to a modern Greek poet and to Greece, it was clear that it was also honoring others who had been nominated for that distinction like Palamas, Kazantzakis, Cavafy, and Sikelianos; in other words, finally recognizing the achievement of modern Greek literature but it was also honoring a lyric poet who embodied the Hellenic tradition in his poetry and his life. In 1960 his good friend and translator Rex Warner in his introduction to the English translation of the *Poems of Seferis* (Boston and Toronto, 1960), had observed that:

²In the Seferis Archives in the Gennadius Library in Athens.

³G. Seferis, (Athens, 1979) and G. P. Savvidis *Σχεδιάγραμμα Χρονολογίας Γιώργου Σεφέρη, 1873-1962* (Athens, 1963).

"Seferis, eminent as he is as a European poet is preeminently a Greek poet, conscious of that tradition which shaped, and indeed created, the tradition of Europe, but which in very modern as in very ancient times often developed differently. Throughout the poetry of Seferis one will notice his profound consciousness of the presence of the past and its weight. There is also observed an extraordinary freshness of vision. Objects recognized and felt to be extremely old, are seen suddenly, as for the first time."⁴

Seferis was not merely conscious of the literary and cultural past; he was clearly and profoundly influenced by modern historical and literary events and developments. He was a diplomat, after all, who rose to be Greece's Ambassador to Great Britain and served for five years in that capacity (1957-1962).

It might be useful to quote his own words from his own Nobel Prize acceptance speech as it relates the Hellenic tradition:

I belong to a small country. It was a rocky promontory in the Mediterranean; all it possesses is the toil of its people, the sea, and the light of the sun. It is a small country, yet its tradition is vast. What singles out this tradition is that it has been conveyed to us through the centuries, without any interruption. Greek has never ceased to be a spoken language. It has naturally undergone the alterations which any living thing must undergo. But no gap has marked its course. Another striking feature of this tradition is its love for human values; justice is its rule. Within the precise, close-knit structure of classical tragedy, a man who exceeds his measure must be punished by the Furies. This rule is also valid in physical laws. "The sun cannot exceed Measure," says Heraclius, "or the Furies, servants of

⁴Rex Warner, *The Poems of Seferis* (Boston and Toronto, 1960), pp. 5-6.

Justice will soon bring him back to order." It seems to be not unlikely that a modern scientist might profit from meditation upon this aphorism by the Ionian philosopher. But what moves me most is to find that the spirit of justice had penetrated so deeply into the Greek soul that it becomes a rule of the World of Nature. One of my masters at the beginning of the last century once cried out: "We are lost, because we wronged." This man was an illiterate, he learned to write at the age of thirty-five. But in modern Greece, oral tradition is as deeply rooted as written tradition. The same applies to poetry. I find it significant that Sweden should wish to honour both this poetry, and poetry in general, even though it springs from a small nation. For I firmly believe that poetry is necessary to the world we live in, harassed as it is by fear and anxiety. Poetry has its roots in human breathing—and what would we be if our breath came to fail. It is an act of trust—and God knows whether most of our ills are not due to our very lack of trust.

Seferis goes on to contrast the differences between the discoveries of modern science and literature:

Yes, human behavior does not seem to have changed much. I must add that it has always needed to hear this human voice which we call poetry; this voice which is ever threatened with extinction for lack of love, and which is ever born anew, when threatened, it instinctively seeks new roots in the most unexpected places. For poetry there exist neither large countries nor small. Its domain is in the heart of all men. It has the grace to eschew the industry of habit. I am grateful to the Swedish Academy for having felt all this, for having sensed that languages of a so-called restricted use must not be allowed to turn into barriers behind which human heart-throbs are doomed to be stilled. I am thankful for yet another reason; because the Academy has proved itself an *Aeropagus* able "to judge with solemn true life's

ill-appointed lot" to quote Shelley, who inspired Alfred Nobel, we are told—a man who found a way of redeeming inevitable violence through the greatness of his heart.

In this rapidly shrinking world, each one of us has need of all the others. We must seek out man wherever he may be. When, on the road to Thebes, Oedipus met the Sphinx, and was given her enigma to solve, his reply was: *man*. This single word destroyed the monster. We have many monsters to destroy—let us consider Oedipus' reply.⁵

I have quoted extensively from Seferis's Nobel acceptance speech because it so clearly, so straightforwardly, so provocatively illustrates his own consciousness of the Hellenic tradition and those classical ideas which were themselves the concerns of Seferis and have remained the concern of humankind. Looking into the Hellenic tradition was for Seferis looking into one's own soul, even though Seferis also said, "If we want to understand the ancient Greeks, it is always into the soul of our own people that we should look."⁶ Seferis was very much interested in the language and the thought of General Makrygiannis, hero of the Greek War of Independence and leader of the popular insurrection that gave Greece the Constitution of 1843, a leader who later found himself incarcerated under the first king Otho and his Bavarian court. Seferis notes in his long essay on this originally illiterate hero what Makrygiannis heard one of the local boys saying to his friends at the beginning of the Revolution in Arta:

Pashas and beys, we shall be destroyed, destroyed! For this war is not with Moscow nor with the English nor the French. We have wronged the Greek infidel and taken away

⁵*Radar*, 2 (March/April 1964) 5, International Edition (Warsaw) in English translation.

⁶In his essay on Makrygiannis in *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism*, trans. by Rex Warner and Th. D. Frangopoulos (Boston and Toronto, 1966), p. 58.

his wealth and his honor. And this darkened his eyes and he rose up in arms. And this Sultan, this beast of burden does not know what is happening. He is deceived by those around him.⁷

Seferis compares this statement put in the mouth of the enemy with the statement that Aischylos put in the mouth of another ancient Greek enemy—the Persian—in his play *the Persians*. “We shall be destroyed because we did wrong.” Makryannis’ words were spoken in 1821 and recorded in 1829; Aischylos fought in 480 B.C. at the occasion of the Battle of Salamis and recorded his dramatic reaction to the Persians in his play in 472 B.C. What a remarkable continuity in the Hellenic tradition as seen by a remarkable modern Hellenic poet. As Seferis observes in his “Letter on ‘The Thrush,’”⁸ it is my belief that in the Greek light there is a kind of process of humanization. I think of Aischylos not as a Titan or the Cyclops that people sometimes went to see him as, but as a man feeling and expressing himself close beside us, accepting or reacting to the natural elements just as we all do. I think of the mechanism of justice which he sets before us, this alternation of Hubris and Ate, which one will not find to be simply a moral law unless it is also a law of nature. A hundred years before him Anaximander of Miletos believed that ‘things’ pay by deterioration for the ‘injustice’ they have committed by going beyond the order of time. And later Heraclitos will declare: ‘The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of Justice, will find him out!’ In a “Letter to a Foreign

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid., p. 104. In her excellent book *Love and The Symbolic Journey in the Poetry of Cavafy, Eliot and Seferis* (New York, 1982). C. Capri-Karka also notes the importance to Seferis of the Aischylian notion of justice. See her pp. 230, 240, and 350. On p. 199 she notes that “In his prose writings, too, Seferis refers to the Aischylian idea, which can be traced back to Anaximander, that the moral law of justice is an expression of the fundamental law of nature.”

Friend” Seferis noted that “None of our traditions, Christian or pre-Christian have really died out.”⁹ Seferis saw the poet as carrying a very heavy responsibility: “He carries the burden of the responsibility of the struggle between life and death.”¹⁰ This responsibility is echoed in his “Mycenae” poem:

B' MYKHNEΣ

Δῶς' μου τὰ χέρια σου, δῶς' μου τὰ χέρια σου,
δῶς' μου τὰ χέρια σου.

Εἶδα μέσα στὴ νύχτα
τὴ μυτερὴ κορυφὴ τοῦ βουνοῦ
εἶδα τὸν κάμπο πέρα πλημμυρισμένο
μὲ τὸ φῶς ἑνὸς ἀφανέρωτου φεγγαριοῦ
εἶδα, γυρίζοντας τὸ κεφάλι
τὶς μαῦρες πέτρες συσπειρωμένες
καὶ τὴ ζωὴ μου τεντωμένη σὰ χορδὴ
ἀρχὴ καὶ τέλος
ἡ τελευταία στιγμή·
τὰ χέρια μου.

Βουλιάζει ὁποῖος σηκώνει τὶς μεγάλες πέτρες·
τοῦτες τὶς πέτρες τὶς ἐσήκωσα ὅσο βάσταξα
τοῦτες τὶς πέτρες τὶς ἀγάπησα ὅσο βάσταξα
τοῦτες τὶς πέτρες, τὴ μοίρα μου.
Πληγωμένος ἀπὸ τὸ δικό μου χῶμα
τυραννισμένος ἀπὸ τὸ δικό μου πουκάμισο
καταδικασμένος ἀπὸ τοὺς δικούς μου θεούς,
τοῦτες τὶς πέτρες.

⁹Ibid., pp. 170-71.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 198. Capri-Karka in *Love and the Symbolic Journey* observes brilliantly in connection with the *Mythistorema*: “These stones symbolize here the principles of the classical Greek tradition, the achievement of harmony through restraint and balance, the violation of which—excess—leads to hubris and punishment; and the protagonist feels that the task of upholding these principles is very heavy” (p. 265).

Ξέρω πῶς δὲν ξέρουν, ἀλλὰ ἐγὼ
 ποὺ ἀκολούθησα τόσες φορὲς
 τὸ δρόμο ἀπ' τὸ φονιά στὸ σκοτωμένο
 ἀπὸ τὸ σκοτωμένο στὴν πληρωμὴ
 κι ἀπὸ τὴν πληρωμὴ στὸν ἄλλο φόνου,
 ψηλαφώντας
 τὴν ἀνεξάντλητη πορφύρα
 τὸ βράδυ ἐκεῖνο τοῦ γυρισμοῦ
 ποὺ ἄρχισαν νὰ σφυρίζουν οἱ Σεμνὲς
 στὸ λιγοστὸ χορτάρι—
 εἶδα τὰ φίδια σταυρωτὰ μὲ τις ὀχιές
 πλεγμένα πάνω στὴν κακὴ γενιὰ
 τῇ μοίρα μας.

Φωνὲς ἀπὸ τὴν πέτρα ἀπὸ τὸν ὕπνο
 βαθύτερες ἐδῶ ποὺ ὁ κόσμος σκοτεινιάζει,
 μνήμη τοῦ μόχθου ριζωμένη στὸ ρυθμὸ
 ποὺ χτύπησε τὴ γῆς μὲ πόδια
 λησμονημένα.
 Σώματα βυθισμένα στὰ θεμέλια
 τοῦ ἄλλου καιροῦ, γυμνά. Μάτια
 προσηλωμένα προσηλωμένα, σ' ἓνα σημάδι
 ποὺ ὅσο κι' ἂν θέλεις δὲν τὸ ξεχωρίζεις·
 ἡ ψυχὴ
 ποὺ μάχεται γιὰ νὰ γίνῃ ψυχὴ σου.

Μήτε κι ἡ σιωπὴ εἶναι πιά δική σου
 ἐδῶ ποὺ σταματῆσαν οἱ μυλόπετρες.

Ὁκτώβρης 1935

In my brief interview with Seferis over a decade ago, it was clear that he was most concerned with the preservation of Hellenism and he was most moved by the tragic nature of Greek history and especially the loss of Ionian Hellenism. The light of this country he saw as having something to do with his own internal life. "I have sometimes the intense feeling," he said

"that there is an absolute black behind the extremely flexible vivacity of an attic day. That is what we used to call the *Greek tragedy*, before being transferred into the great texts which we know; it was those perhaps in that unbelievable light.—"¹¹

Many consider "The King of Asine" Seferis's masterpiece. It is a magnificent example of how the contemporary poet relates the ancient world to the modern world and the modern world to the ancient.

We learn from Seferis's own notes that:

"The King of Asine" is mentioned by Homer in the list of those who sent ships against Troy—as he says. We know the remains of his palace near Nauplion; but about him nothing at all; just a name. Years after my visit to Asine a small terracotta was discovered, which was christened the King of Asine. The find disappointed me. Then I felt that it was perhaps our total ignorance about him which attracted me. I could add that this poem taught me something on the unconscious ways of poetry. When I started writing it the poem could not advance. After many attempts I had to abandon it; my manuscript was lost in the meantime. Two years after I wrote it without any difficulty in one night.¹²

One word in the Iliad 2. 560—a book called the Catalogue of Ships in which Homer listed the Greek forces that set out for Troy—provides the inspiration for Seferis's poem. The archaeologist's spade has often turned up sites, even civilizations that man never dreamed existed, great civilizations the total memory of which has been lost. So with Asine whose acropolis is near the modern village of Tolos on the coast of the Argolid. No one who has seen the golden Mycenaean death masks in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens can help but be haunted by this poem. The viewer can almost hear the voice of the poet coming through it and saying, "under the mask

¹¹B.B.C. III Programme 7-12-59 recording.

¹²Ibid.

a void." We look in vain for the king but there is no king—only the mask. The king is dead. The heroes are gone. Written in 1940 in a period of leadership bankruptcy, man looked desperately for heroes, for an Odysseus but an Odysseus was not to be found. Behind the light of the gold, there was bleak darkness.

Ο ΒΑΣΙΛΙΑΣ ΤΗΣ ΑΣΙΝΗΣ

Ἀσίνην τε. . .

ΙΛΙΑΔΑ

Κοιτάξαμε ὅλο τὸ πρωὶ γύρω-γύρω τὸ κάστρο
ἀρχίζοντας ἀπὸ τὸ μέρος τοῦ ἴσκιου ἐκεῖ ποὺ ἡ θάλασσα
πράσινη καὶ χωρὶς ἀναλαμπή, τὸ στήθος σκοτωμένου
παγονιοῦ

μᾶς δέχτηκε ὅπως ὁ καιρὸς χωρὶς κανένα χάσμα.
Οἱ φλέβες τοῦ βράχου κατέβαιναν ἀπὸ ψηλὰ
στριμμένα κλήματα γυμνὰ πολύκλινα ζωντανεύοντα
στ' ἄγγιγμα τοῦ νεροῦ, καθὼς τὸ μάτι ἀκολουθώντας τὴν
πάλευε νὰ ξεφύγει τὸ κουραστικὸ λίκνισμα
χάνοντας δύναμη ὀλοένα.

Ἀπὸ τὸ μέρος τοῦ ἡλίου ἕνας μακρὺς γιαλὸς ὀλάνοιχτο
καὶ τὸ φῶς τρίβοντας διαμαντικὰ στὰ μεγάλα τείχη
Κανένα πλάσμα ζωντανὸ τ' ἀγριοπερίστερα φευγάτα
κι ὁ βασιλιάς τῆς Ἀσίνης ποὺ τὸν γυρεύουμε δυὸ χρόνια
τώρα

ἄγνωστος λησμονημένος ἀπ' ὅλους κι ἀπὸ τὸν Ὅμηρο
μόνο μιὰ λέξη στὴν Ἰλιάδα κι ἐκείνη ἀβέβαιη
ριγμένη ἐδῶ σὰν τὴν ἐντάφια χρυσή προσωπίδα.
Τὴν ἄγγιξες, θυμᾶσαι τὸν ἦχο της; κούφιο μέσα στὸ φῶς
σὰν τὸ στεγνὸ πιθάρι στὸ σκαμμένο χῶμα·
κι ὁ ἴδιος ἦχος μὲς στὴ θάλασσα μὲ τὰ κουπιά μας
Ὁ βασιλιάς τῆς Ἀσίνης ἕνα κενὸ κάτω ἀπ' τὴν
προσωπίδα

παντοῦ μαζί μας, παντοῦ μαζί μας, κάτω ἀπὸ ἕνα
ὄνομα:

«Ἀσίνην τε... Ἀσίνην τε...»

καὶ τὰ παιδιὰ του ἀγάλματα

κι οἱ πόθοι του πτερουγίσματα πουλιῶν κι ὁ ἀγέρας
στὰ διαστήματα τῶν στοχασμῶν του καὶ τὰ καράβια του
ἀραγμένα σ' ἄφαντο λιμάνι·
κάτω ἀπ' τὴν προσωπίδα ἕνα κενό.

Πίσω ἀπὸ τὰ μεγάλα μάτια τὰ καμπύλα χεῖλια τοὺς
βοστρύχους
ἀνάγλυφα στὸ μαλαματένιο σκέπασμα τῆς ὑπαρξῆς μας
ἕνα σημεῖο σκοτεινὸ ποὺ ταξιδεύει σὰν τὸ ψάρι
μέσα στὴν αὐγινὴ γαλήνη τοῦ πελάγου καὶ τὸ βλέπεις:
ἕνα κενὸ παντοῦ μαζί μας.

Καὶ τὸ πουλὶ ποὺ πέταξε τὸν ἄλλο χειμῶνα
μὲ σπασμένη πτερούγα

σκήνωμα ζωῆς,
κι ἡ νέα γυναίκα ποὺ ἔφυγε νὰ παίξει
μὲ τὰ σκυλόδοντα τοῦ καλοκαιριοῦ
κι ἡ ψυχὴ ποὺ γύρεψε τσιρίζοντας τὸν κάτω κόσμον
κι ὁ τόπος σὰν τὸ μεγάλο πλατανόφυλλο ποὺ
παρασέρνει

ὁ χεῖμαρρος τοῦ ἡλίου
μὲ τ' ἀρχαῖα μνημεῖα καὶ τὴ σύγχρονη θλίψη.

Κι ὁ ποιητὴς ἀργοπορεῖ κοιτάζοντας τὶς πέτρες κι
ἀναρωτιέται

ὕπάρχουν ἄραγε
ἀνάμεσα στὶς χαλασμένες τοῦτες γραμμὲς τὶς ἀκμὲς τὶς
αἰχμὲς τὰ κοῖλα καὶ τὶς καμπύλες

ὕπάρχουν ἄραγε
ἐδῶ ποὺ συναντιέται τὸ πέρασμα τῆς βροχῆς τοῦ ἀγέρα
καὶ τῆς φθορᾶς

ὕπάρχουν, ἡ κίνηση τοῦ προσώπου τὸ σχῆμα τῆς
στοργῆς

ἐκείνων ποὺ λιγότεψαν τόσο παράξενα μὲς στὴ ζωὴ
μας

αὐτῶν ποὺ ἀπόμειναν σκιὲς κυμάτων καὶ στοχασμοὶ μὲ
τὴν ἀπεραντοσύνη τοῦ πελάγου

ἢ μήπως ὅχι δὲν ἀπομένει τίποτε παρὰ μόνο τὸ βάρος
ἢ νοσταλγία τοῦ βάρους μιᾶς ὑπαρξῆς ζωντανῆς

ἐκεῖ ποὺ μένουμε τώρα ἀνυπόστατοι λυγίζοντας
 σὰν τὰ κλωνάρια τῆς φριχτῆς ἰτιᾶς σωριασμένα μέσα
 στὴ διάρκεια τῆς ἀπελπισίας
 ἐνῶ τὸ ρέμα κίτρινο κατεβάζει ἀργὰ βοῦρλα ξεριζωμένους
 μες στὸ βοῦρκο
 εἰκόνα μορφῆς ποὺ μαρμάρωσε μὲ τὴν ἀπόφαση μιᾶς
 πίκρας παντοτινῆς
 Ὁ ποιητὴς ἓνα κενό.

Ἀσπιδοφόρος ὁ ἥλιος ἀνέβαινε πολεμώντας
 κι' ἀπὸ τὸ βάθος τῆς σπηλιᾶς μιὰ νυχτερίδα τρομαγμένη
 χτύπησε πάνω στὸ φῶς σὰν τὴ σαῖτα πάνω στὸ
 σκουτάρι:
 «Ἀσίνην τε Ἀσίνην τε. . .» Νά ταν αὐτὴ ὁ βασιλιάς τῆς
 Ἀσίνης
 ποὺ τὸν γυρεύουμε τόσο προσεχτικά σὲ τούτη τὴν
 ἀκρόπολη
 γγίζοντας κάποτε μὲ τὰ δάχτυλά μας τὴν ἀφή του πάνω
 στὶς πέτρες.

Ἀσίνη καλοκαίρι '38 - Ἀθήνα, Γεν. 40

No one who knows Greece can forget the rocky nature of the terrain (80 per cent of the country is rock). No one who has been to Greece or lived in Greece can forget that the archaeological remains are part and parcel of what used to be a clearly visible landscape. The rocks—both natural and hewn—are clear evidence of the continuity of the Hellenic experience. They are evidence of the Greek past, the present, and the future. For Seferis the stones are more than mere stones. They are stones of the past that live in the present. They are in fact, part of man's present as they are of his past and will be in the future. The Swedish Academy recognized the importance of stones in making the Nobel Prize Award to Seferis and to Greece. One sociologist whom some of you know (Irwin T. Sanders) has called his book about the people of rural Greece *Rainbow in the Rock*¹³ and we all know the folk tradition that in creating the world God used up everything

¹³Irwin T. Sanders *Rainbow in the Rock* (Cambridge, 1962).

on all the other regions and had only rocks from which to make up Greece. Stones, marble fragments, silent statues color the Seferis poetic landscape. Anthony N. Zachareas in an article in *Books Abroad* (Spring 1968)¹⁴ put it well when he noted:

These grounds littered with ruins, ancient marine kingdoms, empty harbors, the trail of arid mountains, slow-moving ships, abandoned homesites, together with the Aegean Sea, the bright sun, and the maddening wind are woven into a symbolic net, the tangled web of the Hellenic experience. Moreover, the Hellenic experience embraces the moral conflicts and the existential doubts that characterize much of the problematic literature of our times. The poet usually gazes at the stone images and searches for more identity with past values, but statues do not always reveal their hidden truths and must face the mystery alone, maimed as it were. The web of evil and the conflicts that Aischylos depicted in the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Orestes are still with us.

Seferis was brought up on the Greek classics. In the Genadius Library in the Seferis Archives we even have his notebook on the *Antigone* of Sophocles from his Gymnasium school days. His wife of thirty years and now widow in 1980 authorized the publication of *Μεταγραφές* (Transcriptions),¹⁵ edited meticulously by George Yatromanolakis. Not only are we presented with poetic and prose texts from classical authors such as Homer, Stesichoros, Anakreon, Simonides of Keos, Aischylos, Euripides, the Palatine Anthology, Heraklitos, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and Apuleius, that Seferis had translated into modern Greek from their classical originals, but also with a long, informed essay by the editor on the "Translation Theory and Practice of Seferis."¹⁶ Seferis inten-

¹⁴Anthony N. Zachareas, "George Seferis: Myth and History" in *Books Abroad* 42 (Spring 1968) 194.

¹⁵George Yatromanolakis, *Μεταγραφές* (Athens, 1980).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 277-82.

tionally used the word *metagraphe* (transcription) rather than *metaphrasis* (translation) to indicate translation from one form of the same language to another form of that language, that is, in this case, from ancient Greek and/or Latin to modern Greek. We know that he objected strenuously to the use of expressions like "ancient Greek" and "modern Greek." He insisted that Greek was Greek—thus bespeaking his own strong belief in the historical continuity and integrity of the Greek language. Yatromanolakis points out that Seferis's theory and practice are consistent to the end of his life. Seferis saw the problem of the Greek language and practice in translation as closely related. Experimentation and practice in translation would test and develop the capabilities of the Greek language. He believed that the Greek language needed to be purified of foreign idioms and that such a purified language could be enriched by returning to a deep study of genuine demotic Greek folk texts. The distinction Seferis made between copying (μεταγραφή) and translation (μετάφραση) caused him to remark:

When we translate from a foreign language which we know a little or a great deal to a language—our own—which is inborn in us and which we love more, we are doing something, it seems to me, like those people whom we see in museums, concentrating with great attention, copying, either for exercise or because someone requested them, to sketch the pictures of different artists."¹⁷ Seferis also said that "I think that when I translate Greek texts into our contemporary language and when I translate from foreign languages, I am doing two different things. Therefore I needed two different words to indicate the difference. Until a more adequate word can be found, I have adopted the word *metagraphe* for the tranference of the ancient texts to contemporary language."¹⁸

The search for a "natural" accommodation between

¹⁷Ibid., p. 234.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 238.

ancient and modern expression is crucially tested and especially illustrated in his biblical translations of *The Song of Songs* and the Book of Revelation. Seferis's interest in the myths of Plato is vividly demonstrated as well. In fact, Seferis's special area of study during his stay at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1968 was Plato. Yatromanolakis has brought to our attention the archival and manuscript sources of Seferis's work in translation development. Particularly interesting is the tracing of his Platonic sources in the *Phaidro*, *Gorgias*, *Republic*, *Politikos*, *Laws*, *Phaidros*, *Symposium*, *Kritias*, and *Timaios*. Yatromanolakis notes:

This language Seferis served, as long as he lived, in poetry, in his essays, and in his translations, always avoiding any easy solutions. He sought, in his lengthy translation preoccupation, to intone his discourses in rhythms which he liked and to provide practice for himself amid the difficulties he encountered. He made theoretical and practical contributions to the solution of our language problem, and is shown both in his work and especially in his *Metagraphes* as the great master of his mother tongue.¹⁹

All his life Seferis was a champion of the *demotike*—he loved the Greek language and he wanted it to be an instrument of the most genuine expression of the Greek spirit. He studied Greek texts intensively—ancient, mediaeval, and modern, as anyone can attest who just looks into his archives. He knew the classical Greek authors as few specialists even today know them. He used them naturally in terms of contemporary life. The classical elements should not be torn out of their natural context and studied as archaeological objects. Rather they must be viewed as integral parts of a poetic whole of great inspiration beauty and complexity. Unlike other literatures, modern Greek literature can draw upon Greek antiquity without jarring the reader's sense of naturalness. Specifically ancient Greek

¹⁹Ibid., p. 308. See also John E. Rexine, "The Poet George Seferis and His Greek Critics" in *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora* 7, (1980) 145-54.

mythology, whose value is of more than of entertainment interest, is expertly used. However, as Sherrard and Keeley say in the Foreword to the Princeton edition of Seferis, “. . . it would be a mistake to regard this source in isolation, since all the various threads of the Greek tradition—folk, literary, and mythic—are tightly woven together in his work: one senses really the whole of the Greek past, as it is represented in poetry from the age of Homer down to the contemporary period.”

A good example of classical quotation and inspiration followed by his own poetic interpretation is from his *Mythi-storema* which is preceded by a quotation of Aischylos' *Libation Bearers* 491, in which Orestes is speaking on Agamemnon's tomb, recalling to his father the bath in which Clytemnestra slew him (*Remember the baths where you were murdered*):

Γ'
Μέμνησο λουτρῶν οἷς ἐνοσφίσθης

Εύπνησα μὲ τὸ μαρμάρينو τοῦτο κεφάλι στὰ χέρια
ποῦ μοῦ ἐξαντλεῖ τοὺς ἀγκῶνες καὶ δὲν ξέρω ποῦ νὰ τ'
ἀκουμπήσω.

Ἔπεφτε στὸ ὄνειρο καθὼς ἐβγαίνα ἀπὸ τὸ ὄνειρο
ἔτσι ἐνώθηκε ἡ ζωὴ μας καὶ θὰ εἶναι πολὺ δύσκολο νὰ
ξαναχωρίσει.

Κοιτάζω τὰ μάτια· μήτε ἀνοιχτὰ μήτε κλειστὰ
μιλῶ στὸ στόμα ποῦ ὅλο γυρεύει νὰ μιλήσει
κρατῶ τὰ μάγουλα ποῦ ξεπέρασαν τὸ δέρμα.
Δὲν ἔχω ἄλλη δύναμη·

τὰ χέρια μου χάνονται καὶ μὲ πλησιάζουν
ἀκρωτηριασμένα.

This a beautiful example of how Seferis merges the present with the past or perhaps better shows us the presentness of the past in the present. The universality of the poetic message is hauntingly illustrated. In commenting on Seferis, John P.

Anton appropriately said:

Nonetheless, Seferis is not a death-preaching poet. He merely speaks of a world, our world which has survived the assaults of senseless destruction, of so much human failure, or ruins which convince us with a frequency approaching the limits of inevitability. Time and again, Seferis has told us how we move among the statues, calm and flawless statues, the lifeless eternity of an antiquity destined to survive us. We live among the sleepless dead who will still be here when we are gone. So deep is the mystery, so fine the relation that it is often impossible to know we live in Hades or Hades lives because of men. The framework in which Seferis chose to put this very thought is markedly contemporary. It has indeed become of the essence of poetry not to be able to decide whether the soul is in the landscape or the landscape is the soul.

It would be possible to make the antiquarian's catalogue of the classical references in Seferis which could easily include passages from Homer, Hesiod, Heraklitos, Herodotos, Aischylos, Sophokles, Euripides, Pindar, Pliny the Younger, Virgil, and this had been done by Elio Benedetti in an Italian volume entitled *Omaggio a Seferis*²¹ in a painstakingly philological fashion, but as impressive as this kind of research may be, it does not begin to say anything about the vitality of Seferis's use of the classics.

The Homeric figure of Odysseus, it has been argued, looms large in the symbolism of Seferis.

Chief place among all of Seferis's symbols is given to the great personality of the Homeric Odysseus, though reworked by our poet in his own peculiar way. Still, Odysseus remains for Seferis the representative symbol of the Greek

²¹Elio Benedetti, "Poesia della Grecia Classica nell' Opera di Giorgio Seferis" in *Omaggio a Seferis* (Padua, 1970), pp. 27-143.

soul, always in voyage...defying all the perils of adventures in the high seas of time.²² Kimon Friar would agree: "Odysseus is also the unifying symbol in the poetry of inner tension; the eternal wanderer forever seeking the land of Heart's Desire—The Lost Paradise lying somewhere behind the mysterious smiles of archaic statues."²³ John Anton has put it somewhat differently as far as the Seferis hero is concerned: "It is the ongoing voyager, any weather-beaten sailor, he disowned Jason whose crushed dream, victim of time and strong wind, cannot recall even the vestiges of some lost golden fleece."²⁴ Odysseus is stripped of his grandeur and of heroic qualities to become an anonymous Greek or person against a contemporary wasteland.

Consider Mythistorema 4 subtitled "The Argonauts":

Δ'

Ἀργοναῦτες

Καὶ ψυχὴ
εἰ μέλλει γνῶσεσθαι αὐτὴν
εἰς ψυχὴν
αὐτῇ βλέπτεον:
τὸν ξένο καὶ τὸν ἐχθρὸν τὸν εἶδαμε στὸν καθρέφτη.

Ἦτανε καλὰ παιδιὰ οἱ συντρόφοι, δὲ φωνάζαν
οὔτε ἀπὸ τὸν κάματο οὔτε ἀπὸ τῆ δίψα οὔτε ἀπὸ τὴν
παγωνιὰ
εἶχανε τὸ φέρσιμο τῶν δέντρων καὶ τῶν κυμάτων
ποὺ δέχονται τὸν ἄνεμο καὶ τὴ βροχὴ
δέχονται τὴ νύχτα καὶ τὸν ἥλιο
χωρὶς ν' ἀλλάζουν μέσα στὴν ἀλλαγὴ.
Ἦτανε καλὰ παιδιὰ, μέρες ὁλόκληρες
ἴδρωναν στὸ κουπὶ μὲ χαμηλωμένα μάτια

²²Andrea Karandonis, *Ὁ Ποιητὴς Γιώργος Σεφέρης* (Athens, 1976), p. 207.

²³*Saturday Review* (November 30, 1962), 16-17.

²⁴Anton, "Classical Humanism," p. 245.

ἀνασαίνοντας μὲ ρυθμὸ
καὶ τὸ αἷμά τους κοκκίνιζε ἓνα δέρμα ὑποταγμένο.
Κάποτε τραγούδησαν, μὲ χαμηλωμένα μάτια
ὅταν περάσαμε τὸ ἐρημόνησο μὲ τὶς ἀραποσυκιές
κατὰ τὴ δύση, πέρα ἀπὸ τὸν κάβο τῶν σκύλων
ποὺ γαβγίζουν.
Εἰ μέλλει γνῶσεσθαι αὐτὴν, ἔλεγαν
εἰς ψυχὴν βλέπτεον, ἔλεγαν
καὶ τὰ κουπιὰ χτυποῦσαν τὸ χρυσάφι τοῦ πελάγου
μέσα στὸ ἡλιόγερμα.
Περάσαμε κάβους πολλοὺς πολλὰ νησιὰ τὴ θάλασσα
ποὺ φέρνει τὴν ἄλλη θάλασσα, γλάρους καὶ φώκιες.
Δυστυχισμένες γυναῖκες κάποτε μὲ ὁλολυγμούς,
κλαίγανε τὰ χαμένα τους παιδιὰ
κι ἄλλες ἀγριεμένες γύρευαν τὸ Μεγαλέξαντρο
καὶ δόξες βυθισμένες στὰ βάθη τῆς Ἀσίας.
Ἀράξαμε σ' ἀκρογιαλιές γεμάτες ἀρώματα νυχτερινὰ
μὲ κελαηδίσματα πουλιῶν, νερὰ ποὺ ἀφήνανε στὰ χέρια
τὴ μνήμη μιᾶς μεγάλης εὐτυχίας.
Μὰ δὲν τελειῶναν τὰ ταξίδια.
Οἱ ψυχές τους ἔγιναν ἓνα μὲ τὰ κουπιὰ καὶ τοὺς
σκαρμούς
μὲ τὸ σοβαρὸ πρόσωπο τῆς πλώρης
μὲ τ' αὐλάκι τοῦ τιμονιοῦ
μὲ τὸ νερὸ ποὺ ἔσπαζε τὴ μορφὴ τους.
Οἱ σύντροφοι τέλειωσαν μὲ τὴ σειρά,
μὲ χαμηλωμένα μάτια. Τὰ κουπιὰ τους
δείχνουν τὸ μέρος ποὺ κοιμοῦνται στ' ἀκρογιάλι.

Κανεὶς δὲν τοὺς θυμᾶται. Δικαιοσύνη.

Clearly in this poem it is the ordinary man who is the hero or nonhero; he does ordinary things. The line "Their oars mark the place where they sleep on the shore" is reminiscent of Elpenor in the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' oarsman who fell off Circe roof and broke his neck in a drunken stupor. When Odysseus visits the world of the dead he meets Elpenor's ψυχὴ which

has not been granted admission to Hades because it has not undergone proper burial. He pleads with Odysseus:

When you make sail
and put these lodgings of dim Death behind,
you will moor ships, I know, upon Aiaia Island;
There, o my Lord, remember me, I pray,
do not abandon me unwept, unburied,
to tempt the gods' wrath, while you sail for home—
but fire my corpse, and all the gear I had,
and build a cairn for me above the breakers—
and unknown sailor's mark for men to come,
Heap up the mound there, and implant upon it
the oar I pulled in life with my companions.

He ceased, and I replied;

'Unhappy spirit,

I promise you the barrow and the burial.' (11.51-80)²⁵

In the Homeric story the point is that Elpenor the common ordinary oarsman, the ordinary man also possesses *arete*, oarsmanship, and this is what he wants to be remembered for. All the great Homeric heroes possess a glorious *arete* have performed κλέα ἀνδρῶν, but Elpenor's claim is simply the hope that he will be remembered as a good oarsman. That is why he asks for an oar to be used as his gravemarker. In Seferis's poem too "their oars mark the place where they sleep on the shore" because these Argonauts, these modern wanderers, are nonheroes; They are all Elpenors, not Odysseuses, whose heroism, whose *arete* consists in doing their day-to-day activities. Anton says: "The heroic quality is no other than the sweat of the people's brow, to be found in the silent currents

²⁵The translation is from Robert Fitzgerald's *Homer: The Odyssey* (New York, 1961), pp. 198-99.

of joint efforts, the communal grasp of unpretentious hands."²⁶ The poet perceives "the non-heroic texture of our time." Keeley suggests Elpenor's lack of valor and intelligence become a characteristic submissiveness and insensitivity in the contemporary world, here symbolized by the futile voyage of a crew of modern Argonauts."²⁷

It is the ordinary man, then, who is the hero for Seferis, if he is a hero. To repeat the relevant line about oarsmen in Seferis "no one remembers them." We all wish to be remembered—to believe that we have a role to play, and that we have played that role well. We do not wish to be forgotten; even the very great want their memory preserved. In some cases, not a trace has been left. That is why the past is so important. As a poet Seferis sees a task that involves the preservation of the memory of Hellenism through which life can be given to contemporary human beings.

Through Greek suffering and tragedy, Seferis sees the suffering and the tragedy of the human race. Through Greek history he sees the continuity of the human experience. "Our legendary past casts light on our tragedy just as our history substantiates the tragic stuff of past myths."²⁸

Seferis is a modern Greek poet in the best classical Greek tradition. His aim is to be Greek, contemporary and universal. He is a poet of reality—not illusion. Like Euripides he paints men as they are—very often stiff and unfeeling like stones, but amidst all the destruction, wars, conflict and tragedy there is love, and Seferis loves humanity. In "The Wreck Thrush" poem Oedipus is made to say:²⁹

Τραγούδησε μικρή Ἀντιγόνη, τραγούδησε,
τραγούδησε...

²⁶Anton, "Classical Humanism," p. 243.

²⁷Edmund Keeley, "Seferis' Elpenor: A Man of No Fortune" in *The Kenyon Review* 28 (June 1966) 382.

²⁸Zachareas, "George Seferis: Myth and History," p. 194.

²⁹In reference to *Thrush*, in *Love and the Symbolic Journey*, Capri-Karka says clearly: "The poem ends with an affirmation of life, an appeal to enjoy this great gift as long as it lasts, instead of wasting it" (p. 320).

δὲ σοῦ μιλῶ γιὰ περασμένα, μιλῶ γιὰ τὴν ἀγάπη·
 στόλισε τὰ μαλλιά σου μὲ τ' ἀγκάθια τοῦ ἡλίου,
 σκοτεινὴ κοπέλλα·
 ἡ καρδιά τοῦ Σκορπιοῦ βασίλεψε,
 ὁ τύραννος μέσα ἀπ' τὸν ἄνθρωπο ἔχει φύγει,
 κι' ὅλες οἱ κόρες τοῦ πόντου, Νηρηίδες, Γραῖες
 τρέχουν στὰ λαμπυρίσματα τῆς ἀναδυομένης·
 ὅποιος ποτέ του δὲν ἀγάπησε θὰ ἀγαπήσει,
 στὸ φῶς·

A man of unusual sensitivity Seferis certainly was, and even though very much a Greek of the Diaspora, he agonized over the tragic nature of Hellenism. The citation of the University Orator at the 218th Commencement of Princeton University of June 15, 1965, when Seferis was granted the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters,³⁰ may encapsulate what could be said of his life and work:

Like his countrymen of the Golden Age, he serves the twin mistresses of art and state, *poiesis* and *polis*. The wisdom and sure sensitivity that he has brought to the arts of diplomacy are reflected in the maturity of his poetry, which is as sharp in color, as sparse in ornament, as austere as beautiful as the enduring landscape it so often invokes. The long continuity of the classical spirit glows in his images that reflect the mood of modern man by calling upon the legend and the history of the land he loves and nobly represents, the cradle of Western civilization.

³⁰The original diploma is in the Seferis Archives of the Gennadius Library. All the Greek citations from the poetry of George Seferis in this article are taken from Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard, *George Seferis: Collected Poems, 1924-1955* (Princeton, 1967).

Seferis and the Homeland

MARIA KAKAVA

"WHEREVER I TRAVEL Greece wounds me."

"There is nothing more bitter than yearning for your country while living there."

"I pray to God that I grow old and die in my homeland."

"The beauty of the transparency of *altra cosa* of Attica is so strong, I mean to say in the medical sense, that you are forced to arrange your senses to absorb it in doses, otherwise it makes you mad and dumb."

Unfortunately, I have to limit myself to very few lines of Seferis' work. These "very few lines" are the demonstration of the poet's preoccupation with the homeland, his admiration for the past, and his grief and the wounds that go along with the priceless heritage, and the unbroken continuity of the culture since archaic times. Seferis is continuously experiencing the ancient moment through his poetic art.

His sister, Ioanna Tsatsou, says: "In order for him to feel the ancient moment, he was experiencing an esoteric short-circuit with the archaic texts." This particular intensity we experience throughout the poet's work. The "day of the return" is the recurrent theme, the Odyssean homecoming. Could anything be more sweet than one's returning home? This very theme is the universality of Seferis' poetry.

Because Seferis deals with the "Hellenic spirit," which he would rather call "the spirit of the people," he can be criticized by many as being extremely nationalistic, and consequently a "poet strictly for the Hellenes." Perhaps some would misunderstand him because of this.

Seferis uses myth because he believes in its universal application. His heroes, Odysseus, Elpenor, Orestes, and the others are not just for a few. They are human beings who suffer