

THE PARIS REVIEW



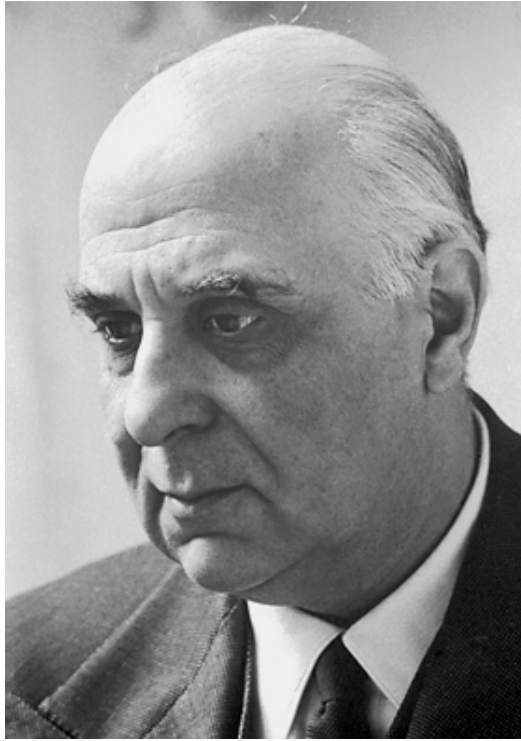
Interview Fiction Poetry

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George Seferis: The Art of Poetry, No. 13

Interviewed by Edmund Keeley

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Seferis was nearing the end of his longest visit to the United States at the time of this interview, which took place in late December of 1968. He had just completed a three-month term as fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and he was in particularly good spirits because he felt that his visit had served for a kind of rejuvenation: an interlude free from the political tensions that had been building up for some months in Athens and the occasion for both reflection and performance. The latter included a series of readings—at Harvard, Princeton, Rutgers, Pittsburgh, Washington, D.C., and the YMHA Poetry Center in New York—Seferis reading in Greek and the interviewer in English, each appearance with its distinct qualities of excitement and response. In Pittsburgh, for example, the audience (composed mostly of local Greek-Americans) seemed bewildered by the poetry during the reading but responded to the poet during the reception afterward as they might to Greece's exiled king. The New York reading began with an

introduction by Senator Eugene McCarthy. During the discussion period several questions from the audience had to do specifically with the political situation in Greece. Seferis refused to answer them. He was thought to be evasive by some in the audience, but he held his ground, and during the dinner following the reading he gave his reasons in private: He didn't consider it proper to criticize his government while a guest on foreign soil, safely outside the boundaries of the government's displeasure. He saved his answers for his return to Greece: an uncompromising statement against the dictatorship presented to local and foreign correspondents in defiance of martial law and at obvious personal risk (*The New York Times*, March 29, 1969).

The combination of diplomatic tact and high conscience that defines the political character of Seferis also colors his presence and personal style. He is a heavy man, his voice gentle when disengaged, his movements slow, almost lethargic at times; yet he has a habit of gripping your arm as he moves, and the grip, though amiable in the old-fashioned European manner, remains young and firm enough to give you word of the strength still in him. And the voice has a second edge that cuts sharply when he senses something dubious or facile challenging it. Then, on the diplomatic side again, comes a sense of humor: a love of nonsense, of the risqué joke, of kidding himself and others with a wry little moon of a smile that appears unexpectedly in his oval face—especially after he's trapped his listener with the question: "Why are you laughing?" An American poet once referred to him as a "Middle-Eastern troglodyte" in a poem about his first reading in New York some years ago. When the interviewer finally got up the courage to show him the poem, Seferis fixed him with a sharp, uncompromising look. "Middle-Eastern troglodyte. Ridiculous and inaccurate. I once called myself a Cappadocian troglodyte, and that is what I plan to remain. Why are you laughing?" Then the smile.

The interview took place in the Seferis temporary home at the Institute for Advanced Study, an unpretentious second-floor apartment with three rooms, with a large window overlooking the grounds, the bookcase almost empty, none of the modern Greek paintings and classical treasures that set the style of the Seferis home in Athens. Yet the poet was delighted with the place because it gave him access to a number of exotic things: changing trees, and squirrels, and children crossing the lawn from school. His wife Maro—hair still gold and braided like a girl's—was present throughout the interview, sometimes listening with apparent amusement, sometimes preparing food or drinks in the background. There were three recording sessions. Seferis would take a while to warm up with the microphone watching him from the coffee

table, but whenever he began to reminisce about friends from the war years and before—Henry Miller, Durrell, Katsimbalis—or the years of his childhood, he would relax into his natural style and talk easily until the tape died out on him.

INTERVIEWER

Let me start by asking you about the Institute for Advanced Study and how you feel, only recently retired from the diplomatic service, about beginning a new career as a student.

GEORGE SEFERIS

My dear, the problem which puzzles me is: What is advanced study? Should one try to forget, or to learn more, when one is at my stage of advanced study? Now I must say, on a more prosaic level, that I enjoy very much the whole situation here because there are very nice people, very good friends, and I enjoy—how shall I put it?—their horizons. There are many horizons around me: science, history, archaeology, theology, philosophy . . .

INTERVIEWER

But don't you feel out of place among so many scientists? So many historians?

SEFERIS

No, because I am attracted by people whose interests are not in my own area.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there's an advantage—as I think Cavafy would probably have thought—to being in dialogue with historians? In other words, do you feel that history has something particular to say to the poet?

SEFERIS

If you remember, Cavafy was *proud* of having a sense of history. He used to say: "I am a man of history"—something like that, I don't remember the exact quotation. I am not that way; but still, I feel the pressure of history. In another way, perhaps: more mythological, more abstract, or more concrete . . . I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

How about the relation of the Greek poet to his particular historical tradition? You once said that there is no ancient Greece in Greece. What did you mean by that exactly?

SEFERIS

I meant Greece is a continuous process. In English the expression “ancient Greece” includes the meaning of “finished,” whereas for us Greece goes on living, for better or for worse; it is *in* life, has not expired yet. That is a fact. One can make the same argument when one discusses the pronunciation of ancient Greek. Your scholars in America or in England or in France may be quite right in adopting the Erasmic pronunciation: for them Greek is a dead language; but for us it is another story. The fact is, you consider that ancient Greek has terminated its function at a certain point, and this enables you to pronounce it—with my regrets—in an arbitrary way.

INTERVIEWER

Then you obviously see the Greek tradition in language, as well as in other things, as a continuous process. That is not the belief of some classical and Byzantine scholars in this country—and, I suppose, elsewhere.

SEFERIS

You know why that happens? Because the subject, the history, of Greece is so large that each scholar limits himself to a certain period or branch, and nothing exists outside of it. For example, Gibbon considered that a thousand years of life were a decline. How can a people be in decline for a thousand years? After all, between the Homeric poems and the birth of Christ eight hundred years elapsed—or something like that—and then presumably there were a thousand years of decline.

INTERVIEWER

On the question of the Greek poet’s relation to his tradition, it has always seemed to me that the Greek poet has an advantage over his Anglo-Saxon counterpart who makes use of Greek mythology and sometimes even of Greek landscape. I remember years ago when I was writing a thesis on what I thought were English influences in the poetry of Cavafy and Seferis, I asked you about certain images that crop up in your landscape, for example, the symbolic meaning of the statues that appear in your work. You turned to me

and said: "But those are real statues. They existed in a landscape I had seen." What I think you were saying is that you always start with the fact of a living, actual setting and move from there to any universal meaning that might be contained in it.

SEFERIS

An illustration of that from someone who is a specialist in classical statues came the other day from an English scholar who was lecturing about the statuary of the Parthenon. I went up to congratulate him after his lecture, and he said to me, as I remember: "But you have a line which expresses something of what I meant when you say 'the statues are not the ruins—we are the ruins.'" I mean I was astonished that a scholar of his caliber was using a line from me to illustrate a point.

INTERVIEWER

The imagery that a poet gets from his childhood is something we've discussed before. You once distinguished yourself from the average Englishman by suggesting that donkeys probably did for you what footballs and cars might do for them. I remember you also talked about the sea and the sailors of your native village near Smyrna.

SEFERIS

You know, the strange thing about imagery is that a great deal of it is subconscious, and sometimes it appears in a poem, and nobody knows wherefrom this emerged. But it is rooted, I am certain, in the poet's subconscious life, often of his childhood, and that's why I think it is decisive for a poet: the childhood that he has lived.

I think there are two different things functioning: conscious and subconscious memory. I think the way of poetry is to draw from the subconscious. It is not the way you write your memoirs, let's say, or the way you try to remember your past, your early life. I remember many things from my childhood which *did* impress me. For instance, when I was a child I discovered somewhere in a corner of a sort of bungalow we had in my grandmother's garden—at the place where we used to spend our summers—I discovered a compass from a ship which, as I learned afterwards, belonged to my grandfather. And that strange instrument—I think I destroyed it in the end by examining and re-examining it, taking it apart and putting it back together and then taking it apart again—became something mythical for me. Or again, when autumn approached, when there would be a rather strong wind, and the fishing

barges would have to sail through rough weather, we would always be glad when they were at last anchored, and my mother would say to someone among the fishermen who'd gone out: "Ah, bravo, you've come through rough weather"; and he would answer: "Madam, you know, we always sail with Charon at our side." That's moving to me. Perhaps when I wrote about Ulysses in that early poem you've commented on ["Upon a Foreign Verse"]—perhaps I had in mind somebody like that fisherman. Those "certain old sailors from my childhood" who would recite the *Erotokritos*. In any case, I think it is always a bit dangerous to make unconscious images conscious, to bring them out into the light, because, you know, they dry out immediately.

INTERVIEWER

Have you felt any burden from having spent so many years writing for a tiny audience—an audience so small in the early years of your career that you had to publish your work at your own expense and issued something under three hundred copies of each volume? That is a situation quite unfamiliar to an established American poet.

SEFERIS

I'll give you an example. When I published my first volume, *Strophe* [*The Turning Point*], I issued 150 copies. That was in 1931. And I remember that in 1939 there were still copies available at the bookseller—copies that I withdrew from circulation so that I could bring out a new edition of the volume in 1940. But I must say that soon after that things began to change a bit. When I left for Egypt after the collapse of Greece in the war against Germany, I left behind me three editions of my work—*Log Book I*, *Mythistorema*, and *Book of Exercises*, besides the earlier volumes *Cistern* and *Strophe*—left them there all brand new, without having sold a single copy before I sailed for Crete and Cairo with the Greek government in exile, as you know. During my absence everything was sold out. When I came back, no copies remained. The foreign occupation—enemy occupation—had given the Greek public the opportunity of concentration and reading. And I reckoned that when I returned at the end of the occupation I was much better known in Greece than before.

INTERVIEWER

It's a very strange phenomenon, the revival of interest in poetry during the period of the occupation in Greece. I've heard about this from other poets: Gatsos and Elytis, for example. Poetry became an activity that brought together the Athenian intellectuals for readings and discussion, so that in a

way it became the richest period for poetry in this century after the period of the thirties.

SEFERIS

Elytis published his book during the occupation, and Gatsos his: I mean the famous *Amorgos* came out during the occupation!

INTERVIEWER

What happened after the occupation? Why was there silence for so long among the leading poets?

SEFERIS

It wasn't silence. Times had changed, and horizons had widened, and everybody tried to see more of life outside the country; they were trying to find new modes of expression.

INTERVIEWER

I wonder if you have felt anything new and interesting through reading to large public audiences in this country. The evidence of friends of mine who have no knowledge at all of Greek is that they have captured, from your reading in Greek, a different sense of the poetry's rhythm from what they get out of my reading in English.

SEFERIS

That is very important. But I can say something more about this experience of reading in America. The other day another poet reacted by sending me a poem about my reading. That is a new kind of response. But still, the important thing is to see reactions, not to be applauded or not applauded.

INTERVIEWER

After your reading at Rutgers this fall, someone in the audience asked you what you thought of the English translations of your poetry, and you went on to make generous gestures towards your English translators, but then you added: "Of course the best translation of my poetry is in Chinese, a language which I don't understand at all."

SEFERIS

It isn't difficult to elaborate on that because, you know, I feel in languages that I know, perhaps because I know them too well (not English, but in French, for example, which I know really well) that there are other possibilities in the translation. For Chinese there are no other possibilities. But translating—I'm changing the question a little bit—is interesting always because it is a means of controlling your own language. Now of course the English language is a more stable language than ours; we have to create ours, so to speak, all the time we are writing.

INTERVIEWER

Pound said that translation is a means for a writer to sharpen continually his awareness of his own language, and he advised young poets to translate whenever they could.

SEFERIS

Provided you don't overdo it, I think it is always useful.

INTERVIEWER

You are a poet who writes in a language which few people know outside Greece. I wonder if you feel any resentment of the fact that you are known in the world of poetry outside your own country largely through translation.

SEFERIS

There are compensations. For example, about a year ago, I received a letter from an American saying to me: "Well, I have learned modern Greek in order to read Seferis." That's a great compliment, I think. It is much more personal than the case of a man who learns a foreign language at school, isn't it? I've heard other people say: "Well, you know, we learned our Greek from your poems." A great reward. And then I should add, perhaps, this situation of not having a very large audience has something good in it, too. I mean, that it educates you in a certain way: not to consider that great audiences are the most important reward on this earth. I consider that even if I have three people who read me, I mean really read me, it is enough. That reminds me of a conversation I had once upon a time during the only glimpse I ever had of Henri Michaux. It was when he had a stopover in Athens, coming from Egypt, I think. He came ashore while his ship was in Piraeus just in order to have a look at the Acropolis. And he told me on that occasion: "You know, my dear, a

man who has only one reader is not a writer. A man who has two readers is not a writer, either. But a man who has *three* readers”—and he pronounced “three readers” as though they were three million—“that man is *really* a writer.”

INTERVIEWER

You said earlier there is a problem in Greek of establishing a language. That’s something which most American readers naturally don’t understand. We have a language. Our problem is always to stretch the language which we have so that it somehow shows a new vitality. When you talk about establishing or creating a language, you mean something quite different.

SEFERIS

We’ve had the calamity of academic intervention. Mark you, I mean from both the left and the right. In the beginning we had the intervention of professors who wanted to transform our living language into something abstract in order to reach some sort of “idea” of a pure language. On the other side, we had the fight for *demotiki*, as we call the popular spoken language. But this tradition—the professorial tradition—was so strong that there was a sort of academic mind which fought actively for both the puristic and the vernacular language. The best way to progress is by forgetting all that academic intervention. For example, I admire very much the Cretan Renaissance. In that period you find a whole poem—ten thousand lines, an enormous poem—where there is no strain at all, no effort at all; the language functions quite naturally, without any flagrant tendency to be learned.

INTERVIEWER

It’s interesting that you take an effortless poem for a model because I remember that, in another context, you described style as the difficulty one encounters in expressing himself.

SEFERIS

I said that in lecturing about Makriyannis, who, as you know, never learned how to write or read until the age of thirty-five. When you see his manuscript, it is like a wall—a wall built up out of stones, one placed on top of the other. It is very strange. For example, he never uses punctuation at all. No paragraphs. Nothing. It goes on like that. And you see that each word is added to another word like a stone on top of another stone. I mean, in any case, that when you

really feel something, you face the difficulty of expressing it. And that, after all, forms your style.

INTERVIEWER

What are the difficulties you've encountered in establishing your own style?

SEFERIS

That's another story. In my youth I worked very much over the Greek language. Glossaries, old texts, medieval texts, and things of that kind. But the difficulty wasn't only in studying them; the difficulty was how to forget them and be natural. I had the blessing, perhaps, of being natural, I don't know. That's for others to say . . .

INTERVIEWER

I know you always considered it the first order of business for a poet to try for economy in style. This seems to be in contrast to the dominant mode of your predecessors—at least the mode of Palamas and Sikelianos.

SEFERIS

That's perhaps a local characteristic. I felt at the time of my early efforts that in Greece they were too rhetorical, and I reacted against it. That was my feeling. And I reacted against it in many ways. For example, in the use of words, of adjectives—especially compound adjectives, which I avoided. To avoid certain things is deliberate with me, you know. My interest in expression was not so much in the color of the language, which Greek has plenty of, but in precision above all; and in order to be precise, you have to be spare in the use of your material. You remember that Valery said lyricism is, after all, the development of an exclamation, of an "Ah." For me "Ah" is quite enough. I never try to elaborate on the exclamation.

INTERVIEWER

Let me pursue the matter of style as process of using language sparingly. Do you agree that in your own work there is a development, a further economy of means, between *Strophe* and everything that followed it?

SEFERIS

Of course. It is not so much a stylistic development as a sort of evolution. Everything evolves. I mean, one *has* to evolve—one *has* to see new things. One has to see other aspects and express these other aspects. Certainly there is an evolution, but I don't see it as a "development" in inverted commas. If I had years more in front of me, I would perhaps write in another way, even in another style. I might again use the strict line or rhymed verse, perhaps. In poetry you change the base of things from time to time in order to have a fresh expression. The main thing you are looking for in poetry is to avoid worn-out expressions. That's the great problem.

INTERVIEWER

What about the problem of developing a prose style? You are one of the very few poets in Greece who has had almost as strong an impact on the language of prose criticism as you've had on the language of poetry. Developing a live yet careful prose style must have been part of your struggle from the beginning.

SEFERIS

Yes, but, you know, my struggle was always for precision. That is at the base of it. And of course in prose it appears more obvious—I mean the matter of economy.

INTERVIEWER

This tape machine seems to have stopped recording. Say something and let's see if it's still working properly.

SEFERIS

Wallace Stevens was in an insurance company.

INTERVIEWER

Let's hope it will go on with us for a while. One of your remarks which has interested me is about the question of the relation between poetry and public service; I think you said that the important thing was for the poet not to have a job which was directly connected with that of being a poet.

SEFERIS

I didn't say the "important" thing. I don't know, really, because I can't speak for other people; but for me at least, I suppose that it is a help not to be in a job where I have to write as I write in my notebooks or poetry books. For example, I am not a professor or a teacher or even a newspaperman. I prefer to have another occupation.

INTERVIEWER

Was there anything in your professional career—that is, the experience you had as a diplomat—which may have influenced in some way the imagery of your poetry or affected the particular themes you chose to express?

SEFERIS

I don't believe that any themes or any imagery were created by my job, though I might mention—how did you translate it?—the lines from "Last Stop": "souls shriveled by public sins, each holding office like a bird in its cage." I mean that is one of the few images I have drawn directly from my public service. But I could have felt that even if I had not been in the diplomatic service. But it was important for me that I had a job which was not related to my creative work. And the other thing is that I was not—how shall I put it?—not obliged to deal with models which belonged to literature. Of course, there are troubles in that career. The main thing I suffered from was not having enough time. Although others might tell you that it is better not to have time because it is the subconscious which is doing the poetical work. That's the point of view of Tom Eliot. I remember once, when I was transferred from London to Beirut (this was after just one and a half years of service in London), I told him: "My dear Mr. Eliot, I think I am fed up with my career and I shall give up all this." I remember his saying: "Be careful, be careful if you do that," and then he mentioned the subconscious—the subconscious working for poetry. And I told him: "Yes, but if I have a job, an official job which is interfering with my subconscious, then I prefer not to have a job. I mean I would prefer to be a carpenter and to be where my subconscious is quite free to do whatever it likes, dance or not dance." And I added: "You know, I can tell you when my public life began to interfere with my subconscious. It was on the eve of the war with the Italians—in September '40—when I started having political dreams. Then I knew quite well that my subconscious was suffering the onslaught of my official job. 'In dreams responsibilities begin.'"

INTERVIEWER

You once made a comment about the connection between poetry and politics .

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SEFERIS

You mean what I've said about propaganda writing, or "engaged" writing, or whatever you call that kind of writing in our times. I believe that something real, as far as feeling is concerned, should be elaborated as feeling. I don't consider that Aeschylus was making a propaganda play by putting the suffering Persians on stage, or desperate Xerxes, or the ghost of Darius, and so forth. On the contrary, there was human compassion in it. For his enemies. Not that he's not of course glad that the Greeks won the battle of Salamis. But even then he showed that Xerxes' defeat was a sort of divine retribution: a punishment for the hubris that Xerxes committed in flagellating the sea. Since his hubris was to flagellate the sea, he was punished exactly *by* the sea in the battle of Salamis.

INTERVIEWER

Is it possible to compare poetry across national lines? Or do we always have to make qualitative comparisons strictly within a single tradition?

SEFERIS

I feel a sort of reluctance about comparing poets. It is very difficult—even within the same tradition. Try to compare Dante and Alfred, Lord Tennyson, for example: What that would lead to, I don't know. Or, in the French tradition, how can you compare Racine and Victor Hugo? You have to go very deep, to the bottom of the tradition, in order to find some sort of common ground where the comparison can fairly take place. On the other hand, for example, I myself used Yeats in my Stockholm acceptance speech because I had been reading, just a few months before my trip to Stockholm, "The Bounty of Sweden," where he recounts the whole affair of his election to the Nobel Prize: his trip to Stockholm, the ceremony, and everything. And there I felt a sort of relation with him as a human being—not as a poet but as a human being; because Yeats belonged to a small country with a great folklore tradition, a country which, after all, had political turmoil. By the way, there's another example of a public poet who doesn't write propaganda. He writes, for example, a poem about an Irish airman which isn't at all propaganda. "Those I fight I do not hate—" etc. Or he writes "The Second Coming." That, too, is not propaganda: "The center cannot hold," etc., which after all starts

somewhere in Irish political life; but it goes deeper, and that's the whole point, I think.

INTERVIEWER

You've mentioned at your readings, in talking about "The King of Asine," the fact that it had taken you two years to find a way of writing about that particular experience, and then, at some point, after having given your notes for that poem to a friend, you completed the final draft in one long evening. Eliot has implied that you finished the poem (between ten P.M. and three in the morning) exactly because you didn't have your notes before you.

SEFERIS

I had no notes. And he may have been right. I don't know. In my home in Athens, I have all my papers and my books. And I wonder if that's a helpful thing or not, if it's not better to have just a blank writing desk without any papers or any books at all, where you can sit at regular hours every day.

INTERVIEWER

Do you normally make notes on the experience of a poem before you write it?

SEFERIS

Oh, there are many ways. Sometimes I do. Sometimes I do not. There are things which you have to remember, and I have to record these somewhere, so of course I make notes. For example, there is a poem where I have used the chronographer Makhairas, where it was impossible to avoid referring to that story about the demon of fornication.

INTERVIEWER

I didn't mean notes once the poem has been composed in your mind, but notes on the experience which, in effect, becomes the poem.

SEFERIS

No, I don't do that. When I say notes, I mean there are those on the material, notes which are needed because they are descriptive. And there are notes that are ideas, poetical ideas. For example, poetical expressions, poetical utterances, that is the kind of notes I mean. If I were to write a poem about you—I might make a note that "Mike has ceased to smoke for many years." I

mean if the things sound well in Greek to my ear, I could write it. That's all—things which are indifferent to other people. These I call poetical notes. Sometimes I disregard them altogether, and sometimes I go back to them. Sometimes, when they are quite forgotten, by having a glimpse at them, I say: "Oh, that poem was rather interesting," although they don't say anything at all to the ordinary person. Still, they take me back to a certain atmosphere which, in the meantime, has been working, elaborating, a form in my mind.

INTERVIEWER

Do you keep these notes or do you destroy them?

SEFERIS

Oh, I destroy a lot. Some months ago in Athens—there was somebody, a sort of Hellenist, who was interested in photographing notes. And I had the impression that I had kept my notes on *The Cistern*. I looked for them in all my files, and it appeared to me then that I had destroyed them. The only thing that I found was the "Notes for a 'Week'" which have been published quite recently—that is, the two missing poems from that group.

INTERVIEWER

I'm sorry about that, in a way, because I think *The Cistern* is a poem that all of us have found obscure in places, and the notes might have helped—might have helped *me*, anyway.

SEFERIS

Don't complain about it. They might have made the poem much more obscure, you know. For example, the general idea about my evolution in poetry is: "Ah, you see, Seferis started with regular lines, rhymes, strict versification, and then he moved to free verse." When I see my notes, I see that the main poem of *Strophe*, the "Erotikos Logos," appears to be in very strict versification; but my notes show me that this poem was also written in free verse. I have found some of the first drafts.

INTERVIEWER

Would you ever consider publishing them?

SEFERIS

By God, no.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that's the reason Eliot was so careful about not rediscovering the lost parts of *The Waste Land*, which have now been rediscovered?

SEFERIS

When he told me the story about the writing of *The Waste Land*, he seemed quite desperate about the manuscripts being lost. On the other hand, he also told me how useful—he stressed that point—how *useful* the intervention of Pound had really been.

INTERVIEWER

Do you approve of publishing discarded things?

SEFERIS

I don't know; it depends. It needs a great deal of tact. Not by the poet himself but by his editors. If they publish them, they tend to stress that they are all-important discoveries, and I think this is bad. Overplaying it. The editors and the philologists are always overdoing things, I think.

INTERVIEWER

I know from a section of your diary which my wife and I translated that your relationship with Eliot was an important one in your life in various ways. I wonder if any other literary figures who are known in the West have also been important to you. I'm thinking particularly of Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell and maybe others I don't know about. I'm thinking also of your own compatriots: Theotokas and Katsimbalis, for example.

SEFERIS

Durrell was much younger than me, you know. He was a very interesting young man when I met him. He was in his mid-twenties. I met him with Henry Miller. They came to Athens to see the Colossus of Maroussi, Katsimbalis. It was on the day—if my memory is correct—of the declaration of war.

INTERVIEWER

But of course Katsimbalis wasn't the Colossus at that point.

SEFERIS

No, but Miller was threatening to make him something very colossal.

INTERVIEWER

Well, he did.

SEFERIS

It was nice to meet them; they were, let's say, the first—or if not exactly the first, then the second or third—readers with an understanding of what I was doing. For example, one of them, Miller or Larry, told me after reading my poems: "You know what I like about you is that you turn things inside out. And I mean that in the *good* sense." That was a very nice compliment for me at that time.

INTERVIEWER

How did they come to know your poetry?

SEFERIS

How. Hm. There were then in English only the translations of Katsimbalis. Manuscript translations, I mean.

INTERVIEWER

When they came to Athens, why did they go directly to Katsimbalis? Why was he the man whom they approached? Was he well known as a literary figure outside Greece?

SEFERIS

I don't know. It was a matter of common friends, perhaps. He became a bigger literary figure after *The Colossus of Maroussi*. At that time he was more in contact than I was with the English and American literary circles. There was a sort of international bohemia, I might say, by then in Athens. I mean on the eve of the war. I must add that Katsimbalis has that wonderful quality of

being without evil intention in his heart. He might criticize somebody, but in a good-hearted way. And he believed that our country, our little country, was able to do something. He had that sort of belief.

INTERVIEWER

What about Henry Miller? How did you respond to him?

SEFERIS

I like Miller because he is a very good-hearted man, and I think—excuse me for saying so, but this is not a criticism: It is great praise to say about a writer that he is a good man—Miller has a great deal of generosity in him. For example, when the moment came for him to go back to America (he was advised to do so by the American consul; as an American national, he had to go back home because the war was coming near), he said to me one day: “My dear George, you’ve been so kind to me, and I want to give you something.” And he produced a diary which he had been keeping during his stay in Greece. I said: “Look here, Henry. But after all, I know that you are going to write a book, and you can’t write the book—I mean you might need your notes.” He said: “No. All those things are here,” pointing to his head. I offered to make a typescript copy for him to give him. “No,” he said, “a gift must be whole.” Well, that’s a splendid way of behaving, I think. And I shall never forget that. The diary was a sort of first draft of the *Colossus*. But with more personal explosions. And more jokes, of course.

INTERVIEWER

There are quite a few jokes in the book, too.

SEFERIS

The trip to Hydra is splendid and the channel of Poros. Remember? My feeling about Miller is this: Of course it’s a great thing to have an understanding of the ancient authors; but the first man I admired for not having any classical preparation on going to Greece is Miller. There is such a freshness in him.

INTERVIEWER

The freshness of being ready to take it all in for the first time, you mean?

SEFERIS

I suppose I was the first man to give him a text of Aeschylus, when he decided to go to Mycenae. But of course he doesn't see anything from Aeschylus; he sees, in the plain of Argos, *redskins* while he hears a jazz trumpeter. That is spontaneous behavior. And I admire it.

INTERVIEWER

Jazz trumpeter?

SEFERIS

The jazz trumpeter was inspired, I suppose, by Louis Armstrong. Because he had heard Armstrong on a small gramophone—a quite elementary gramophone—that I had then in my home in Athens. I myself had discovered jazz eight or ten years earlier . . .

INTERVIEWER

Before Miller's arrival in Greece. So you taught *him* about jazz?

SEFERIS

I was thirty-two or thirty-three at that time. And I became a jazz addict. I said to myself, after all, you have discovered at the same time the importance of Bach—the great Bach—*and* the importance of jazz. I remember once I said to Mitropoulos: "For me, my dear maestro, jazz is one of the few ways left for us to express feeling without embarrassment." That was in '35. No, '34.

INTERVIEWER

Was there any other writer abroad or in Greece with whom you had a particularly close relationship?

SEFERIS

Its depends on what period you are referring to. For example, I had very close relations with Sikelianos once upon a time. I met him first in 1929, though it did not become a close relationship until after his illness and my return to Greece in 1944. During his illness, Sikelianos was really remarkable, when he had all those crises in his health. While I was serving abroad, I would take advantage of my trips to Athens to go and see him. One time I heard that he

had just been through a sort of cerebral hemorrhage. I found him at the theater wearing dark glasses—a première at the National Theatre. I said: “Oh Angelo, I am so glad you are here, because I had heard that you were not so well.” “My dear,” he said, “it is such a splendid thing to have a little ruby on the top of your brain.” He meant the hemorrhage. I said to him: “It is a splendid thing that you can talk about it that way. I am so glad.” He said: “George, look here. I shall tell you a story during the next intermission.” I approached him during the next intermission. He said: “Have you read *Rocambol*?” It’s a sort of French thriller. Sikelianos went on: “Once upon a time a woman had thrown vitriol against the face of Rocambol, and Rocambol was in danger of losing his eyesight; so he was taken by one of his henchmen to the best specialist in Paris, and the specialist examined him very carefully while the friend of Rocambol was sitting in the waiting room overhearing the conversation of the doctor. And the doctor’s conclusion was: ‘Sir, you have to choose between two things: either lose your eyesight or be disfigured.’ There was a moment of heavy silence; then the voice from the waiting room, the voice of the friend of Rocambol, was heard: ‘Rocambol has no need of his eyesight.’”

INTERVIEWER

Tell me more about Sikelianos. So little is known about him outside Greece.

SEFERIS

Another thing which I have mentioned in writing, at the time of his death. He had a great crisis in Athens, and I rushed to see him; I was very anxious; he had collapsed in the house of a friend. And again, the same splendid reaction. I said to him: “My dear Angelo, are you all right?” He said: “I’m all right. But I had a splendid experience. I saw the absolute dark. It was so beautiful.”

INTERVIEWER

Did you know Palamas? What kind of man was he?

SEFERIS

You know, it is strange the memories I have kept of people. For example, other people admire Sikelianos for their own special reasons; myself, I was attracted by those tragic and splendid moments of Sikelianos’s last years. Now Palamas: One of my last memories of him was when I went to tell him good-bye because I was leaving shortly. During our conversation he referred to various crazy people mentioned in his poetry and added: “You know, we

have many mad people in my family. I wanted once upon a time to write a book called ‘To Genos ton Loxon.’” How can we translate that into English? “The breed of . . .”

INTERVIEWER

Of madmen.

SEFERIS

Not quite of madmen. Of “oblique” men.

INTERVIEWER

Oblique men?

SEFERIS

I’m trying to get the precise translation of the word.

INTERVIEWER

Unbalanced men, perhaps.

SEFERIS

I said to him: “Mr. Palamas, it is a pity you *didn’t* write such a book.” Because I thought it would be a good book. He had an interesting sense of humor.

INTERVIEWER

What do you consider Palamas’s most significant contribution to Greek literature?

SEFERIS

Well, I said it in *Dokimes*, but I would repeat: his very important contribution to the Greek language. I mean compared to his, Cavafy’s expression seems rather faint, although at certain moments more real.

INTERVIEWER

But the minute you say “although more real” . . .

SEFERIS

Again, what I appreciate very much in Cavafy is his having started with terrifically unreal poems, and then, by insistence and work, he found at last his own personal voice. He wrote very bad poems up to his thirty-fourth year. The failure of those poems cannot be translated or communicated to a foreign reader because the language of the translation is always bound to improve them. There is no possibility of translating that sort of thing faithfully.

You know, what I admire—let me put it my own way—what I admire about Cavafy was this: He was a man who starts at a certain age with all signs showing that he's unable to produce anything of importance. And then, by refusing and refusing things which are offered him, in the end he *finds*, he *sees*, as they say; he becomes certain that he's found his own expression. It's a splendid example of a man who, through his refusals, finds his way.

INTERVIEWER

What did he refuse precisely?

SEFERIS

Expressions, and the easy things, verbosity—that sort of thing. Take his poem on ancient tragedy, for example. It is very bad. It is something unbelievable. By putting aside things like that, Cavafy improves his expression up to the end of his life, even up to the last poem he wrote on the outskirts of Antioch: the happenings between the Christians and Julian. And I admire him for going on to the end like that. He's a great example. He had the courage, up to the end of his life, not to admit certain things, to reject them. And that's why I have doubts about all these people who are trying to put into circulation all the rejected writings of Cavafy, unless one is very careful in reading him. You know, that needs a great deal of discernment.

INTERVIEWER

To turn now to the other well-known writer of the older generation, what about Kazantzakis? In the U.S., Cavafy is the poet who's respected by those who are themselves poets—Auden, for instance, and many of the important younger American poets; most of them know Cavafy, and most of them have a sympathetic attitude towards him. But among students and among those who are just beginning to learn about literature, Kazantzakis is by far the most popular Greek writer, both as poet and as novelist. Increasingly my job is to

try to discuss Kazantzakis's work—whether poetry or fiction—without diminishing him.

SEFERIS

I don't wonder. The thing is that one must have a possibility of being in contact with a writer, and that I cannot do in the case of Kazantzakis—a terrible thing for me, you know. I must give you a warning as far as Kazantzakis is concerned. On the one hand, there is his poetry—what is called poetry—and that's the *Odyssey* sequel, of course, and his plays in verse; and on the other hand, there is his prose: the novels. Now, as far as the novels are concerned, I am not competent to judge. I don't know how to speak about the novels. I have not read all of them. I hear from people whom I trust that they are very good, and they may well *be* very good. But the *Odyssey* sequel is another matter. There, although you have interesting passages, I'm afraid there is no poetry in them. I say interesting passages—passages that are informative about the man Kazantzakis; but I don't believe that's poetry, at least not the poetry I believe in.

INTERVIEWER

What about as “idea,” quite aside from poetic considerations? As statement of a philosophical or religious position.

SEFERIS

I don't know. I have no idea about philosophical positions and worldviews. You know, whenever worldviews begin interfering with writing—I don't know. I prefer worldviews in the sort of dry, repulsive, and (I don't know how to put it) prosaic way. I don't like people who try to express worldviews in writing poetry. I remember once I had a reading in Thessalonike, and a philosopher stood up and asked: “But what, after all, Mr. Seferis, is your worldview?” And I said: “My dear friend, I'm sorry to say that I have no world view. I have to make this public confession to you that I am writing without having any worldview. I don't know, perhaps you find that scandalous, sir, but may I ask you to tell me what Homer's worldview is?” And I didn't get an answer.

INTERVIEWER

To move on to a more general subject, you said during one of our conversations in Athens that a circumstance which is notable about Greek writers in this century was that so many of them were outside the Kingdom of

Greece proper. You mentioned yourself as an instance, having been brought up in Smyrna. Could you comment on the ways your Smyrna origin may have influenced your work or your general role as a man of letters?

SEFERIS

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. For example, I was terribly interested, as you know, in what happened in Crete in the seventeenth century. And in another way, people in Romania, for example, the principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, interested me very much—even odd minor people like Kaisarios Dapontes, if you know who he is. I think he was from somewhere in the northern islands, Skopelos of the Sporades, and he lived a long part of his life in the principalities, then Constantinople, and finally he retired to Mt. Athos under the name of Kaisarios. I don't mean that he is a great poet, simply that his way of expressing himself interests me. I don't say that he writes great poetry, but after all, one feels that in those countries in the eighteenth century, there was such a flourishing of Greek letters. Another monk of Mt. Athos—I'm trying to remember his name—yes, his name was Pamberis, wrote a poem, not a very long one because it would be an impossible achievement to write a long poem under the system he decided to use. He called it "Poiema Karkinikon," so to say, "Poem Cancerous." It was devised so that it could be read from left to right or from right to left, and still attempting to make sense—but a sense so remote that he had to put notes explaining what each line meant. These small details amuse me, you know. And I think that they add to the too professorial image we have of Greek literature. Or again, another text: "The Mass of the Beardless Man." It is a text written in the form of a mock Mass that parodies the Mass in a rather shocking way. It amuses me especially because I don't see enough light comic texts in our literature. Either people refrained from writing such texts, or such texts were eliminated by somber-minded academics.

INTERVIEWER

That's an interesting remark. You've said on another occasion that one thing which you find that the Anglo-Saxon tradition has and no other tradition has is that element of nonsense—an element which is fairly continuous in our literature and which seems always to have existed in some form.

SEFERIS

The Anglo-Saxon tradition is certainly different from ours in that respect; and I believe that no continental country can claim the same kind of nonsense that Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll offer.

INTERVIEWER

You've spent three periods of service in England, spread over the best part of your literary career. Did you find it an especially congenial climate for work?

SEFERIS

Not really. A very good place for me for writing was when I was in Albania because I was quite unknown there, and very isolated; at the same time I was near Greece, I mean, from the language point of view, and I could use my free time to advantage. There were no exhausting social functions.

INTERVIEWER

What about your acquaintance with English men of letters during your early years in England? You met Eliot, of course.

SEFERIS

No, I had a letter of introduction to Eliot, and I rang his office, but the secretary informed me that Eliot was in the United States. It was the time when he was Charles Eliot Norton Professor at Harvard. I never met Eliot nor any other writer in the beginning. First of all, I was rather shy as a person; then, it was a period when I was groping to find my own further expression. In contrast, when I came to England after World War II, my period in the Middle East had created a great many friends among the English, and when I came back to England as Counselor at the Embassy, I had no difficulty at all because by then I was quite well known in England. It was just after the publication of my first translation into English, *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, in 1948.

INTERVIEWER

During the period of your first official visit to England, I wonder whether you had any contact with English or American literature that you found particularly exciting along with Eliot's work.

SEFERIS

I think a very instructive man for me, as I found out afterwards, was W. B. Yeats. But I'm talking about Yeats's early period. After all, you see, I had endeavored to exploit folklore much as Yeats did.

INTERVIEWER

What about American literature? Did you have any favorite American authors in your formative years?

SEFERIS

It is an odd thing for us—I suppose that happens to everybody abroad—I mean, one gets into literature and art by chance. For example, I don't remember on what occasion I came to know Archibald MacLeish. And I translated him, as a matter of fact. I think I am the first man to have translated him in Greece. Then there was Marianne Moore. I had translated Marianne Moore before the war also. "The Monkeys," "To a Snail."

INTERVIEWER

You say you encountered them by accident. What was the accident?

SEFERIS

Oh, I don't know. Some review where I saw the poems, I don't remember which one. And again, Ezra Pound. I had already translated three *Cantos* before the war.

INTERVIEWER

When I brought up American literature, I was really thinking about the older American poets: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, for example.

SEFERIS

I knew Walt Whitman. Because I started with French literature, and Walt Whitman was translated into French early enough to be available to me. And then Henry Miller had an admiration for Whitman. He gave me many hints about him. That was quite near the outbreak of the war, of course. But I keep reading Whitman, as, in my youth, I was reading Edgar Allan Poe.

INTERVIEWER

Now that you're about to go back to Greece, do you have anything that you can say about this particular visit to the United States—which is your third visit, if I'm not mistaken—anything about your impressions of this country?

SEFERIS

My third visit to America has been the most important of all, this visit; it has been more substantial than the others. I don't believe that visiting New York helps you to understand America. Curiously enough, I am now in the middle of a wood in a remote place, Princeton, yet I have been able to see and understand more of America from this remote place than if I were in a great center.

INTERVIEWER

Of course Princetonians don't think Princeton is all that remote.

SEFERIS

Well, I mean for others who are trying, when they are traveling, to see cosmopolitan centers, it might look remote. And after all, we travelers do not attend courses at the university.

INTERVIEWER

What have you seen in particular during this visit that has impressed you?

SEFERIS

I don't want to mention things which impress me, you know. Nobody knows what impresses him on the spot. I mean it takes time to be elaborated somehow by memory.

INTERVIEWER

Did you get some work done?

SEFERIS

Yes, I think I did. I can't say. I don't know how to speak about work done. I have the impression that one can speak about work done only when the work

is finished. I am not inclined to speak about my work during the period of elaboration. But in any case, there is an inner feeling that you have not lost your time. Which is something. I mean, I want to be honest with you: I cannot mention anything really done. The only thing I can mention to you—and I'm not going to mention the substance of it—is that I wrote a poem of two lines.

INTERVIEWER

You just received a volume of Eugene McCarthy's poems. I found that rather moving: to discover that he had in fact written a volume of poems, and apparently during his campaign last year.

SEFERIS

Yes, why not? I mean I can very well understand that. If there was a period of euphoria, there is no reason why it shouldn't happen in poetry at the same time that it happens in a chapter of politics. One of my poems, "Thrush," was written after a terribly active period of my life—I mean, politically active, because I was principal private secretary to the Regent of Greece just before going to Poros. Of course poems do not appear like an eruption by a volcano; they need preparation. And I think back on "Thrush," I can well mark notes, lines, which I had started writing during the previous year, that most active year. Nevertheless, I remember days when the job was killing, because I was not a politician, I was just a servant, a public servant, and I remember days when I started going to my office at something like eight o'clock in the morning and returned back home the next day at five o'clock in the morning without having had any meal or any sleep. I mention that, of course, not in order to move you but in order to show you that, after all, time was pressing then. But I was also writing. Of course, there are other things which influenced my work at that time, and among other things I might mention the fact that I returned to my country after a great period of longing, at the end of the war.

INTERVIEWER

Do you feel that, in addition to the lines you wrote, the poem was gestating in some significant way during this very active period, so that when you went to Poros it could come out as the coherent work it is in a relatively short period? A month of vacation, wasn't it?

SEFERIS

Two months. The first long holiday I ever had during my career—the longest one.

INTERVIEWER

And you were able to write the poem—and it is a long poem—in effect during one sitting: the long sitting of that two-month vacation?

SEFERIS

No. You'll find the story of my writing that poem in the diary of this period, the period of '46 on Poros. I used to go for a swim—no, first I would cut wood in the garden (which was a huge garden), then go to the sea, and then work up to night, up to darkness, which started at seven o'clock. And it is strange, you know, how—excuse me for talking like this—I noticed how one is cleansed progressively by such a life. For example, I noticed that cleansing in my dreams, as I mentioned in this diary which has been recently published.

INTERVIEWER

I have only one more really general topic to bring up. I wonder if you feel, as the result of your rather unique position in Greek letters now—I suppose any poet has a unique position in his country once he's won the Nobel Prize—if you feel that this in any way has affected your sense of a public role as a man of letters as distinct from your private role as a poet—any responsibility you may feel towards younger poets, for instance, towards the cultural life around you, or any position you may sense you have to maintain in relation to your country.

SEFERIS

I should from the beginning tell you quite bluntly—if I can say it in English—that the Nobel Prize is an accident, no more than an accident. It's not an appointment. And I have no feeling that I have been appointed to any sort of function. It is just an accident which one has to try and forget as soon as possible. Otherwise, if you are overdazzled by that sort of thing, you get lost and founder. At the time I won the prize, there was a sort of—how can I put it in English?—a sort of Cassandra-like critic who wrote that Seferis should be very careful because he's going to be completely dried up as far as his work is concerned and even die from various illnesses since that sort of thing happens to people who have that kind of success. He was just exaggerating

the one side of it without considering, after all, what showed in the way I reacted to the prize. For example, I said in Stockholm to my judges (or whatever they are): Gentlemen, I thank you—this at the end of a sort of lecture I gave there—for allowing me, after a long effort, to be *nobody*, to be unnoticed, as Homer says of Ulysses. And I was quite sincere. After all, I don't recognize the right of anybody to take you by the back of your neck and throw you into a sort of ocean of empty responsibilities. Why, that's scandalous, after all.

INTERVIEWER

Now let's move away from the issue of the Nobel Prize. Greece, being a small country, seems to me to have always had, somehow, a tradition (it's an informal tradition, unlike the British one) of an unofficial but generally recognized poet laureate—a feeling among poets and their followers that there is one spokesman for poetry in each particular generation—even if the role of spokesman is sometimes self-assumed. Sikelianos, for example, played that role. And in his day, so did Palamas.

SEFERIS

Well, yes, God bless them, but I'm sorry to say that I never felt I was the spokesman for anything or anybody. There are no credentials which appoint anybody to be a spokesman for something. Now others consider that a sort of function which must be performed; but I think that is, after all, why I have written so little. I've never felt the obligation; I have to consider only that I am not dried up as a poet and to write. I mean that has been my feeling from the very beginning. I remember when I published my first book, there were lots of people who said: "Mr. Seferis, you must now try to show us that you can do more." I answered them: "Gentlemen, you must consider that every poem published by me is the last one. I never have any feeling about its continuation." My last poem. And if I write another one, it's a great blessing. Now how much I have worked in order to produce the next poem, or how much I have not worked, is another matter—a private matter. Others think that they are the voices of the country. All right. God bless them. And sometimes they've been very good in that function.

INTERVIEWER

Joyce felt that way a bit. I'm thinking of the famous remark by Stephen Dedalus at the end of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

SEFERIS

I can give you another example. In my youth there was an enormous amount of discussion about the problem of knowing, or trying to define, what is Greek and what is not Greek—praising one thing as Greek and condemning something else as un-Greek: trying, in short, to establish “the real” Greek tradition. So I wrote, “Greekness is the sum of the authentic works which are going to be produced by Greeks.” We cannot say that we have *some* works creating the conscience of Greece. We see a line, but surrounded by large margins of darkness. It isn’t simple. I don’t know what my voice is. If others, for the time being, consider that it is *their* conscience, so much the better. It’s up to them to decide. It’s not up to me to impose; because you cannot be a sort of dictator in these matters.

INTERVIEWER

Some would think yours the healthy attitude, but there are other people who feel that a Nobel Prize winner, especially when he is the only one the country has ever had, *ought* to be a spokesman and a public conscience.

SEFERIS

It might be so, but, after all, one takes the attitude which is imposed on him by his nature, or whatever you call it. At the same time, I have never forced myself to write anything which I didn’t think necessary. When I say “necessary,” I mean which I *had* to express or be smothered.

INTERVIEWER

Well, I’ve run out of questions. Since you don’t have any grand advice for the younger generation, I’ve nothing more to ask you.

SEFERIS

I *have* advice.

INTERVIEWER

Oh you *do*? Good.

SEFERIS

I have the following advice to give to the younger Greek generation: to try to exercise themselves as much as they can in the modern Greek language. And not to write it upside down. I have to tell them that in order to write, one must believe in what one does, not seeming to believe that one is believing something. They must remember that the only job in which one cannot lie is poetry. You can't lie in poetry. If you are a liar, you'll always be discovered. Perhaps now, perhaps in five years, in ten years, but you are going to be discovered eventually if you are lying.

INTERVIEWER

When you speak of lying, you're speaking first of all about lying against your emotional . . .

SEFERIS

I don't know what I mean. Perhaps it is an emotional thing. In the reality of one's thoughts. I don't know. I mean, there is a special sound about the solid, the sound thing. You knock against it, and it renders a sort of sound which proves that it is genuine.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think every writer always knows himself whether the sound he hears is genuine or not?

SEFERIS

No. It is difficult to say. But he must somehow have an instinct—a guiding instinct—which says to him: "My dear boy, my dear chap, be careful; you are going to fall. You are exaggerating at this moment." And then, when he hears that, he should not take a drug in order to say to himself: "Why, you are all right, my dear." You are not all right, my dear, at all.

* Parenthetical dates indicate publication in translation.

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