Reading Seferis's politics and the politics of reading Seferis*

Roderick Beaton

George Seferis the poet-diplomat was closely involved in many of the most crucial political issues which affected his country between the late 1930s and the early 1960s; he was closer than most poets to the centres of power and the dilemmas confronted by his political masters; his poetry and other public utterances, with a single exception scrupulously aloof from overt political statement, often comment in complex, covert ways on the political realities of his time and on the more fundamental forces which Seferis saw as underlying these realities. In a certain sense, then, few writers are more "political" than Seferis.

The huge secondary bibliography on his work has generally little to say about Seferis's actual political involvement, on what he did in his diplomatic career, or on how his personal beliefs, expressed in posthumously published poems, diaries and letters, relate to both his literary and his diplomatic activity.[1]

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* Some of the ideas presented here were first aired in lectures given at Brown University (April 2000) and King's College London (September 2000), as well as at international conferences on Seferis at Platres, Cyprus (February 2000), Izmir (October 2000) and Norwich (May 2001). I am grateful to participants on all these occasions, as well as the audience for the Cambridge lecture from which this essay immediately derives, many of whose suggestions and comments I have tacitly incorporated.

[1] This is not to say that the political dimension of his poetry and other published work has not been noticed: on which see, indicatively, Orfanidis 1985. Specific studies of Seferis's professional career by professional historians and/or diplomats are few indeed. Almost the only article which tackles this topic head-on is Xydis 1984. We also owe to Xydis the excellent editions, with commentary, of Seferis's two "political diaries" which have so far appeared (Seferis 1979a; Seferis 1985) and, although unattributed, of the *Manuscript Sept. '41* (Seferis 1972a, text only = 1992: 17-55). Some invaluable information and insights have come from Y.

At the same time, those critical voices which have been raised in recent years against the pre-eminence and cultural authority of Seferis, have mounted their attack almost exclusively on the territory of what they call "politics". What in my title I have called the "politics of reading Seferis" predominates in the bibliography over "reading Seferis's politics". The contention of this paper is that the two activities are inseparable, just as the two public roles of Seferis the poet and Seferiadis the diplomat are also inseparable.

For this reason, I propose to approach the first half of my title by way of the second. First, I shall introduce the charges that have been levelled against Seferis over the last fifteen years, by revisionist scholars who have in common an Anglo-American institutional background.[2] Then I will propose rather different readings of the evidence adduced by the revisionists. Finally I will demonstrate how this and other evidence can be used to identify the principles that guided Seferis's political judgements at particular stages of his life, and the ways in which these principles are in turn related to Seferis's poetry and essays.

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Yeoryis (1991; 2000), whose interest, however, is avowedly limited to Seferis's involvement in the affairs of Cyprus.

[2] The principal "revisionist" critiques are, in chronological order: Dimiroulis 1985; Lambropoulos 1988; Calotychos 1990; Layoun 1990; Jusdanis 1991; Leontis 1995; Gourgouris 1996; Dimiroulis 1997; Kayalis 1997a; Van Dyck 1998. I exclude from this list Dimiroulis's more recent book on Seferis (Dimiroulis 1999), which, although it approaches the *Three Secret Poems* tangentially as a pretext rather than as the object of literary interpretation or analysis, and is presented as the "continuation" of the earlier book, nonetheless marks a notable shift from the agenda that is here termed "revisionist". Also excluded, although cited where relevant, is Pitsilidis (2000). This writer does not share the academic affiliations or interests of the "revisionists", and the evidence he adduces is different from theirs in being chiefly biographical; on the other hand Pitsilidis's extensive quotation from Dimiroulis (1997) and his emphasis on Seferis's political behaviour and allegiances place his work in a direct relation to theirs.

The politics of reading Seferis

Almost all of those whom I am here calling revisionists privilege Seferis's essays over his poetry. Much the greater part of their discussions is devoted to the ideas expressed in the literary essays that Seferis published between 1936 and his death in 1971.[3] Dimitris Dimiroulis, the only one to have devoted a whole book to Seferis, confines discussion of the poet's poems to just 74 pages out of a total of 455. Only Karen Van Dyck, who contrasts Seferis's Modernism with the Postmodernism of three women writers who began writing at about the time of Seferis's death, uses close reading of one of his poems, alongside other kinds of evidence, to sustain her reading of his work as politically conservative and aesthetically bound into a dead end.[4]

The underlying resistance to Seferis in every case is expressed in terms of "politics". Often the attack is not just on Seferis but on the Greek version of literary Modernism of which, quite reasonably, Seferis is taken to be the most influential exponent. Under this heading, three specific charges emerge: firstly that Seferis's essays were conceived programmatically[5] with the purpose of promoting his own work through a "massive ... rewriting" of the Greek literary canon;[6] secondly the charge of Hellenocentrism, which is understood in terms of nationalist exclusivity; and thirdly, closely bound up with the second, the

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[3] For these essays as collected by Seferis see Seferis 1981; for "uncollected" essays see Seferis 1992. Gourgouris explicitly dismisses the poetry altogether: "There is enough written about Seferis's poetry ... to constitute a full-fledged industry. To take up the subject of Seferis's poetry once again would first require, from my point of view, a ruthless dismantling of this accumulated refuse of discourse surrounding his verses and his name, a task for which I am certainly not suited. Yet there is another reason for *not taking the time to address the Seferis phenomenon as a poetic phenomenon.* For as distinct as Seferis's poetry was, he would not have achieved such cultural dominance without his consistent and prolific critical production..." (Gourgouris 1996: 202-3; my emphasis).

[4] Van Dyck 1998: 38-42 on "The Cats of St Nicholas"; cf. 24-8 on Seferis's politics derived from essays and diaries.

[5] See especially Calotychos 1990: 87 and n. 10.

[6] Lambropoulos 1988: 64.

insinuation that Seferis's political sympathies lie with the Right, and even the far Right.

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Canon-formation

> A national tradition redefined, a literary canon revised, and the more unsettling modernist trends suppressed: all this served, of course, a relentless self-promotion which was never to cease.[7]

> His careful commentary on specific literary persons and œuvres amounts to a *wily, strategic* construction of a canon ... which, one recognizes, would foreground those particular technical qualities that would most resemble those employed by Seferis and his like-minded contemporaries.[8]

There is unlikely to be disagreement about the contents of Seferis's "Great Tradition" of Modern Greek literature and culture, as this emerges from the *Dokimes*. Its principal components are: (i) oral folk song; (ii) the seventeenth-century Cretan verse romance *Erotokritos;* (iii) the "national poet" of the time of the Greek war of independence, Dionysios Solomos; (iv) the veteran of that war, General Makriyannis who taught himself to write at the age of thirty in order to record his experiences; (v) Kostis Palamas, the doyen of Greek poets and critics at the turn of the twentieth century; and (vi) the naïf painter of the early twentieth century, Theophilos Hatzimichael.

Makriyannis, the unlettered General and neglected hero of the nineteenth-century war of independence, for many revisionists becomes a test case. Seferis's admiration for the *Memoirs* of the General lasted throughout his life, and is famously enshrined in the text of a lecture which he gave in Alexandria and Cairo in 1943, and later published among his essays.[9] Lambropoulos teases out from this essay what he calls "the strategies

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[7] Lambropoulos 1988: 64.
[8] Calotychos 1990: 120, my emphasis.
[9] Seferis 1981: I 228-63.

Seferis uses to appropriate *The Memoirs* as a literary work".[10] Gourgouris, traversing the same ground in the context of the idealising construction of state ideology, goes so far as to declare: "In 1943, in Cairo, Makriyiannis was abolished and Seferis emerged as the *anthropos*."[11] This is perceived as the consequence of "Seferis's desire to Hellenize Makriyiannis, i.e. to discover in him the essence of *anthropos*",[12] part of a programme which Gourgouris understands to be at once aesthetic and nationalistic.[13] More modestly, Takis Kayalis reads the same essay in order to propose

> that through Makriyannis Seferis picks out, transposes and consolidates within Greek cultural life basic modernist values and concepts.[14]

Gregory Jusdanis, in the context of a study of canon-formation in which Greece is taken as a test case, finds "also worth mentioning ... Seferis's success in classifying the nearly forgotten [sic!] memoirs of General Ioannis Makriyiannis as a prototype of Greek literature".[15]

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Modernism v. Hellenocentrism

The second charge is more complex, and relates to an alleged contradiction at the heart of Greek literary Modernism. The term "Modernism", in the sense that it has been routinely applied to what Hugh Kenner memorably termed the "Pound era" in Anglo-

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[10] Lambropoulos 1988: 56.

[11] Gourgouris 1996: 198.

[12] Gourgouris 1996: 197-8.

[13] Programmatic for many of this group is the statement of Jusdanis, referring to the literary "Generation of the 1930s" in Greece: "whereas in the past Greece was understood as content, now it is appreciated as form" (Jusdanis 1991: 121).

[14] ότι μέσω του Μακρυγιάννη ο Σεφέρης εξειδικεύει, μεταφέρει και εδραιώνει στην ελληνική πνευματική ζωή βασικές μοντερνιστικές αξίες και αντιλήψεις (Kayalis 1997a: 34).

[15] Jusdanis 1991: 85.

American literature,[16] was not commonly applied to Greek literature until the 1980s. Since then, it has moved in to supplant the clearly deficient term "Generation of the 1930s" that was dominant before then. Dimitris Tziovas has edited a collection of essays which together go a long way towards defining this literary phenomenon in Greece in terms consonant with the Anglo-American model.[17] But many of those who have pioneered a new perception of the dominant literary mode in Greece between 1930 and about 1960 as Modernism, including Tziovas himself, have been struck by the paradox which many of them also see as Greek Modernism's fatal flaw.

Artemis Leontis detects this contradiction in an acute form in the work of Seferis (again, she is referring mainly to the essays):

> Seferis both defended his affiliation with modernist poetics and recuperated the Hellenic as an approachable though difficult standard of value. This *paradoxical* joining of the modern with the Hellenic, the modernist, international with a neotraditionalist, national sensibility, is the critical foundation of his work.[18]

Dimitris Dimiroulis, in his long book on Seferis, returns again and again to this crux, in a display of linguistic ingenuity which often carries a weight of explicitly moral outrage.[19] Among the eighteen essays edited by Tziovas, the majority of those which directly address this issue concur in seeing a contradiction at the heart of Greek Modernism, while a lone dissenting voice bravely

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[16] Kenner 1971.

[17] Tziovas 1997.

[18] Leontis 1995: 139 (my emphasis).

[19] See for example: αντιμετάθεση (Dimiroulis 1997: 27), υφέρπουσα αμφισημία (112), αντίθεση, αντίφαση (78), εντατική αμφιδοξία (132), σχεδόν πιλάτεια στάση (273). Revisiting this issue in his more recent book Dimiroulis allows for a more nuanced coexistence of the two terms: Στα "κρυφά ποιήματα" η γη της Ιωνίας και ο λόγος των προσωκρατικών αναδεικνύουν το αιώνιο πρόβλημα της ελληνικής ποίησης: την χωρίς έκβαση ταλάντευση της ποιητικής γραφής ανάμεσα στον ευρωπαϊκό λόγο της μοντερνικότητας και στη μοναδικότητα της ελληνικής εμπειρίας που συναρτάται πάντοτε με το αίτημα της ταυτότητας (Dimiroulis 1999: 198).

insists, in the teeth of the evidence, that Greek Modernism is not Hellenocentric, or nationalistic, at all.[20]

Only Takis Kayalis, so far as I know, has approached this alleged "contradiction" in Seferis (and others of his generation) via the context of late twentieth-century scholarship on Anglo-American "High Modernism". Kayalis recognises, in Seferis's appropriation of Makriyannis, something that most scholars of Eliot and the "Pound era" have been saying for decades. Seferis's search, in this essay, for the roots of a collective tradition, and particularly the manner in which that search is conducted, are for Kayalis the sure and consistent proof of Seferis's affiliation to "High Modernism" in the style of Eliot.[21] For Kayalis, as for Kermode, Lentricchia and many others who have dealt with this issue in the Anglo-American context, there is nothing contradictory about this: aesthetic innovation and political/cultural nostalgia for an irrecoverable pre-modern age are two sides of the same coin.[22]

Kayalis, however, declares finally for the revisionists, rejecting the whole modernist project as leading to "a kind of professional schizophrenia", and "pregnant with serious dangers"[23] – clearly of the same political kind as also disturbed Dimiroulis. Elsewhere Kayalis has carried this "political" assault on Greek Modernism, though not primarily with reference to Seferis, to the point of linking it with fascism.[24]

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[20] See Vayenas 1997. Layoun also writes in terms of "contradiction" and "unintentional ironies" in Greek Modernism (1990: 13, 14).

[21] Kayalis 1997a: 34-6.

[22] "The courage to 'make it new' as a writer is not a metaphor: it is Eliot's path to regeneration. The other side of Eliot is never avant-gardist, is the very antithesis of the spirit of the avant-garde. The two sides coexist, always uneasily but always through necessity, in Eliot's writing, life being a truncated travesty if imagined otherwise. I refer, of course, to his commitments to tradition, literary history, the past" (Lentricchia 1994: 285). See also Kermode 1967: e.g. 111; Morrison 1996.

[23] ... ένα είδος επαγγελματικής σχιζοφρένειας. ... εγκυμονεί σοβαρούς κινδύνους (Kayalis 1997a: 63).

[24] Kayalis 1997b.

Seferis and the politics of the Right

Implicit in much of this is the attribution to Seferis of the politics of the establishment figure which he posthumously became. Several of these critics, implicitly or explicitly, go further and link Seferis with the Greek Right. Karen Van Dyck, whose theme is censorship in a later period, notes that Seferis worked "in the Press Office in Athens under the Metaxas dictatorship", and assumes that this implicated him in the very censorship against which he "struggle[d] for freedom of expression in his own poetry and criticism".[25]

Most of those I am calling revisionists similarly assume, usually with less direct evidence adduced than this, that Seferis, the establishment figure thirty years after his death, was during his lifetime inextricably implicated with the political Right.

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The politics of reading

To a student of history or politics, none of this would seem, probably, very political at all. It is clear, however, that severally and together these revisionist approaches to Seferis in themselves amount to a political strategy. The nature and purpose of this strategy are not hard to seek. For Lambropoulos, a priority for "contemporary Greek criticism" must be:

> the undermining of Seferis's exasperating presence and the debunking of his legislative authority in every part of public rhetoric and conduct. ... His is a language we must unlearn and a rhetoric we must expose ...[26]

This same outright opposition is expressed by Kayalis when he takes an explicitly personal and ideological stand against the Modernist phenomenon which he had acutely dissected in the case of Seferis's reading of Makriyannis. Dimiroulis, the only one

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[25] Van Dyck 1998: 36; cf. Dimiroulis 1997: 379-83, indicatively cited by Pitsilidis (2000: 214-16), who adds further details, none of which prove the allegation (Pitsilidis 2000: 177-217).

[26] Lambropoulos 1988: 65.

of the revisionists to tackle Seferis head-on, by devoting a whole book to him, indicates both a personal animus, similar to Lambropoulos's "exasperation", and a grudging sense of awe before the idol which he acknowledges he does not know how to cast down. In his preface, Dimiroulis admits to reading Seferis in the way that Seferis read his predecessor Cavafy: "with hidden jealousy and enigmatic displeasure".[27] And among Dimiroulis's conclusions (one of the book's explicit rhetorical tropes is the way in which it refuses to end) is this:

> at the point of radical doubt, at the cutting-edge of the abyss, I imagine that I encounter Seferis who has been held captive between escape and falling.[28]

And Dimiroulis goes on to quote (it is still not, quite, the end), the poem from Seferis's last collection, *Three Secret Poems*, in which the poet confronts the void that is the white paper in front of him.[29]

None of this actually gets us very far with Seferis's political opinions, activities, and judgements. The "politics" that interest the revisionists are the perceived "politics" of the essays, which they see as imposing a canon on Modern Greek literature and buttressing an introverted Hellenocentric, nationalist ideology, which fatally compromises the overtly (and extroverted) Modernist project which the same essays purport to promote. Finally, identifying Seferis (not unreasonably) as a central figure in the establishment and consolidation of literary Modernism in Greece, they more or less explicitly insert their critiques of Seferis into their own postmodern, post-structuralist resistance to Modernism.

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[27] ... με κρυφή ζήλεια και αινιγματική δυσαρέσκεια (Dimiroulis 1997: 16).

[28] ... στο σημείο της ριζικής αμφιβολίας, στην κόψη του κενού, φαντάζομαι ότι συναντώ τον Σεφέρη που αιχμαλωτίστηκε ανάμεσα στη φυγή και στην πτώση (Dimiroulis 1997: 452). The antagonism of these comments, and of most of the book from which they come, is markedly moderated, if not entirely replaced, in Dimiroulis's second book on Seferis (Dimiroulis 1999), which as noted above is not included here among the revisionist "canon".

[29] Heavily begrudged respect is also a characteristic of Gourgouris – see e.g. 1996: 206 n.

This is, of course, the very stuff of literary, cultural and academic politics. What is at stake is precisely how, and indeed whether, readers in the new century, in the English-speaking world, square up to Seferis. One conclusion to be drawn, so far, is that on the evidence of these critiques, Seferis is far too important to be ignored. To that extent, these revisionist voices, raised in varying degrees of exasperation against the dominant position they ascribe to Seferis, cannot help but consolidate what they seek to deny. On the other hand, considerable institutional power has now (in July 2001) gathered around these positions, to the extent of preventing this paper from appearing in the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, to which it was first submitted.[30]

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Reading Seferis's politics (i): canon-formation

Far from laying down the established canon of Modern Greek literature and redefining Modern Greek letters in his own image, Seferis's preferred "Great Tradition" of Modern Greek literature and culture, as set out in the *Dokimes*, has in fact proved the least durable part of his legacy. A study of the critical essays of his predecessor Palamas has shown that Palamas, in the early years of the century, did far more than Seferis to fix the "demoticist" literary canon for much of the century that followed;[31] Seferis merely extended it. Of the "greats" in Seferis's Modern Greek tradition, only Solomos, the "national poet" of the first half of the nineteenth century, is still viewed by criticism in more or less the way that Seferis viewed him. The Greek folk songs are no longer seen as the organic, living link between the bards who sang the Homeric poems and the simple fishermen of Seferis's childhood.[32] The seventeenth-century verse romance *Erotokritos* is no longer mistaken for a product of the folk tradition, but has been shown to be the highly skilled

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[30] See Postscript (July 2001).

[31] Apostolidou 1992.

[32] For Seferis's "romantic" perception of folk poetry, see the poem "Upon a Foreign Line of Verse" ("Πάνω σ' έναν ξένο στίχο") and, *inter alia*, his 1943 essay on Palamas (Seferis 1981: I 215-27). For modern reassessments of this material see e.g. Herzfeld 1982; Sifakis 1988.

and rhetorically polished masterpiece of an educated, probably an aristocratic, writer with a developed knowledge of Italian and Latin literature.[33] Makriyannis's *Memoirs* have been returned to the field of history where they belong; the rediscovery of nineteenth-century fiction in *katharevousa* has toppled Makriyannis from the canonical status he briefly enjoyed during the 1930s and 1940s (due to Theotokas and others, as much as Seferis).[34] Even Makriyannis's language has been shown to be much more the product of its time than Seferis thought;[35] and the publication of the General's bizarre superstitious writings, in 1983, would surely have shattered Seferis's illusions about his hero's humane rationality.[36]

Palamas, next, whose shadow lay as heavily over Seferis's generation as that of Seferis does today, is now more often studied for his critical essays than for his poetry. It is generally accepted that the naïf painter Theophilos, charming though his works are, was greatly overrated by those writers of the thirties – Myrivilis, Elytis, Embirikos as well as Seferis – who chose him as their icon of an indigenous art-form. Influential Seferis's essays may have been in other ways, but the literary and aesthetic canon they incidentally promoted had already been set aside by serious students of Modern Greek literature by, at the latest, the end of the 1980s.[37]

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Reading Seferis's politics (ii): Hellenocentrism

There is no doubt at all that Seferis participated in the search for a new sense of national identity, that was a common denominator for almost all Greek creative artists and intellectuals in the

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[33] See S. Alexiou 1980; Holton 1991.

[34] On the reception of Makriyannis in the 1930s see Tziovas 1989: 127-9.

[35] Holton 1984-5.

[36] Makriyannis 1983; cf. Gourgouris 1996: 187-96.

[37] For rather different perceptions of the canon as it was being shaped at the end of the twentieth century see Lambropoulos 1988; Beaton 1999. For a useful indicator of how far the contemporary canon diverges from that of Seferis, it is instructive to consult the analytical prospectus (Οδηγός Σπουδών) of the Departments of Literature at the major Greek universities.

years following the expulsion of the Greek populations from Asia Minor and the ending of the irredentist programme known as the "Great Idea" which had taken root in Greek politics and culture since at least the mid-nineteenth century.[38] Anyone who reads the poems of Sikelianos, Papatzonis, Seferis, Kalas, Elytis, Ritsos, Embirikos, Engonopoulos, to cite only the best-known names, written during the decade of the 1930s, will immediately recognise this shared quest. It is equally evident in the prose fiction of the time, most programmatically in the two-volume novel *Argo* by Theotokas, published in 1933 and 1936, and in all the new periodicals which were founded in Athens between 1927 and 1936 – of which *Ta Nea Grammata,* established by close associates of Seferis in 1935, is only one.

In 1938 Seferis published an essay in *Ta Nea Grammata* which is regularly quoted by the revisionists as the proof of how Hellenocentric he was. Seferis, in this essay, was actually replying to his brother-in-law, Konstantinos Tsatsos, in a somewhat staged confrontation (both men were living in the same house at the time). The "Dialogue on Poetry" takes the Modernist line against the nationalist, but without denying the claims of the latter, since to have done so in Greece in 1938 would have been not so much politically reprehensible as simply inconceivable. These were the terms in which people thought at the time. But Seferis insists that "Greekness" (ελληνικότητα) – an abstraction much in vogue in the thirties – must *not* be imposed on works of art as an aesthetic criterion. Rather, "Greekness" (which everybody around him expects) must be left to emerge, and to be defined, by what Greek artists actually produce:

> ... let us advise them [*sc.* the young] to seek the truth..., not asking *how* to be Greeks, but believing that since they *are* Greeks, the works that will truly be born out of their souls cannot but be Greek.[39]

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[38] See e.g. Tziovas 1989 *passim*.

[39] Κι ας τους συμβουλεύουμε [*ενν.* τους νέους] να γυρεύουν την αλήθεια ..., όχι ρωτώντας *πώς* να είναι Έλληνες, αλλά πιστεύοντας πως αφού *είναι* Έλληνες, τα έργα που πραγματικά θα γεννήσει η ψυχή τους δεν μπορεί να μην είναι ελληνικά (Seferis 1981: I 102).

Seferis's argument here has been, on occasion, wrenched out of the historical context of 1938 and distorted, not least by Dimiroulis who contrives to make it mean the exact opposite of what Seferis said.[40] But Dimiroulis is not the only critic of Seferis to confuse ελληνικότητα (Greekness), that shibboleth of the Athens intelligentsia in the 1930s, with ελληνισμός (Hellenism), which in Modern Greek defines Greek culture diachronically and without reference to the geographical boundaries of the Greek state. Seferis rejected the former term. He used it only in the "Dialogue on Poetry" just quoted, and only within quotation marks, in order to make plain his objections to it:

> When I read remarks such as these, I deduce that we consider the "Greekness" (ελληνικότητα) of a work of art as an aesthetic criterion which can condemn it or condone it, regardless of its other virtues and vices. This principle I reject ...[41]

That said, there is no doubt that Seferis accorded Hellenism a special place in his worldview. Wherever he travelled, in that much quoted and probably much misunderstood line, it was *Greece* that pained him.[42] As he expressed it in his interview with Edmund Keeley in 1968:

> Let me say that I am interested in everything which finds expression in the Greek language and in Greek lands — I mean taking Greek lands as a whole.[43]

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[40] Dimiroulis 1997: 33; 35.

[41] ... όταν διαβάζω περικοπές σαν αυτές, ερμηνεύω ότι θεωρούμε την "ελληνικότητα" ενός έργου τέχνης σαν κριτήριο αισθητικό που μπορεί να το καταδικάσει ή να το συχωρέσει, ανεξάρτητα από τις άλλες του αρετές ή αμαρτίες. Τον κανόνα αυτόν τον αρνιέμαι ... (Seferis 1981: I 98).

[42] Όπου και να ταξιδέψω η Ελλάδα με πληγώνει, from the poem "In the manner of G.S." ("Με τον τρόπο του Γ.Σ."). For evidence that this poem was originally intended to be read satirically, probably as self-parody, see Seferis's correspondence with Karandonis, where Karandonis twice calls it a "pastiche" (Seferis/Karandonis 1988: 120; 126-7) and Seferis corrects him, shortly before publication, giving it the current title: "Satire on himself" ("Σάτιρα εις εαυτόν") (Seferis/Karandonis 1988: 134).

[43] Keeley 1983: 207.

But if it was the Hellenic world and Hellenic culture that claimed Seferis's deepest allegiance, there is ample evidence, on the other hand, in both his life and his writings, that Seferis was open to a great deal that came from elsewhere – most notably in the energy he devoted to immersing himself first in French and then in English literature and culture.

His receptivity to other, non-European cultures, is evidenced from at least the late 1920s in his experimentation with verse-forms such as the Japanese *haiku*, the Malayan *pantun*, and the calligram (in the published poems). Posthumously published poems show his interest in Zen Buddhism and the ancient Hittite language, and include a brief translation from Nahuatl.[44] The catalogue of his books in the Vikelaia Public Library, Heraklion, includes the *1001 Nights* (which we know from his correspondence was among his earliest reading and remained a favourite),[45] the Rubayyat of Omar Khayyam (in several translations), the anecdotes of Nasreddin Hodja, Modern Israeli poetry, Basho and other Japanese poets, the *Tale of Genji*, anthologies of Chinese verse, an English translation of Malay sonnets, and a history of Arabic literature, some of them with Seferis's annotations.[46] In music he admired Ravi Shankar and jazz – to the latter of which he even claimed to have introduced Henry Miller![47] As ambassador in London over twenty years later, he notes in his diary his favourable impressions of a Duke Ellington concert at Kilburn.[48]

Seferis's own self-assessment under this heading, which dates from 1959, states the case in a more nuanced way than either his critics or his defenders have done:

> Something which preoccupies me now with the passing of the years; I am not what might be called a typical nationalist. But these roots in this soil, in this voice – sometimes excessively ex-

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[44] Seferis 1976: 89-92 (1946); 28-9 (1949); 126 (1968?).
[45] See e.g. Seferis/Maro 1989: 156-7.
[46] Yannadakis 1989: 275-80.
[47] See, respectively, Seferis 1975b: 133-4 (4 May 1933); Keeley 1983: 201.
[48] Seferis 1990: 87 (12 October 1958).

> clusive the way I feel them – how can it be that they are so sensitive? ...[49]

Four years later, in his lecture to the Swedish Academy on 11 December 1963, Seferis explicitly rejected the racial concept of the continuity of Hellenism, defining "tradition", instead, in terms of the human relationship to landscape, and as a force for innovation, not stasis:

> I will not say that we are of the same blood [as the ancients] – because I have a horror of racial theories –, but we still inhabit the same country and see the same mountains ending in the sea. Perhaps I used the same word, tradition, without emphasising this evidence that tradition does not mean habit. On the contrary, its interest lies in its ability to break with habit; it is by this that it demonstrates its life force.[50]

The text of this lecture, one of two given in French on the occasion of the award of the Nobel Prize, was not included by Seferis either in the volume of his selected essays or in the definitive two-volume edition of *Dokimes* which he had prepared for publication but which did not appear until after his death.[51] A Greek translation of the lecture, by G.P. Savvidis, did appear, in *Tachydromos*, three days after it was delivered, and Seferis himself published the definitive French text of both lectures shortly afterwards.[52] It would be an exaggeration, therefore, to

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[49] Ενα πράγμα που με απασχολεί τώρα που πέρασαν τα χρόνια· δεν είμαι αυτό που λένε ο τύπος του εθνικιστή. Αλλ' αυτές οι ρίζες σ' αυτό το χώμα, σ' αυτή τη φωνή – κάποτε υπερβολικά αποκλειστικές καθώς τις νιώθω – πώς συμβαίνει να είναι τόσο ευαίσθητες; ... (Seferis 1990: 99, 1 March 1959).

[50] Je ne dirai pas que nous sommes du même sang – car j'ai horreur des théories raciales –, mais nous habitons toujours le même pays et nous regardons les mêmes montagnes finir dans la mer. Peut-être ai-je employé le mot de tradition, sans souligner cette évidence que tradition ne signifie pas habitude. Elle intéresse au contraire par la faculté de pouvoir rompre l'habitude; c'est par cela qu'elle prouve sa force de vie (Seferis 1992: 167).

[51] Respectively Seferis 1966; 1981.

[52] The text was not published again until it appeared in Seferis 1992: 149-68, with Savvidis's Greek translation (357-71). See the bibliographical

say that Seferis deliberately suppressed, at home, the views that he had expressed for the rather different audience of the Swedish Academy. On the other hand, the evidence is unmistakable that Seferis, in this case, exercised diplomatic censorship against himself.

Why did he do so? If Seferis was a shrewd judge of what his peers back home would tolerate, it is not he who stands out from those peers for harbouring nationalist sentiments.

So when we say that Seferis was "Hellenocentric" or "nationalist", it must be in the same limited and limiting sense in which the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, writing in 1937, one year before Seferis's "Dialogue on Poetry", applied the equivalent term to himself, at the end of his life:

> I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons; State and Nation are the work of intellect, and when you consider what comes before and after them they are, as Victor Hugo said of something or other, not worth the blade of grass God gives for the nest of the linnet.[53]

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Reading Seferis's politics (iii): the politics of the Right

It is only a short step from Seferis's alleged nationalism to the allegations that he was committed to the political agenda of the Greek Right. The most serious charge here is the one repeated by Van Dyck, Dimiroulis, and Pitsilidis referred to earlier, namely that as Director of the Foreign Press Bureau under Metaxas Seferis participated in the exercise of censorship and, implicitly, was implicated in the authoritarian policies of the regime of the 4th of August.[54] This charge is not new. It was first laid against Seferis as early as the first months of 1943. Seferis replied to it in a seven-page letter, dated 20 May 1943, which he delivered in person to the Deputy Prime Minister of the government in exile in Cairo, Georgios Rousos.

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notes by Savvidis in Seferis 1981: II 361-2 and by Daskalopoulos in Seferis 1992: 386.

[53] Yeats 1961: 526.

[54] See n. 25 above.

The specific charge to which Seferis replies in this letter relates to two posts which he had held recently: firstly as Director of the Foreign Press Bureau in Athens (December 1937 to April 1941), and then, less plausibly, when he was retained by his boss in that job, the distinctly dictatorial Theologos Nikoloudis, to serve in the South African embassy (July 1941 to April 1942). Seferis's defence is in two parts: firstly, a public servant has no choice in whom he serves and in what capacity; and secondly, and more interestingly, he sets out in unusually direct terms, for Seferis, what his political sympathies at that time were.

> These two positions I did not seek, but was appointed by decree. ... My political ideas [are] certainly not in favour of dictatorship, nor are they aristocratic-republican; I favour people's rule. That is to say, I believe that the so-called upper class in Greece has been bankrupt for years and that the only policy which has hopes of succeeding is that which will be able to create new party members and new leaders arising from the heart of the people; that policy which ... will try to liberate our people in social, economic and national terms.[55]

Seferis's defence is worth examining closely. Certainly, he appears to have had no choice in accepting the posting to South Africa, which he liked no more than he liked his political superior, Nikoloudis.[56] But his appointment to the Press Bureau

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[55] Τας δύο αυτάς θέσεις δεν τας επεζήτησα, αλλά διετάχθην να τας αναλάβω ... [Αι] πολιτικα[ί] ιδέ[αι] μου ... δεν είναι βεβαίως δικτατορικαί, αλλ' ούτε καν δημοκρατικαί αριστοκρατικαί, είναι λαοκρατικαί. Πιστεύω δηλαδή ότι η ανωτέρα λεγομένη τάξις εις την Ελλάδα έχει από ετών χρεωκοπήσει και ότι η μόνη πολιτική που έχει ελπίδας να επιτύχει είναι εκείνη που θα ημπορέσει να δημιουργήσει νέα στελέχη και νέους ηγέτες προερχομένους από τα σπλάχνα του λαού· η πολιτική εκείνη που ... θα προσπαθήσει να απελευθερώσει κοινωνικώς, οικονομικώς και εθνικώς τον λαόν μας. Cited from a typed carbon copy (p. 2), among the small number of Seferis's papers in the Greek Literary and Historical Archive, Athens (ELIA). The delivery of the letter, on 22 April, and something of the circumstances which provoked it, are mentioned in Seferis 1979a: 120. Compare Seferis's reconstruction of the apologia he made verbally to the newly appointed Prime Minister, George Papandreou, on 27 April 1944 (Seferis 1979a: 210-11).

[56] See Seferis 1979a: 27-40.

at the end of 1937 was a different matter. There is indeed no evidence to suggest that Seferis sought this specific post; the verb he uses for his appointment, διετάχθην, is accurate. But we know that Seferis, throughout 1937, had been desperate to return to Athens.[57] This was not because of any political sympathy with the Metaxas regime, but because of his developing relationship with his future wife, Marika Londou (Maro Seferi). Seferis's secondment from the Foreign Ministry to the Ministry of Press and Tourism, and the responsibility for exercising a degree of censorship over the foreign press, were the price Seferis paid in order to set up house with the woman he loved. In the letter to Rousos, and again, in 1944, when he was called as a witness in a court case, Seferis insisted that his role at the Press Ministry had nothing to do with internal censorship in Greece.[58] This has also been categorically stated by Alexandros Xydis, who served under Seferis in the Press Office in Cairo.[59] The censorship that Seferis did exercise shows him consistently and sometimes courageously trying to block the propaganda of the agents of Hitler and Mussolini, with the result that by April 1941 Seferis was on the Gestapo blacklist. This was the reason why an official of such relatively junior rank came to be evacuated with the government.[60]

Whatever may have been his political sentiments in 1937, by the time that he wrote the letter to Rousos in May 1943, and from then until the *Dekemvriana* a year and a half later, Seferis's political sympathies were not with the Right, but with the Left. His disgust with the old political class, and his idealistic elevation of the people (λαός) as the hope for the future, as

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[57] See e.g. Seferis 1977a: 42; 84; Tsatsou 1973: 351-2; Theotokas/Seferis 1981: 140; and Seferis/Maro 1989: *passim*, throughout the period that Seferis was in Albania.

[58] Seferis 1979a: 164-5 (29 March 1944).

[59] Editor's [=Xydis] unsigned note in Seferis 1972a: 72, n. 27 (only a few of the notes from the 1972 edition have been carried over into Seferis 1992); cf. Xydis 1984: 112. Pitsilidis, who cites this evidence extensively, and does not believe it, does not prove his case that Seferis was a trusted supporter of the 4th August regime (Pitsilidis 2000: 177-217).

[60] Seferis 1997b: 55. The same point is made in the unpublished letter to Rousos quoted above.

expressed in the letter to Rousos, can be corroborated by other things that he wrote at the same time. One of these is the essay on Makriyannis, to which reference has already been made.

The unlettered nineteenth-century General, painstakingly composing his memoirs between 1829 and 1850, is indeed appropriated by Seferis, in this essay, as both an ideal precursor of the Modernist artist and as a prop to support Seferis's own Modernist poetics in the manner of Eliot. But the essay on Makriyannis also has a strong political subtext, as has been noted in two doctoral theses written at English universities in the 1990s.[61] Makriyannis, as appropriated by Seferis, represents not just the idealised "authentic" voice of tradition, such as Eliot claimed to find in the seventeenth-century preacher Lancelot Andrewes and Pound in the Occitan troubadour Arnaut Daniel; Makriyannis, for Seferis, represents the repressed voice of the Greek *people* (λαός). As Seferis begins to sum up his argument towards the end of the essay:

> This is what I had to say to you about Makriyannis, [who was] the ... sure messenger of our long and unbroken popular tradition, who because he holds it so deeply rooted within him, comes to tell us, in the voices of many people, and not of just one, what we are and how we are, ourselves. That his anger and his tragedy are not individual matters, but things which matter to you and to me and to all of us; matters in which all together, dead and living, are mutual guarantors and jointly responsible.[62]

Seferis's essay on Makriyannis was written as a lecture and finished, in Cairo, on 30 April 1943.[63] As a lecture, it was given to an audience of about 1,400 in Alexandria on 16 May, and on 19

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[61] Williams 1997: 52-55, also mentioned by Petropoulos 1996: 221.

[62] Αυτά είχα να σας πω για τον Μακρυγιάννη, τον ... σίγουρο μαντατοφόρο της μακριάς και αδιάσπαστης λαϊκής μας παράδοσης, που επειδή την κρατά τόσο βαθιά ριζωμένη μέσα του, έρχεται να μας πει με τη φωνή πολλών ανθρώπων, και όχι ενός μονάχα, τι είμαστε και πώς είμαστε κι εμείς οι ίδιοι. Πως ο θυμός του και η τραγωδία του, δεν είναι ατομικές του υποθέσεις, αλλά υποθέσεις δικές σας και δικές μου κια όλων μας· υποθέσεις όπου όλοι μαζί, πεθαμένοι και ζωντανοί, είμαστε αλληλέγγυοι και συνυπεύθυνοι (Seferis 1981: I 261-2).

[63] Seferis 1977b: 289.

May, to an audience of "unfortunately" only about 500, in Cairo.[64] Seferis notes with cryptic satisfaction that Crown Prince Paul, who was in the audience, said to him afterwards, "I didn't know these things."[65] In Cairo, after the lecture, he records, "Young colleagues moving away from my vicinity, like rats from a sinking ship."[66] Seferis was perfectly well aware that his lecture on Makriyannis was not only a statement of poetic Modernism, it was also as open a statement of left-wing political conviction (in terms of the ideology and rhetoric of the time) as could possibly be made in public by someone in Seferis's position – and indeed too open in the eyes of many.[67]

The day after he gave the lecture in Cairo, Seferis wrote his letter to Deputy Prime Minister Rousos.

The immediate upshot was that Seferis kept his job – for the time being.[68] A year later he resigned (effectively he was sacked) by Prime Minister George Papandreou, who refused to have confidence in a man so much identified with the Left and sympathetic to the left-wing resistance in Greece, as Seferis now was. At that time Seferis ruefully recorded the comment of a French colleague and his reply:

> "Strange, ... until now they accused your office of being conservative, now of being leftist, strange — I don't understand." ... "Perhaps you should understand that we've done a good job."[69]

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[64] Seferis 1979a: 120 = 1977b: 290.

[65] Seferis 1977b: 289; cited with comment by Williams 1997: 54.

[66] Seferis 1977b: 290.

[67] More than a year later, Seferis recorded that there were still those who had not forgiven him for this lecture, and he held them responsible for his effective dismissal by Papandreou in April 1944 (Seferis 1979a: 254, 21 August 1944).

[68] Seferis 1979a: 221.

[69] "Περίεργο, ... ώς τώρα κατηγορούσαν το γραφείο σας ως συντηρητικό, τώρα ως αριστερό, περίεργο – δεν καταλαβαίνω." "Ίσως να πρέπει να καταλάβετε ότι κάναμε καλά τη δουλειά μας" (Seferis 1979a: 221, 3 May 1944). For the circumstances of Seferis's resignation from the Press Office at the end of April 1944, see Seferis 1979a: 210-28.

Reading Seferis's politics (iv): a historical perspective

If we stand back from these particular issues, on which the recent revisionists have based their attack on Seferis's pre-eminence, it is possible to sketch in, on the basis of historical hindsight, some of the basic principles of what might broadly be termed Seferis's politics.

One particular misunderstanding has to be avoided from the start: in his actions and his public statements as a higher civil servant, Seferis was subjected to very specific constraints, which it is sometimes hard for those in the academic world, the beneficiaries of "academic freedom", to appreciate. It is therefore important to make a distinction between the professional diplomat, who had limited freedom of action and none of speech, on the one hand, and on the other the private estimations which Seferis made on political matters, which are expressed directly only in diaries and letters, but may also be encrypted in the poems and essays which he published during his lifetime.[70]

First of all, Seferis was a Venizelist, the son of a Venizelist, and his closest friends, at least until 1941, seem also to have been Venizelists. Only one political principle seems to have been stronger in Seferis even than this, and that was his dislike of the monarchy. As he wrote in 1941, he never forgave Venizelos for having finally acquiesced in the return of King George in 1935.[71] Seferis's first overtly political poem, which was not published in his lifetime, was "Leoforos Syngrou II", dated the day on which King George landed at Tzitzifies.[72] The roots of this antipathy probably go back to the National Schism, and to Seferis's adolescent memories of the anathema pronounced

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[70] Cf. Yeoryis 2000.

[71] Seferis 1972a: 22 = 1992: 27-8.

[72] The poem is now included in Seferis 1976: 64-6. It was originally a letter sent to Theotokas, dated 25 November 1935, and also appears in its place in that correspondence (Theotokas/Seferis 1981: 136-8). It also inaugurates what Seferis himself called his "service diary" (υπηρεσιακό ημερολόγιο), on which see Xydis in Seferis 1979a: 7-8. The published title "political diary" (πολιτικό ημερολόγιο) belongs to Xydis (see Seferis 1979a: 9).

against Venizelos on the Pedion Areos in 1916.[73] Taking stock, in the circumstances of his new exile, to South Africa, at the end of 1941, Seferis was unforgiving of the Six who had been executed in 1922 for their part in the Asia Minor disaster.[74] But the prime responsibility, in Seferis's eyes, as in those of many Venizelists, lay with Venizelos's arch-opponent King Constantine and therefore, by extension, with the monarchy itself.[75]

The politics of Left versus Right always interested Seferis less than the (again Venizelist) principle of the integrity and self-determination of the nation-state. Seferis saw the Axis as the enemy at the start of World War II not only because they were Nazis and Fascists, but because he foresaw (surely rightly) that an Axis victory would deprive Greece of self-determination.[76] What he could not forgive in Metaxas, writing in 1941, was not the dictatorship as such, but Metaxas's support for King Constantine in 1916.[77] By upbringing and temperament naturally inclined towards the "aristocratic-republican" Right, Seferis adopted the cause of the Left during the Second World War, not least because he saw how fatally out of touch was the government in exile, which he served, from what should have been its power-base in occupied Greece. Although he never says so explicitly, it seems to have been the street violence of December 1944 which changed all that. In 1947, with the "third round" of the civil war now in full swing, the right-wing press denounced Seferis as a "communist"; the Left withheld its support because he was not.[78] The result, at the end of 1947, was political exile to the embassy at Ankara, without promotion.[79]

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[73] Seferis 1972a: 11 = 1992: 20; for Xydis's historical note see Seferis 1972a: 70; cf. Aronis 1984: 21.

[74] Seferis 1972a: 19 = 1992: 25.

[75] Without stridency or prominence, this issue runs through the *Manuscript Sept. '41* and the two published volumes of *Political Diaries*.

[76] Seferis 1972a: 41 = 1992: 41. For Seferis's revulsion at Nazi propaganda see e.g. Seferis 1977a: 195-6 (24 May 1940).

[77] Seferis 1972a: 44 = 1992: 43.

[78] Seferis 1985: 116-32; Seferis 1977c: 85-94. The press cuttings reflecting the outcry when Seferis was awarded the Palamas prize in February 1947 are collected in the Seferis Archive, Gennadius Library, file II.51 (pre-1996 catalogue). For the attack on Seferis, Katsimbalis and the "clique" in

During four periods of national crisis, Seferis became deeply involved in political decision-making, and gave his energies unstintingly. These were: the war against Italy in 1940-41 (it was Seferis who drafted the King's declaration of war in the early hours of 28 October 1940,[80] and who announced the German invasion on 6 April 1941, in terms which anticipate the end of the second part of the poem *"Thrush"*);[81] in Cairo during successive government crises during the war; in 1945-6 when he served the Regent, Archbishop Damaskinos, as head of his Political Bureau; and finally from 1956 to 1959, when he played what must have been a key role in the diplomatic resolution of the Cyprus crisis, although the evidence for this last is still tantalisingly unavailable.[82]

In all these situations, Seferis was far more than a mere functionary carrying out instructions.[83] He often gave far-reaching, even radical advice to senior politicians. Seferis pinned his political hopes for his country, successively and conditionally, on three, perhaps four, political figures: Panayotis Kanellopoulos (in 1943), Yorgos Kartalis (in 1944 and perhaps later), Archbishop Damaskinos (during the Regency of 1945-6), and (the doubtful fourth) Konstantinos Karamanlis (from 1956 until, perhaps, 1958).[84] Leaving aside the last, for which the evidence

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the same year, see file II.53; Seferis 1992: 278-82. For an account of these events (hostile to Seferis), which reproduces the published sources extensively, see Pitsilidis 2000: 219-325.

[79] Seferis 1985: 118-20; 225 n. 3 (Xydis).

[80] Seferis 1977a: 259.

[81] Text reproduced by Xydis in Seferis 1972a: 65-8, but omitted from the reprint in Seferis 1992. See also Seferis 1972a: 74 n. 52 (Xydis).

[82] Seferis's "political diary" for this period has not been published and is at present inaccessible. Two pages of extracts appear in the "Prosopa" supplement of the newspaper *Ta Nea* (Prosopa 2000: 22-3), preceded by an interview with Xydis (Prosopa 2000: 21). See also Yeoryis 2000.

[83] This point is also made, although in a tone hostile to Seferis, by Dimiroulis (1997: 379).

[84] Seferis's political and personal relationships with the first three are well documented. On Kanellopoulos see Seferis 1979a: 46-7; 63-4; 69-70; 78; 99; 101-2; 178-9. On Kartalis see Seferis 1979a: 128; 233; 235-46; 279-80. On Damaskinos see Seferis 1985: 48; 50; 52; 54; 59; 62; 68; 109-10. On Karamanlis see Seferis 1986a: 220-40, esp. 231, and note 80.

is incomplete, it is clear that in each of the first three Seferis aspired to see a second Venizelos; indeed Seferis urged Damaskinos, on more than one occasion, to renounce the monarchy in whose name he held office and instead unite the squabbling politicians behind his own authority.[85] It is perhaps significant that all four political leaders were already close friends of Seferis's family before he placed his trust in them;[86] with all four, successively, he became bitterly disillusioned.

But the final principle, and the one that reveals Seferis's politics as inseparable from either his poetry or his essays, is the belief that he expressed repeatedly, from at least 1939 onwards, in the *ethical* basis of the life of nations, and in the organic link between human ethics and the laws that govern the natural world. This, I believe, is the fundamental link between Seferis the writer and Seferiadis the higher civil servant. As Seferis summed up his career succinctly in 1966:

> I have the impression that whatever has been vouchsafed me to do, has crystallized around an organically ethical stem.[87]

The earliest full articulation of this belief comes in 1939, just a month before the start of the Second World War:

> Feelings that I find in Aeschylus; that reassure me: the security and the balance of justice without sentimentality, without moralising, without psychology. Like a law of the universe, clear, uncorroded. And the authenticity of that voice, its authority. The greatest order that I know.[88]

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[85] Seferis 1985: 35-8; 54; 59.

[86] Seferis's diaries are reticent about this, though in at least the first three cases there is a presumption of a degree of intimacy in the early entries in which they appear. For the relationship of these political figures to the circle of Konstantinos and Ioanna Tsatsos see Tsatsos 2000: 127; 239; 241; 267; 306; 327-8 (Kanellopoulos); 285 (Kartalis); 312-9 (Damaskinos); 335; 460-4 (Karamanlis).

[87] Έχω την εντύπωση πως ό,τι αξιώθηκα να κάνω, γύρω από ένα οργανικά ηθικό στέλεχος κρυσταλλώθηκε (Seferis 1981: II 297-8).

[88] Αισθήματα που βρίσκω στον Αισχύλο· που με αναπαύουν: η ασφάλεια και η ισορροπία της δικαιοσύνης χωρίς αισθηματολογία, χωρίς ηθικολογία, χωρίς ψυχολογία. Σαν ένας νόμος του σύμπαντος, καθαρός, χωρίς σκουριές.

There are good grounds for believing that from this time onwards, this idea of an impartial, ineluctable justice, regulating equally both nature and human affairs, animated all Seferis's thinking about the political choices faced by those in power, both in Greece and in other countries, as well as his own actions, choices and, crucially, the advice he gave to politicians when in a position to do so.

During this period of his life, Seferis frequently quotes Heraclitus. One of his favourite fragments of Heraclitus is Fr. 94: "Sun will not overstep his measures...; if he does, the Erinyes, the minions of Justice, will find him out."[89]

Seferis's most fundamentally held principle, at least during the last thirty years of his life, was this belief in justice.[90] His last poem sums this up well. The poem was written two years after Seferis's one overt and personal, as opposed to professional, political act, his "statement" against the Colonels of 28 March 1969.[91] In the poem "On Aspalathoi" ("Επί ασπαλάθων"), the ancient text of Plato is linked to the flowering thorn-bushes on Cape Sounion, to ensure that the tyrant (who represents, of course, the Colonels) is punished eternally for his crimes – not just against human mores, but against the balance of nature itself.[92]

In this poem, Seferis's lifelong distrust of the Greek monarchy has far transcended the narrow political horizons of the National Schism of 1915 with which it began, or even the Asia Minor disaster of 1922, for which Seferis and those who thought

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Και η αυθεντία αυτής της φωνής, το κύρος της. Η μεγαλύτερη τάξη που ξέρω (Seferis 1977a: 125-6, 3 August 1939).

[89] "Ηλιος γὰρ οὐχ ὑπερβήσεται μέτρα· εἰ δὲ μή,' Ερινύες μιν Δίκης ἐπίκουροι ἐξευρήσουσιν (Kirk 1954: 284).

[90] See, indicatively but not exhaustively: Seferis 1981: II 283-92 (1965); Seferis 1975a: 125 (15 August 1930); Seferis 1977b: 140 (2 January 1941): 192 (8 March 1942); Seferis 1977c: 90-1 (12 February 1947); Seferis 1990: 124-7 (9 September 1959); Seferis/Philippe 1991: 80; 81 (May 1971).

[91] Δήλωση, Seferis 1992: 261-2. On the background to this see Seferis 1986b and introduction by Pavlos Zannas (the text only is reproduced in Seferis 1992: 246-60).

[92] The Greek text, first published in the newspaper *To Vima* on 23 September 1971 (the day after Seferis's funeral), is included in Seferis 1976: 50; English translation in Seferis 1995: 223.

like him held the monarchy responsible. The word "tyrant" (τύραννος) in the poem's last line reminds us of the visionary glimpse of reconciliation which comes at the end of the poem "*Thrush*", written in 1946: "the tyrant from within man has fled" (ο τύραννος μέσα από τον άνθρωπο έχει φύγει).[93] What offended Seferis about the regime of the Colonels was not only the political repression, still less the (temporary, as it turned out) seizure of power by the political Right at the expense of the political Left. What repelled Seferis even more about the Colonels, and what he denounces in this poem, is the exercise of absolute power.

Tyranny, in a conflation of the ancient and modern senses of the word, for Seferis was an overstepping of the natural limits which according to Heraclitus and Aeschylus govern, impartially, both nature and human affairs. The outrage (*hubris*) represented by the Colonels and by the ancient, mythical tyrant of Pamphylia named in the poem, is punished, not by human agency, but by nature, in the form of the thorns – and on the day which is both that of the Annunciation and (by convention) commemorates the uprising of the Greeks in 1821 against their "tyrannical" Ottoman masters.[94]

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Conclusion

The late twentieth-century revisionist readings of Seferis, which privilege the "politics" of his essays as a point of attack, themselves amount to an important strategy in literary/cultural politics. This strategy can be understood in terms of a post-structuralist and postmodernist reaction against the Modernism of the first half of the century, of which Seferis is justly seen as

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[93] Part III of the poem, line 71 (Seferis 1972b: 229). Previous lines of the poem (III 59-62) had referred to Sophocles's play *Oedipus at Colonus* (and, through reference to the warring sons of Oedipus, to the civil war whose third round was breaking out at the time when the poem was written – cf. Vitti 1989: 228-30). This line then underscores the imagined transition from the first Oedipus play in Sophocles's trilogy (*Οιδίπους Τύραννος*).

[94] The allusion is to the myth of Er (*Republic* 616a): see Seferis 1976: 152 n. (Savvidis).

the leading Greek representative. What these readings highlight, however, is the lack of serious attention that has so far been given to the available evidence for Seferis's actual involvement with the political life of his time, which during the second half of his life was considerable.

This paper has proceeded to interrogate the most prominent critiques of Seferis's politics by the revisionists. It has not sought to rebut them; nor do their arguments emerge as baseless. But in the three areas examined (canon-formation; Hellenocentrism; adherence to right-wing politics), the picture that has emerged is a much more nuanced one than most of the revisionists have been prepared to consider.

Seferis's "canon" was probably not as programmatically conceived as they have supposed, and has certainly not been as influential as they assume. Seferis's "Hellenocentrism" in the 1930s has to be placed in the context of his rejection of the prevalent (nationalist) concept of "Greekness" (ελληνικότητα), and both then and later has to be seen alongside his profound involvement in other cultures, first and foremost French and English, but also, right through his life, non-European cultures. Seferis's stance *vis-à-vis* the twentieth-century divide between Right and Left can perhaps best be summed up as "old-fashioned": more fundamental to his thinking seem to have been the Venizelist concepts of the integrity of the nation-state and (after 1922) the avoidance of a "hubristic" monarchical or autocratic system. From 1941 until at least 1944, his sympathies were strongly with the Left, against the Right and the established politicians. These opinions were profoundly held and vigorously defended by Seferis at that time. Later he distanced himself from the Left, until 1969 when he broke with the habit (and the professional ethos) of a lifetime, to denounce the dictatorship of the "Colonels" in the foreign press.

Finally, Seferis's long-delayed acceptance by the Greek Left, and his "canonical" status today, owe much to the popular musical settings of his poems, which begin with Theodorakis in 1961. It was thanks to these that Seferis's funeral on 22 September 1971 turned into the first spontaneous (and peaceful) mass demonstration against the regime of the "Colonels". The preeminence of Seferis that provokes the revisionists is not, as many of them suppose, a status that he enjoyed during his lifetime.

What Gourgouris terms the "Seferis phenomenon"[95] dates from no earlier than the poet's death, and owes more to contingent factors than it does directly to either the poetry and essays of Seferis or the political activity and estimations of Seferiadis.

A century after the poet's birth, it is certainly time to reassess a "phenomenon" that is perhaps too easily taken for granted – as witness, for example, the national and international events to mark the "Seferis Year", declared by the Greek Ministry of Culture in 2000. But if Seferis's achievement is to be assessed anew for the twenty-first century, it will be essential to re-couple the arbitrarily divided poet and diplomat, and to understand how both Seferis's unique, distinctive brand of literary Modernism, and his engagement with the political life of his country, belong integrally to their time. As much as any great writer, and perhaps more than most, Seferis has to be read in and against history.

King's College London

Postscript (July 2001)

Of two anonymous peer reviews received from the editor of the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, justifying the decision not to publish this paper, one states: "The approach the essay characterizes as revisionist is now established and it is the author's own view that could be characterized as revisionist." The other I quote in full and without comment, as it shows the argument of this paper to be more urgent and necessary than I had supposed when I wrote it.

> I cannot recommend "Reading Seferis's Politics and the Politics of Reading Seferis" for publication in *The Journal of Modern Greek Studies*. This essay attempts to counter the recent initiative of an Anglophone and poststructuralist criticism of Seferis that would demonumentalize his monumental status in the modern Greek literary canon on the basis of finding in his poetic and prose

[95] See note 3.

work a concerted effort to reinvent the Greek canon in his own image, a Hellenocentric nationalism, and a politics of the Right. There may be an argument to be made against this judgment (though I doubt it). But I do not think the author's is adequate to that possibility. As his/her counter-attack suggests, it is written from a rather undefined traditionalist critical perspective, the only theoretical certainty of which is its utter impatience with poststructuralism, postmodernism, and, it seems, any kind of criticism resembling these. I have to admit that my review of this essay is undertaken from such a perspective, so my evaluation of it may appear to be prejudiced against it from the start. But it is not the traditionalist or anti-poststructuralist orientation of the essay I am criticizing; it is, rather, the oversimplified way the author carries it out. For one thing, if a critic, such as this one, overdetermines his/her opposition to a poststructuralist interpretation of texts, then it seems to me, especially at this late stage in the history of contemporary criticism, he/she is obligated to say more about its operations than that it is simply an agency of Left politics. There is, in fact, nothing in this essay to suggest that its author is even conversant with this poststructuralist perspective, though he/she may be. Further, one of the author's complaints is that these poststructuralist "revisionists," who "have in common an Anglo-American institutional background" (it is difficult not to infer from this that the author feels that their project of demonumentalizing a Greek writer is presumptuous) avoid Seferis's poetry in favor of his essays in keeping with their political reading. The implication is that Seferis's poetry would show that his "politics" was, in fact, far more complex than the revisionist claim. One would, therefore, expect the author to put Seferis's poetry into play in his/her argument. But that's not the case. Instead, he/she, like the antagonists he/she alleges eschew the poetry, relies on Seferis's prose to make his/her argument. And that argument, unlike that of the poststructuralist revisionists, which is, as such, attuned to the unsaid of discourse, reads Seferis's text at face value. It would be easy to point out many places in this essay where this assumption of linguistic transparency blinds the author to ideological implications of Seferis's prose writing that corroborate the argument of the "revisionists". But time will not permit. It will suffice to refer to a couple: 1) his/her unexamined reference to Seferis's insistent use of the word "people", which by this time, and thanks to the poststructuralist *lecture symptomale*, is now massively identified with the self-present nationalist subject and conservative nation-

state; and 2) his/her acceptance of Seferis's rationale for remaining a member of the Metaxa [sic] dictatorship.

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