

# **Some Notes on Modern Greek Tradition:**

## **The Nobel Prize Lecture**

**George Seferis**

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A poet who is especially dear to me, the Irishman W.B. Yeats, Nobel laureate of 1923, on his return from Stockholm wrote an account of his trip entitled «The Bounty of Sweden». I was reminded of it when the Swedish Academy honoured me so greatly by its choice. «The bounty of Sweden» is for us much older and extends much further. I do not think that any Greek, on learning of the homage you have paid to my country, could forget the good that Sweden has done in our country with altruism, patience, and such perfect humanity, whether it was done by your archaeologists in times of peace or by your Red Cross missions during the war. I pass over many other gestures of solidarity that we have seen more recently.

When your King, His Majesty Gustav Adolf VI, handed me the diploma of the Nobel Prize, I could not but remember with emotion the days when as Crown Prince he was determined to make his personal contribution to the excavations of the Acropolis of Asine. When I first met Axel Persson, that generous man who had devoted himself to the same excavation, I called him my godfather – godfather because Asine had given me a poem.

In the town of Missolonghi a granite monument has been dedicated to the Swedes who died for Greece in her struggle for independence. Our gratitude is even more durable than that granite.

One evening at the beginning of the last century, in a street on the island of Zante, Dionysios Solomos heard an old beggar at the door of a tavern reciting a popular ballad on the burning of the Holy Sepulchre at Jerusalem. Extending his hand, the beggar said:

The Holy Sepulchre of Christ, it did not burn;

Where the holy light shines, no other fire can burn.

Solomos, we are told, was seized with such enthusiasm that he entered the tavern and ordered free drinks for all those present. This anecdote is significant for me; I have always considered it as a symbol of the gift of poetry that our people are left in the hands of a prince of the spirit at the very moment when the resurrection of modern Greece begins.

This symbol represents a long development that has not yet been completed. It is my intention to speak to you of some men who have been important in the struggle for Greek expression ever since we started breathing the air of liberty. Forgive me if my account is sketchy, but I do not wish to tax your patience.

Our difficulties began with the Alexandrians who, dazzled by the Attic classics, began to teach what is correct and incorrect in writing, began, in other words, to teach purism. They did not consider that language is a living organism and that nothing can stop its growth. They were indeed very successful and brought forth generation after generation of purists, who have

survived even to our day. They represent one of the two great currents in our language and our tradition that have never been interrupted.

The other current, long disregarded, is the vulgar, popular, or oral tradition. It is as old as the former and has its own written documents. I was moved when one day I happened to read a letter from a sailor to his father, preserved on a second-century papyrus. I was struck by the actuality and the presence of its language, and I grieved that for many centuries a wealth of sentiments had remained unexpressed, stifled forever by the vast shroud of purism and the niceties of the rhetorical style. The Gospels, too, as you know, were written in the popular language of their period. If one thinks of the Apostles, who wanted to be understood and appreciated by the common people, one can only view with anguish the human perversity that caused uproars in Athens at the beginning of the century on the occasion of a translation of the Gospels, and which even today would brand as unlawful the translation of the words of Christ.

But I am anticipating. The two currents ran parallel until the fall of the Greek Byzantine Empire. On the one hand, there were the scholars, refined by a thousand embellishments of the mind. On the other hand, there were the common people, who regarded them with respect but nevertheless continued in their own modes of expression. I do not think that during the Byzantine era there ever was a rapprochement between the two currents, that is, a phenomenon such as one observes in the frescoes and mosaics of the years preceding the end of the Empire under the Paleologues. At that time imperial art and the popular art of the provinces merged to produce a splendid renewal.

However, Constantinople underwent a long agony before she fell. When she was finally taken, a servitude, which was to last for several centuries, descended on the entire nation. Many then were the scholars who, «carrying the heavy urns filled with the ashes of their ancestors», as the poet says, came to the Occident to spread the seeds of what came to be called the Renaissance. But that Renaissance – I mean the word in its strict sense, as we use it to indicate the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern age, whether it was good or bad – that Renaissance was not known in Greece, with the exception of certain islands, notably Crete, which was then under Venetian rule. There, toward the sixteenth century, was developed a poetry and a verse drama in a language splendidly alive and perfectly sure of itself. Considering that at the same time important schools of painting were flourishing in Crete and that toward the middle of the century the great Cretan painter Domenicos Theotocopoulos, who came to be known as El Greco, was born and grew up on that island, the fall of Crete is an even more painful event than the fall of Constantinople.

Constantinople had, after all, received a fatal blow from the Crusaders in 1204. She was merely outliving herself. Crete, on the other hand, was full of vigour, and one can only brood with a curious mixture of grief and faith over the destiny of that Greek land whose people are always ready to rebuild what the squalls of history are to overthrow again. One is reminded of what the poet Kalvos wrote to General Lafayette: «God and our Despair».

At any rate, the revival in Crete began to decline in the middle of the seventeenth century. At that time many Cretans sought refuge in the Ionian Islands and in other parts of Greece. They brought with them their poems, which they knew by heart and which were immediately adopted in their new surroundings. These poems sometimes blended with the popular songs

preserved by the Greeks of the mainland, together with their legends, for many generations. There is evidence that some of them may date back to pagan times; others emerged in the course of the centuries, such as the cycle of Digenis Acritas, a product of the Byzantine era. They make us realize that throughout the ages the same attitudes toward work, suffering, joy, love, and death persisted without change. But at the same time their expression is so fresh, so free and full of humanity, that they make us feel intuitively to what extent the spirit of Greece has always remained faithful to itself. I have so far avoided giving you examples. However much I am indebted to my translators – it is through them that you are able to know me – I have the painful feeling of a distortion beyond recovery when I translate my language into language that is not mine. Forgive me if for the moment I cannot help making an exception. It is a very short poem about the death of a loved one:

To protect you I placed three guards: the sun on  
the mountain, the eagle on the plain, and the fresh  
north wind on the ships. The sun has set;  
the eagle has fallen asleep; and the ships have  
carried away the fresh north wind. Charon saw  
his chance and took you away.

I have given you a pale reflection of the poem, which is radiant in Greek.

Here you have in very simplified terms the antecedents of modern Greece. It is the heritage which the old beggar in front of the tavern on Zante bequeathed to Dionysios Solomos one evening. That image comes to my mind whenever I think of him and of what he has given to us.

In the history of modern Greek poetry there is no lack of strange figures and cases. It would have been much more natural, for instance, if the

poetry of a country of sailors, peasants, and soldiers had begun with rough and simple songs. But the opposite happened. It began with a man driven by the daemon of the absolute, who was born on the island of Zante. The level of culture on the Ionian Islands was at that time much superior to that on the mainland. Solomos had studied in Italy. He was a great European and very much aware of the problems faced by the poetry of his century. He could have made his career in Italy. He wrote poems in Italian, and he did not lack encouragement; but he preferred the narrow gate and decided to do his work in Greek. Solomos certainly knew the poems that the Cretan refugees had brought with them. He was a fervent partisan of the popular language and an enemy of purism. His views on the subject have been preserved in his *Dialogue between the Poet and the Pedant Scholar* (we should understand that word in the sense in which Rabelais uses the word Sorbonicole). I cite at random: «Is there anything in my mind», he exclaims, «but liberty and language?» Or again: «Submit to the language of the people, and if you are strong enough, conquer it.» He undertook this conquest and through this undertaking he became a great Greek. Solomos is without doubt the author of the «Hymn to Freedom», the first stanzas of which have become our national anthem, and of other poems that have been set to music and widely sung in the course of the last century. But it is not for this reason that his heritage is so valuable to us; it is because he charted as definitively as his age permitted him the course that Greek expression was to take. He loved the living language and worked all his life to raise it to the level of the poetry of which he dreamt. It was an effort beyond the powers of any single individual. Of his great poems – for instance «The Free Besieged», inspired by the siege and sufferings of the town of Missolonghi – only fragments remain to us, the dust from a diamond that the craftsman took into his tomb. We have nothing but fragments and blank spaces to represent the struggle of this great soul which

was as tense as a bow-string that is about to snap. Many generations of Greek writers have bent over those fragments and those blank spaces. Solomos died in 1857. In 1927, *I Gynaika tis Zakynthos* [Woman of Zante] was published for the first time and established him as a great prose writer just as he had long been acknowledged as a great poet. It is a magnificent work that makes a profound impact on our minds. In a significant manner fate willed that seventy years after his death Solomos would reply by means of this message to the inquietude of new generations. He has always been a beginning.

Andreas Kalvos, a contemporary of Solomos, was one of the most isolated figures in Greek literature. There is not even a portrait of him. A friend of the Italian poet Ugo Foscolo, he soon was embroiled in a quarrel with him. He was born on the island of Zante and lived for many years on Corfu. He does not seem to have had any contact with Solomos. His entire work consists of a slender volume of twenty odes published when he was barely thirty. In his youth he travelled extensively in Italy, Switzerland, and England. He had a lofty mind, imbued with the moral ideas of the end of the eighteenth century, devoted to virtue, fiercely opposed to tyranny. His poetry is inspired by the grandeur and sorrow of a martyred nation. It is moving to see how this man, who lost his mother as a child, in the depth of his consciousness identifies the love for his lost mother with that for his country. His language is irregular; his rhymes idiosyncratic; he had a classical ideal in mind and despised what he called «the monotony of the Cretan poems» that had given so much to Solomos. But his images are flashes of lightning and of such immediate power that they seem to tear his poetry apart. After a solitary life on Corfu, devoted to teaching, he left the Ionian Islands for good. He married a second time in London and with his wife opened a boarding school for girls in a small provincial town in England. There he lived for fourteen years until his death, without ever renewing contact with Greece.

I have made a pilgrimage to those regions haunted by the shadows of Tennyson. An old man who loved that part of the country told me that he had once interviewed old women of eighty who had been pupils of Kalvos and whose memories were full of respect for their old master. But again I was unable to free myself from the image of that faceless man, clad in black, striking his lyre on an isolated promontory. His work fell into oblivion; doubtless his voice did not conform to the taste for unreal and romantic rhetoric that swept Athens at that period. He was rediscovered about 1890 by Kostis Palamas. Greece had matured meanwhile, and it was the time when the young forces of modern Greece were beginning to burst forth. The struggle for a living language was widening. There were exaggerations, but that was only natural. The struggle, continuing for many years, went beyond literature and was characterized by the will to challenge every aspect of the present. It turned enthusiastically toward public education. One rejected ready-made forms and ideas. One certainly wanted to preserve the heritage of the ancients, but at the same time there was an interest in the common people; one wanted to illuminate the one by the other. One wondered about the identity of the Greek of today. Scholars and schoolmasters took part in this struggle. Important studies of Greek folklore appeared during this period, and there was a growing realization of the continuity of our tradition as well as of the need for a critical spirit.

Kostis Palamas played a great role in this movement. I was an adolescent when I first saw him; he was giving a lecture. He was a very short man, who impressed one by his deep eyes and by his voice, which was rich with a somewhat tremulous quality. His work was vast and influenced decades of Greek literary life. He expressed himself in all genres of poetry – lyric, epic, and satirical; at the same time he was our most important critic. He had an astonishing knowledge of foreign literatures, proving once again that Greece



is a crossroads, and that since the time of Herodotus or Plato it has never been closed to foreign currents, especially in its best moments. Palamas inevitably had enemies, often among those who had profited from the road he had opened. I consider him a force of nature in comparison with which the critics look petty. When he appeared, it was as if a force of nature, held back and accumulated for over a thousand years of purism, had finally burst the dikes. When the waters are freed to flood a thirsty plain, one must not ask that they carry only flowers. Palamas was profoundly aware of all the components of our civilization, ancient, Byzantine, and modern. A world of unexpressed things thronged his soul. It was that world, his world, which he liberated. I would not maintain that his abundance never harmed him, but the people that assembled about his coffin in 1943 clearly felt something of what I have just told you when at the moment of final farewell they spontaneously sang our national anthem, the hymn to freedom, under the eyes of the occupation authorities.

One hundred and fifty-four poems constitute the known work of Constantine Cavafy, who is at the opposite pole from Palamas. He is that rare among poets whose motivating force is not the word; the danger lies in the abundance of words. He was part of the Hellenic culture that flourished in Egypt and is disappearing today. Except for a few absences, he spent all his life in Alexandria, his native city. His art is characterized by rejections and by his sense of history. By history I do not mean the account of the past, but the history that lives in the present and sheds light on our present life, on its drama and its destiny. I compare Cavafy to that Proteus of the Alexandrian shore who, Homer says, changed his form incessantly. His tradition was not that of the popular art which Solomos and Palamas had followed; it was the scholarly tradition. Whereas they took their inspiration from a popular song or tale, he would have recourse to Plutarch or to an obscure chronicler or to

the deeds of a Ptolemy or a Seleucid. His language is a mixture of what he learned from his family (a fine family from Constantinople) and what his ear picked up in the streets of Alexandria, for he was a city man. He loved countries and periods in which the frontiers are not well defined, in which personalities and beliefs are fluid. Many of his characters are partly pagan and partly Christian, or live in a mixed environment: «Syrians, Greeks, Armenians, Medes», as he has said. Once you have become familiar with his poetry, you begin to ask yourself if it is not a projection of our present life into the past, or perhaps if history has not decided all of a sudden to invade our present existence. His world is a preliminary world that comes back to life with the grace of a young body. His friend E.M. Forster told me that, when he read to him for the first time a translation of his poems, Cavafy exclaimed in surprise, «But you understand, my dear Forster, you understand» He had so completely forgotten what it was like to be understood!

Time has passed since then, and Cavafy has been abundantly translated and commented upon. I am thinking at this moment of your true poet and generous Hellenist, the late Hjalmar Gullberg, who introduced Cavafy to Sweden. But Greece has several facets, and not all of them are obvious. I am thinking of the poet Anghelos Sikelianos. I knew him well, and it is easy to recall his magnificent voice as he recited his poetry. He had something of the splendour of a bard of a former age, but at the same time he was uncommonly familiar with our land and the peasants. Everybody loved him. He was called simply «Anghelos», as if he were one of them. He knew instinctively how to establish a relation between the words and the behaviour of a Parnassus shepherd or a village woman and the sacred world which he inhabited. He was possessed by a god, a force made up of Apollo, Dionysius, and Christ. A poem he wrote one Christmas night during the last war, «Dionysius in the Manger», begins «my sweet child, my Dionysus and my Christ.» And it is truly

amazing to see how in Greece the old pagan religion has blended with orthodox Christianity. In Greece Dionysus, too, was a crucified god. Cavafy, who has so strongly felt and expressed the resurrection of man and the world, is nonetheless the same man who has written, «Death is the only way.» He understood that life and death are two faces of the same thing. I used to visit him whenever I passed through Greece. He suffered from a long illness, but the force that inspired him never left him to the end. One evening at his home, after his fainting spell had alarmed us, he told me, «I have seen the absolute black; it was unspeakably beautiful.»

Now, I should like to end this brief account with a man who has always been dear to me; he has supported me in difficult hours, when all hope seemed gone. He is an extreme case of contrasts, even in my country. He is not an intellectual. But the intellect thrown back upon itself sometimes needs freshness, like the dead who needed fresh blood before answering Ulysses. At the age of thirty-five he learned to read and write a little in order to record, so he said, what he had seen during the war of independence, in which he had taken a very active part. His name is Ioannis Makriyannis. I compare him to one of those old olive trees in our country which were shaped by the elements and which can, I believe, teach a man wisdom. He, too, was shaped by human elements, by many generations of human souls. He was born near the end of the eighteenth century on the Greek mainland near Delphi. He tells us how his poor mother, while she was gathering faggots, was seized by labour pains and gave birth to him in a forest. He was not a poet, but song was in him, as it has always been in the soul of the common people. When a foreigner, a Frenchman, visited him, he invited him for a meal; he tells us, «My guest wanted to hear some of our songs, so I invented some for him.» He had a singular talent for expression; his writing resembles a wall built stone by stone; all his words perform their function and have their roots; sometimes

there is something Homeric in their movement. No other man has taught me more how to write prose. He disliked the false pretences of rhetoric. In a moment of anger he exclaimed, «You have appointed a new commander to the citadel of Corinth – a pedant. His name was Achilles, and in hearing the name you thought that it was the famous Achilles and that the name was going to fight. But a name never fights; what fights is valour, love of one's country, and virtue.» But at the same time one perceives his love for the ancient heritage, when he said to soldiers who were about to sell two statues to foreigners: «Even if they pay you ten thousand thalers, don't let the statues leave our soil. It is for them that we fought.» Considering that the war had left many scars on the body of this man, one may rightly conclude that these words carried some weight. Toward the end of his life his fate became tragic. His wounds caused him intolerable pain. He was persecuted, thrown into prison, tried, and condemned. In his despair he wrote letters to God. «And You don't hear us, You don't see us.» That was the end. Makriyannis died in the middle of the last century. His memoirs were deciphered and published in 1907. It took many more years for the young to realize his true stature.

I have spoken to you about these men because their shadows have followed me ever since I started on my journey to Sweden and because their efforts represent to my mind the efforts of a body shackled for centuries which, with its chains finally broken, regains life and gropes and searches for its natural activity. No doubt, my account has many limitations. I have distorted by oversimplifying. The limitation I particularly dislike is inherent in any personal matter. I have certainly omitted great names, for instance, Adamantios Korais and Alexandros Papadiamantis. But how to talk about all this without making a choice? Forgive my shortcomings. In any case, I have only indicated some landmarks, and that I have done as simply as possible. In addition to those men, and in the periods that separated them, there were of

course many generations of dedicated workers who sacrificed their lives to advance the spirit a little more toward that many-faced expression which is the Greek expression. I also wanted to express my solidarity with my people, not only with the great masters of the mind, but with the unknown, the ignored, those who pored over a book with the same devotion with which one bends over an icon; with the children who had to walk for hours to get to schools far away from their villages «to learn the letters, the things of God», as their song has it. To echo once more my friend Makriyannis, one must not say «I» one must say «we», because no one does anything alone. I think it is good that it be so. I need that solidarity because, if I do not understand the men of our country with their virtues and vices, I feel that I could not understand the other men in the wide world.

I have not spoken to you of the ancients. I did not want to tire you. Perhaps I should add a few words. Since the fifteenth century, since the fall of Byzantium, they have increasingly become the heritage of mankind. They have been integrated into what we have come to call European civilization. We rejoice that so many nations contribute to bring them closer to our life. Still, there are certain things that have remained our inalienable possessions. When I read in Homer the simple words «*dao*z *helioio*» – today I would say «*dwz tou hliou*» (the sunlight) – I experience a familiarity that stems from a collective soul rather than from an intellectual effort. It is a tone, one might say, whose harmonies reach quite far; it feels very different from anything a translation can give. For we do, after all, speak the same language – a language changed, if you insist, by an evolution of several thousand years, but despite everything faithful to itself – and the feeling for a language derives from emotions as much as from knowledge. This language shows the imprints of deeds and attitudes repeated throughout the ages down to our own. These imprints sometimes have a surprising way of simplifying problems of inter-

pretention that seem very difficult to others. I will not say that we are of the same blood, for I abhor racial theories, but we have always lived in the same country and have seen the same mountains slope into the sea. Perhaps I have used the word «tradition» without pointing out that it does not mean habit. On the contrary, tradition holds us by the ability to break habits, and thus proves its vitality.

Nor have I talked to you of my own generation, the generation on which fell the burden of a moral reorientation after the exodus of one and a half million people from Asia Minor and which witnessed a unique phenomenon in Greek history, the reflux to the Greek mainland, the concentration of our population, once dispersed in flourishing centres the world over.

And, finally, I have not spoken to you of the generation that came after us, whose childhood and adolescence were mangled during the years of the last war. It undoubtedly has new problems and other points of view: Greece is becoming more and more industrialized. Nations are moving more closely together. The world is changing. Its movements are speeding up. One might say that it is characteristic of the new generation to point out abysses, whether in the human soul or in the universe about us. The concept of duration has changed. It is a sorrowful and restless young generation. I understand its difficulties; they are, after all, not so different from ours. A great worker for our liberty, Righas Pheraios, has taught us: «Free thoughts are good thoughts.» But I should like our youth to think at the same time of the saying engraved on the lintel above the gate of your university at Uppsala: «Free thoughts are good; just thoughts are better.»

I have come to the end. I thank you for your patience. I am also grateful that «the bounty of Sweden» has permitted me in the end to feel as if I were

«nobody» – understanding this word in the sense that Ulysses gave it when he replied to the Cyclops, Polyphemus: «outiz» – nobody, in that mysterious current which is Greece.

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