

FOREWORD

THE POETRY OF George Seferis, whatever relation it may have to the literature of other countries, stems first of all from a tradition that is eminently Greek. This means that it not only shares in the modern revival which has produced, during the last hundred and fifty years or so, such distinguished Greek poets as Solomos, Kalvos, Palamas, Sikelianos, Cavafy, Elytis and Ritsos; it also proceeds, like most of the poetry that belongs to this revival, from earlier sources. One of these is the long tradition of Greek ballads and folk songs. Both the spirit of Greek folk literature and its dominant form, the 'dekapentasyllavos',¹ can be traced back directly at least to the Byzantine period, and both have been consistently influential since that time, though the form has naturally been modified in keeping with new needs. Seferis's early poem, 'Erotikos Logos' (1930), is a major example of such modification: a successful attempt to adapt the dekapentasyllavos line to the expression of a contemporary sensibility.

Another area of the post-medieval poetic tradition that has remained equally influential is the more complex and sophisticated literature which developed on the island of Crete during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The dramatic literature of Crete includes plays such as *Abraham's Sacrifice*, a religious work, and the *Erophile*, a bloodthirsty tragedy in which all the main characters are killed or kill themselves; but the masterpiece of this more complex (and, in contrast with the folk ballads, more introspective) tradition is the epic romance, the *Erotokritos*, by Vitzentzos Kornaros, a work of 10,052 verses telling of the love of Aretousa, daughter of the king of Athens, and the valiant Erotokritos, son of one of the leading court families. This epic became immensely popular throughout the

1. A line of fifteen syllables, with a caesura after the eighth syllable and two main accents, one on the sixth or eighth syllable and one on the fourteenth.

Greek world, great sections – and sometimes even the whole of it – being recited by heart as though an ordinary folk epic: the kind of recitation that haunts Seferis's persona in 'Reflections on a Foreign Line of Verse', where he speaks of

... certain old sailors of my childhood who, leaning on
their nets with winter coming on and the wind raging,
used to recite, with tears in their eyes, the song of
Erotokritos;
it was then I would shudder in my sleep at the unjust fate
of Aretousa descending the marble steps.

Seferis has written the best Greek critical commentary on the *Erotokritos*,² and its influence, as a monument to the poetic possibilities of the demotic Greek language,³ is apparent from the use he makes of it in his 'Erotikos Logos', where he introduces actual phrases from the epic into the text of his poem in order to establish an analogy between his diction and that of another vital, relevant moment in his nation's literary past.

Cretan literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the folk tradition are, then, among the more important local sources of Seferis's art, particularly because of their creative exploitation of the Greek language; at the same time, however, the poetry of Seferis and that of his immediate predecessors differs in an important respect from the poetry of both these literatures: in the use made of images, characters and myths that derive from ancient Greece. Whether it is Palamas contrasting the 'people of relics' – who reign among the temples and olive groves of the Attic landscape – with the modern crowd crawling along sluggishly, like a caterpillar over a white flower (in *Life Immovable*); or Cavafy evoking – perhaps ironically, perhaps erotically – some scene out of his poetic world of ancient Alexandria; or Sikelianos endeavouring

2. Included in his *Δοκίμεις* [Essays], Athens, 1974.

3. Demotic Greek, as opposed to purist Greek (known as *katharevousa*), is now the literary language of modern Greece, though it was not generally accepted as such until this century.

to resurrect the whole pantheon of the ancient gods and to be a hierophant to their mysteries; or Seferis searching for the archaic king of Asini – the substantial man who fought with heroes – and finding only the unsubstantial void of contemporary existence; whichever it is, the ancient world in all its aspects preoccupies the imagination of these poets constantly. This preoccupation is only natural in a country which, like Greece, remains full of the physical remnants of antiquity; everywhere reminders of the ancient past leap to the eye and stimulate the mind:

Scattered drums of a Doric column
Razed to the ground
By unexpected earthquakes

as Sikelianos puts it in 'The Conscience of Personal Creativeness', or, to quote Seferis himself: 'fragments of a life which was once complete, disturbing fragments, close to us, ours for one moment, and then mysterious and unapproachable as the lines of a stone licked smooth by the wave or of a shell in the sea's depths.'⁴ This means that the Greek poet who draws on classical mythology in shaping the drama of his verse enjoys a large advantage over his similarly disposed contemporaries in England or America: he can evoke characters and settings that have mythological overtones with less danger of being merely literary in doing so, with less danger of arbitrarily imposing gods and heroes on an alien landscape – Tiresias on the Thames or Prometheus in Pennsylvania, for example – since his own natural landscape is that to which these gods and heroes themselves once belonged and in which they still confront the mind's eye plausibly.

Seferis, like most poets of modern Greece, has fully exploited this advantage. His secret (in addition to his advantage) is that he always offers an appropriate setting – a poetically

4. From *Delphi*, translated by Philip Sherrard, Munich and Ahrbeck, Hanover, 1963, p. 8.

realistic setting – before he allows any legendary figures to appear on his stage; before he attempts to carry the reader to the level of myth, he earns his sympathy and belief by convincingly representing the present reality sustaining his myth – and it is a contemporary, Greek reality always. In this way the myth comes to life fully, the ancient and modern worlds meet in a metaphor without strain or contrivance as we find the legendary figures moving anachronistically onto the contemporary stage that the poet has set before our eyes. The anachronism is, of course, very much to the point: in one sense, what was then is now, but in another sense, what is now was then; the modern voyager, for instance, shares something of Odysseus's fate, while Odysseus finds a symbolic representation of his fate in the modern setting that the poet has him confront: the deserted, arid, repetitious land and the calm, embittering sea so frequently encountered in Seferis's poetry are symbolic of Odysseus's frustrating voyage, of his failure to realize the island paradise he longs for. And his fate is that of every wanderer seeking a final harbour, a spiritual fulfilment, that he can't seem to reach. The frustrations of the wanderer are perennial; as Seferis puts it in an illuminating commentary on the rôle of mythic characters in his verse: '... men of inconstancy, of wanderings and of wars, though they differ and may change in terms of greatness and value... always move among the same monsters and the same longings. So we keep the symbols and the names that the myth has brought down to us, realizing as we do so that the typical characters have changed in keeping with the passing of time and the different conditions of our world – which are none other than the conditions of everyone who seeks expression.'⁵

The mythology of the ancient world thus plays a crucial rôle in Seferis, but it would be a mistake to regard this source in isolation, since all the various threads of the Greek tradition

5. From '“Ένα γράμμα για την «Κίχλη»' [A Letter on 'Thrush'], 'Αγγλο-ελληνική Έπιθεώρηση, IV (July–August 1950), 501–6.

that we have mentioned here – 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, behind Seferis's maturest verse, giving it overtones and undertones sometimes too subtle for the non-Greek ear to catch (especially when they have to be caught in a language foreign to the text). But even as one does catch the sound of a richly traditional voice, a voice learned in the best poetry of previous ages, one is also aware that the voice is very much of the present age and that the poet's sensibility couldn't be farther from that of an antiquarian delving nostalgically into the past in order to escape from the bewilderments and afflictions of modern life: the past is always there to shape and illuminate an image of the present. And if this image seems inevitably to have its sorrow – that *ῥαῖος τοῦ Πρωτοσύνη* which is so specifically Greek that Seferis rightly regards any translation of the phrase as a distortion – one can take it simply for an index of the image's veracity, since a mature consciousness in the Greek world cannot but be aware of how much this world has achieved only to find everything suddenly ruined by the 'war, destruction, exile' of constantly unpropitious times, as Seferis's persona puts it in *'Thrush'* – aware of how much and how little individual creative effort signifies in a world so vulnerable. It is the depth of this awareness, so often incomprehensible to nations with shorter and less tragic histories or with more superficial memories, that serves him for protection against those too-easily won positions, that too-readily assumed despair, from which much modern poetry issues.

If Seferis's sensibility has always been too specifically Greek to allow the easy sharing of what he himself has called 'the "Waste Land" feeling' that was common to Anglo-American and European poets after the First World War,⁶ his expression

6. In 'Letter to a Foreign Friend' (included in Rex Warner's translation of Seferis's essays, *On the Greek Style*, Athens, 1982).

of this sensibility has been influenced by the example of several poets outside the Greek tradition. There is no doubt, for instance, that in the early phase of his career Seferis was keenly interested in the tonal and stylistic experiments of his French contemporaries, and, indeed, often seemed to be striving for a 'pure' poetry in the manner of Valéry. With the appearance of *Mythistorema* in 1935, a distinct change in style became evident, in part the consequence of the poet's sympathetic reading of Eliot and Pound during the early thirties and in part the last phase of a personal stylistic catharsis that had already begun to show in *The Cistern* (1932). With *Mythistorema*, Seferis abandoned the relatively formal mode of his earlier volumes in favour of the much freer and more natural mode that is characteristic of all his mature poetry,⁷ where we inevitably find a precisely controlled style, undecorated by embellishment, the colouring always primary and the imagery sparse. In this mature poetry Seferis also combines the modes of everyday speech with the forms and rhythms of traditional usage in a way that creates the effect of both density and economy – an effect almost impossible to reproduce in English, however carefully one may attempt to duplicate the particular character of the poet's style.

But if one discerns the influence of foreign sources in Seferis's stylistic development, one also discerns that the substance of his poetry has remained consistently individual since the start: in the finest poems of each of his volumes (often those least accessible to the Western reader because the least mythological or 'classicist'), there is always that tragic sense of life which comes most forcefully out of a direct, personal experience of history – out of a poet *engagé* responding to what he has known and felt of human suffering, or at least what he has clearly seen of it at close quarters. This is not merely to repeat

7. We have chosen to open this collected edition with the poems in which Seferis's mature voice is first heard rather than with the poems of his less characteristic – and less translatable – early phase (see note to 'Rhymed Poems', p. 308).

the frequently suggested relationship, for example, between Seferis's poetic representation of exile and his actual exile after the loss of his childhood home in the Asia Minor disaster of 1922 and during his many years away from Greece in his country's diplomatic service, valid though this relationship may be in some respects; more important, perhaps, than his capacity to make the personal poetic in this way is his capacity to capture the metaphoric significance of some event that has moved him, his capacity to transform a personal experience or insight into a metaphor that defines the character of our times: for example, the metaphor of that 'presentable and quiet' man who walks along weeping in 'Narration', the 'instrument of a boundless pain / that's finally lost all significance'; or the couple at the end of 'The Last Day' who go home to turn on the light because they are sick of walking in the dusk; or the messengers in 'Our Sun' who arrive, dirty and breathless, to die with only one intelligible sentence on their lips: 'We don't have time' (all of these poems written, incidentally, either just before or just after the outbreak of the Second World War in Europe). These are the kind of metaphors that project Seferis's vision beyond any strictly local or strictly personal history and that bring to the mind's eye images as definitive, as universal, as any offered by the poetry of Seferis's contemporaries in Europe and America.

There are also moments when an event that would seem to be only of local or personal significance becomes the occasion for a simple statement of truth about human experience – a statement more direct, and sometimes more precise, than the poet's metaphoric mode allows: the second stanza of 'Last Stop', written on the eve of Seferis's return to Greece at the end of the Second World War, is an occasion of this kind, as is the conclusion of 'Helen', written during the Cyprus conflict of the early 1950s. It is moments such as these, when the poet describes the corruption of war in a voice made wise and simple by the clearest vision, that raise his poems about specific historical events far above the level of political comment or

propaganda and that show him to have sustained – through his poems about the Second World War and his volume dedicated to the people of Cyprus – the same universalizing sensibility that has shaped his image of contemporary history since *Mythistorema* and several earlier poems that anticipate it. The distinguishing attribute of Seferis's genius – one that he shares with Yeats and Eliot – was always his ability to make out of a local politics, out of a personal history or mythology, some sort of general statement or metaphor; his long Odyssean voyage on rotten timbers to those islands ever slightly out of reach has the same force of definitive, general insight that we find in Yeats's voyage to Byzantium or Eliot's journey over desert country to a fragmentary salvation. Seferis's politics are never simply the restricted politics of a nationalist – though he was very much a 'national' poet in his choice of themes, and though his vision is often rendered in those terms that best characterize his nation: its landscape, its literature, its historical and mythic past. His politics are those of the poet with an especially acute sensitivity to issues that are not restricted simply to contemporary history. Though he was preoccupied with his tradition as few other poets of the same generation were with theirs, and though he had long been engaged, directly and actively, in the immediate political aspirations of his nation, his value as a poet lies in what he made of this preoccupation and this engagement in fashioning a broad poetic vision – in offering insights that carry with them the weight of universal truths and that thus serve to reveal the deeper meaning of human existence.

This new edition of George Seferis's collected poems contains translations of all the poems that Seferis published during his lifetime. We have included three poems that were serially published by Seferis before his death in 1971 but which were first collected in the posthumous volume entitled *Book of Exercises II*. Most of the poems that make up that volume are omitted here for the reasons we give in our third, expanded edition of the bilingual *Collected Poems*, published in 1981.

Since that date the number of studies of Seferis's work has so multiplied, and is being so continuously augmented, that we have decided to exclude them from the brief bibliography. Our notes remain as they were: readers who wish for further information referring to the Greek text should consult the Ikaros (Athens) edition of Seferis's poems, edited by George Savidis. We have only to add that this new collection incorporates many revisions of the translations that appeared in our 1981 edition. In fact, we would like to think that this revised volume contains our definitive English versions of virtually all of Seferis's poetry. We would also like to think that the volume bears witness both to the full scope of the poet's vision and to the fineness of the artistry with which this vision is expressed.

E. K.

P. S.