

## *The Land of Broken Statues: The Poetry of George Seferis*

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Seferis, as well as being a great poet, was a career diplomat who reached the top of his career as Greek Ambassador to London in 1957, retiring five years later and returning to Greece in 1962. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1963.

He was in Greece, therefore, for five years when the military dictators took over. He kept his silence for two years, however, until March 28, 1969, when he attacked the Junta for "imposing upon us (a regime) utterly contrary to the ideals for which our world — and so magnificently our people — fought in the last world war."

A personal confession. I waited a long time for him to attack the Junta, but when he did I wanted more. After all, he was the first Greek to receive the Nobel Prize. In the same statement, he explained that he had resolved to keep out of Greece's internal politics, "but this did not mean I was indifferent to our political life."

I was younger then and expected too much, perhaps. What I did not consider was the need that this long-wandering diplomat had to settle down, finally, in a permanent home. The day after the news reached the Free World that Seferis had called the Greece of the Colonels "a swamp" of intellectual torpor, I was walking on Panepistimiou, across from Zonar's, when a group of Athenian young approached me, overjoyed, and a stylish young woman turned to the others and asked "*Μα ποιός είναι αυτός ο Σεφέρης?*" So much for the Greek university students' interest in

N. B. Unless otherwise noted, all references to criticism about Seferis's work can be found in *Για τον Σεφέρη*, published in Athens, 1961.

poetry, I thought. What we did not notice in his by-now famous statement was his warning. "Tragedy awaits us at the end. It is this tragic ending that consciously or unconsciously torments us, as in the ancient choruses of Aeschylus. I see before us the precipice toward which the oppression that covers the land is leading us...."

When we contemplate the tragedy of Cyprus we see how prophetic he was.

We must be frank to say that for people who are not accustomed to reading modern verse, Seferis, like most poets of our time, is difficult. For one thing, he employs symbols that are private, which each reader must interpret for himself. Only occasionally does he use universal symbols, for example, snakes standing for evil.

*I've seen snakes crossed with vipers/knotted over the evil generation// our fate (Mycaene)*, which he repeats in one of his final poems, "The Cats of St. Nicholas", with clear references to the Military Junta.

In *Δοκιμές (Essays)*, Seferis addresses the issue of private symbolism that marks modern art and how this differs from traditional poetry, which uses symbolism commonly accepted by one's culture.

Because Seferis is a great artist, however, there are many ways to read his work, each one providing rich rewards.

Poetry, after all, is compressed language and certain words develop great power in the rather limited word-total of verse. For example, in Seferis's poetry, words like "thirst" (*δίψα*), which we encounter even in short and minor poems like *Αρνηση*, and "wells" (*πηγάδια*) and "cisterns" in major collections like (*Η Στέρνα*) develop a cluster of meanings that transcend the specific objects that we, readers of poetry, assign to them. "Asphodel" is another such loaded word, for in the language of flowers it represents "regret." It is said that the spirits of the dead sustain themselves with the roots of this flower. Ancients planted the flower on graves, and the ghosts beyond the River Acheron roam through the meadows of asphodels in order to reach the waters of Lethe or Oblivion. Obviously, the more sensitive and cultivated the reader, the more he or she will be able to appreciate modern poetry.

These words, in the work of a conscious artist like Seferis, become symbols and thus worthy of study. Light (*φως*), whether "an-

gelic" or "black", memory (*μνήμη*), justice (*δικαιοσύνη*) and Elpenor, the unfortunate companion of Odysseus, and Circe, will mean little to someone who does not know *The Odyssey*. "Σπίτι" is another word that for Seferis has powerful connotations, and it has an emotional resonance that suggests the *ομηρική εστία* as well as the houses the Greek refugees left uninhabited in Asia Minor.

In this lecture, I hope to interpret what I consider Seferis's first major work, *Μυθιστόρημα*, and because I know some people resist interpretation, let me call upon Nora Anagnostaki's defense of the role of the critic.

"The poet must forgive every interpretation that exhibits the great dimensions that his work provides to another sensitivity. *Ο ποιητής πρέπει να συγχωρεί κάθε ερμηνεία που δείχνει τις μεγάλες διαστάσεις που μπορεί να πάρει σε μια άλλη ευαισθησία η δική του έκφραση*, σ. 239. A critic, therefore, must be permitted to interpret a work of art in his or her own way, as long as convincing evidence is provided to support each statement.

But it is not only critics who interpret works of art. As we shall see tonight, composers who set poems to music are interpreting them as well.

Markos Avyeris in *Η Ποίηση του Σεφέρη* writes that it was Seferis "who abandoned the traditional poetic form and first established in our land the new style of polyrhythmic verse..." But his early work, notably *Στροφή*, *Ερωτικός Λόγος*, and *Η Στέρνα* have meter and rhyme, though they cannot be apprehended at a surface level. This difficulty need not be an obstacle to enjoyment, but it does diminish pleasure for people who want musicality, rhythm, and rhyme in their poetry.

Like most demotic poets, the influences of Seferis are Kornaros's Erotokritos, the folk ballads, and the poets who lived and wrote after Greece attained her political freedom: Solomos, Kalvos, Palamas, Sikelianos, and Cavafy. Though not poetry, *The Memoirs of Makriyiannis* must also be mentioned, not only for its authentic expression of the folk idiom but for Makriyiannis's stance toward despotism. It is clear that this "illiterate, my teacher" as Seferis calls him became a moral beacon during the Thirties, the Forties, and the Cold War years when, as a career diplomat, Seferis had to

serve policies he did not necessarily agree with.

Cavafy, certainly, enabled Seferis to look at Modern Greek history through the lenses of an eternal, timeless Greece, a Greece of Alexandria, embedding in his poetry a view of a disguised political reality, an indirect dialogue with the issues of his day.

Although many consider Seferis apolitical, we can see that because of his career as a diplomat and employee of the Greek Government he tended to camouflage his meanings.

Cavafy was one influence. T. S. Eliot was another, and "The Waste Land", published in that most significant year in Greek history, 1922, was to make an unforgettable impact on him.

Anglo-American critics cite *The Odyssey* and the Voyage of the Argonauts when discussing *Mythistorima*, but most Greek critics stress, as does Avyeris, "... the catastrophe of Asiatic Hellenism, one of the greatest in our history, ... which bears the seal of this crisis and whose feelings toward this catastrophe fills it completely" (p. 35) Yiannis Dallas agrees, stating that "behind *Mythistorima* there is something of the post-Great War, especially our own 1922." (p. 300) In fact, as Andreas Karandonis writes in his astonishing and prophetic *Ο Ποιητής Γιώργιος Σεφέρης* which appeared in 1931, almost simultaneously with the publication of *Στροφή*, that Seferis broke out of poetry's preoccupation with Ego and "our racial psychology as it changed after the War and especially after the suffering we endured when we tried to realize the goals of the Megale Idea" (p. 95).

Seferis was a Smyrniot, after all, and was 22 years of age when the Asia Minor Disaster occurred. Leon Karapanagiotis, in his essay on *Mythistorima*, suggests that if Seferis, uprooted once more, had not lived through the Asia Minor Disaster and the exile that followed this, he would not have seen the 1941-1944 years in Egypt with the same eyes." (p. 219) Finally, Takis Papatzonis, discussing the difference between himself and Seferis, says that "Seferis was the bitter Greek who had sailed from the other shore, bearing the wound of his uprooting, while I remained the native (*autochthon*) of this side and an observer of the uprooting." (p. 26)

Most critics consider *Στροφή* the "turning point" of Greek poetry after Palamas and the romantics, but I tend to agree with Zisimos Lorenzatos who identifies *Mythistorima* as the collection that changed how Greek poets viewed their art. With your forbear-

ance, it is this work that I'd like to devote my attention to this evening.

Precisely when the word "*mythistorima*" emerged is unclear. Adamantios Koraes, in preparing his introduction to Heliodorus's *Aithiopika*, (1833) came up with "*mythistoria*" to identify, with a Greek term, the new literary form that had emerged in Europe several centuries before. And it's a beautiful word, besides, not bland like "novel" or roman. Later in the century "*mythistorima*" was coined to differentiate it from "romance" and all that this implied in the way of motivation and narrative coherence. The title Kimon Friar used for his translation, "The Myth of our History" is not successful, I believe, though it approaches the resonance of *Mythistorima* in its ambition.

In *Mythistorima* (1935) (*Nea Grammata*): (Savvidis, p.305, ftn, *Για τον Σεφέρη*), Seferis combines, certainly, the mythic wanderings of the Argonauts and the men of Odysseus, but a number of suggestive phrases lead us to add two other groups, both looking to the sea for salvation: Xenophon's "March of the Ten Thousand" and the Asia Minor refugees. "The event that influenced me more than any other," Seferis writes to Timos Malanos, "was the Asia Minor Disaster." (May 13, 1944, found in *The Poetry of George Seferis*, 2nd edition, Alexandria, 1955, p. 16),

Like the Homeric epics, *Mythistorima* is made up of twenty-four poems, each representing a letter of the Greek alphabet. Unlike much of the Greek poetry that preceded it, and Seferis's own verse, *Mythistorima* is unrhymed and in free verse. Rarely does its meter approach the fifteen-syllable (*δεκαπεντασύλλαβο*) lines that had characterized Greek poetry for centuries. In his metrics we can see the influence of Cavafy, which several years later would lead him to copy all of the Alexandrian's poems by hand. Seferis's *Mythistorima* differs, however, from Cavafy's approach to history in that its references are less specific, more ambiguous, more elusive.

Important objects are caves, wells, cisterns, oars, fragments of statues, and the ever-recurrent asphodels. But the concept of justice to the meek, the modest, and the long-suffering, emerges as a powerful demand. In the work of Homer, Seferis has written, "everything is retained. The whole world is a fabric made up of or-

ganic, living threads. Animals, plants, spirits, the hearts of people, good, evil, death, life. All ripen, perish, blossom once more. And all of these occur simultaneously (Savvidis, p. 307, fn.).

In a note from his journal, *Days of 1945-1951*, Seferis has a statement that might help us understand a little more about his feelings about how our lives relate to those of the past. In his view, there are two kinds of light — angelic (*αγγελικό*) and black (*μαύρο*). They exist simultaneously. But most of us see only one, or at least only one, at a time. “Behind the golden fabric of the summer in Attica exists the frightening black,” he writes in his journal, “we are all playthings of this black.” (*πίσω από το χρυσό υφάδι του αττικού καλοκαιριού υπάρχει το τρομαχτικό μαύρο. Όλοι μας είμαστε παιχνίδια αυτού του μαύρου.*) And in the folk tale, “Land that Never Dies”, people do not die; they disappear. George Savvidis tells of Seferis’s recollection of the last words of Angelos Sikelianos: “I saw the absolute blackness and it was beautiful beyond words.” (*Είδα το απόλυτο μαύρο. Είταν ανέκφραστα ωραίο.*) p. 322.

In fact, this world that we cannot see lives next to and simultaneously with the visible world. In his journal, this buried world is clearly depicted. A brilliant scene (dated July 17) takes place in the Archeological Museum of Athens as statues buried to protect them during the War and German Occupation are uncovered. “They are now digging up statues — some in boxes and others directly from the soil with shovels and pick-axes.... (I haven’t been able to do justice to his wonderful Greek: *τα αγάλματα κατασάρκα μέσα στο χώμα.*) The statues embedded in the soil and planted as if by chance look naked from the waist up. ... The bronze Zeus, or Poseidon, lies like an ordinary tired worker. I touch his chest, where the arm joins the shoulder, his belly, his hair. I feel that I am touching my own body.... I sense that all my life I won’t be able to express what I’m trying to see now and have seen during the last few days; this union of nature with a simple human body.... I make despairing motions in the void as I write and succeed in expressing nothing. ... But to express what needs to be said you must create another language and to nurture it for years and years with what you’ve loved, with what you’ve lost, and with what you’ll never find again.

Those who have read *Serenity* (*Γαλήνη*) by Ilias Venezis will sense a similar feeling when the Asia Minor refugees, forced to cultivate the then-inhospitable soil of Anavyssos, find an ancient statue buried in the earth, and how this provides them with a sense of home.

In Greece, land of broken statues, the dead vastly outnumber the living, they exist simultaneously with us, and they weigh us down. “I woke with this marble head in my hands; it exhausts my elbows, and I don’t know where to set it down.” (*Γ* or #3)

*Mythistorima* is about compulsory travel, the longing to return to one’s home, which may no longer exist, or which may be deserted or in ruins, searching for friends “in the other life beyond the statues.” (E, 5). The trek takes us through “the world of Homer — the world of *The Odyssey*,” because Helladic Greece is not enough for Seferis. This is “a Greek world, but one beyond Helladic Greece.” *Ένας κόσμος ελληνικός μα εξωελλαδικός*, which he clearly identifies in “The Thrush” (*Η Κίχλη*), 1947, s. 224) when he mentions the four exo-Helladic place-names: Smyrna, Rhodes, Syracuse, Alexandria.

In *Mythistorima* we are given a report by an unnamed man who usually speaks for himself but sometimes for others, for the race, living and suffering in a timeless world “searching to discover the first seed so that the ancient drama could begin again.”

It has been a long trek they have endured, dehydrated from the intense sun of a landscape barren of greenery and water, where even minor pleasures like the coolness of stone on fingers “reminds us of our past happiness.”

The landscape can be either Aegean or Anatolian. However we may describe it, its terrain is almost lunar, forbidding, where we find ourselves expiating an act, or fulfilling a mission that is hard to explain. It is timeless, yes, but its timelessness is both Homeric and contemporary, one that contains both chariots and gramophones, and though these men “passed many capes many islands...” they encountered “unfortunate women (who) lament lost children” or, raving, seek “Alexander the Great and glories buried in the depths of Asia.” In these few words Seferis has summed up the cataclysmic result of the Asia Minor Disaster and the death of the Megale Idea.

There are mermaids, broken statues, tragic columns, the ever-present asphodels, all the references to an inhospitable, unforgiving world with no reference to Byzantium and only one to Christianity and that to “the Nazarene ... who showed you his heart from the stone pavement,” a statement that seems alienating to an Orthodox Greek. Instead, we have “Odysseus waiting for the dead among the asphodels” and the “gorge where Adonis was wounded.” (Θ or #9)

Happiness is a memory, justice is not only deferred, or even denied, but a promise perpetually longed for but never really expected. If *Mythistorima* were a painting, it would not resemble the lush and moody terrain of Impressionism, or the splendor of Renaissance art whose foreground is the promise and compassion of the Virgin Mother and the Redeemer, but the stark, sun-punished world of di Chirico, except that the Italo-Greek’s canvases depict an urban world, though broken statues litter his streets and plazas.

These companions who survived in this harsh world, returned “broken to (their) homes” and brought back “carved reliefs of a humble art” (Α or #1). They “never complained about the world or the thirst or the frost, (but) had the bearing of trees and waves” which do not change “in the midst of change” but are submissive, “looking deep into their souls, knowing that they’ve seen “the stranger and the enemy ... in the mirror”.

What are they after, our souls traveling  
on the decks of decayed ships  
crowded in with sallow women and crying babies  
unable to forget themselves ...  
grated by gramophone records ...?

What are they after, our souls, traveling  
on rotten brine-soaked timbers  
from harbor to harbor?

And, after “the bitter bread of expatriation” (Ζ or # 7) after seeing “these decimated villages .. and the end of this autumn”, he knows that

Whatever I’ve loved was lost along with the houses  
which were new last summer

and collapsed with the wind of autumn. (ΙΗ or #18)

We come (Ι, or #10) to a land that “is closed in, all mountains ... with no rivers, no wells, no springs, only a few cisterns — and these empty — that echo, and we venerate them.” (Aside: Stephanos Xenos, in *Androniki, Heroine of the Greek Revolution* (1861) has someone characterize the poverty of Mani by saying that “A full cistern is a worthy dowry for a girl.” Γεμάτη στέρνα είναι αξιόλογη προίκα.) How have we continued to live, to survive? That is the enigma of our lives, of our race, Seferis seems to say. “How were our children born, how did they grow strong?” the poem asks.

“because we know so well this fate of ours  
wandering within the broken stones, three or six thousand years  
searching through ruined buildings that might have been our homes  
trying to remember dates and heroic deeds.  
will we be able?” (ΚΒ or #22)

*Mythistorima* is a lament for the lost spaciousness of a Hellenism that stretched deep into “the depths of Asia” (Δ or #4) and an assessment of a Greece that is “closed in, all mountains”. It is major poem in any language, one that repays frequent study and yields new insights after every reading. It is dense and difficult, but as Andre Gide said, “I write not to be read ... but to be reread.”