

Seferis's Lost Centre

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When we think of George Seferis, we think, first of all, of the poet, the literary critic, and even, perhaps, of the diplomat. Yet there is a further, equally public, equally crucial side to Seferis, and that is his *persona*, to use Edmund Keeley's fitting term, as a serious and committed letter-writer. In his case especially, letters become a vital part of his work, wittingly and quite revealingly. Together with his diaries, they are his very own literary workshop, where he searches for ideas, shares experiences, or tries out lines, where he most importantly becomes aware of himself as a poet, as a literary figure, in the eyes of others.

Their most extraordinary quality, however, is that through his letters Seferis completes what is no less than the conscious foundation of a new world, a world that he offers as an answer to the adversity and the crisis of the historical reality that surrounds him. If, through poetry, he seeks to express that world's spirit and sentiment, and through criticism to define it theoretically, then the letters supply this world with its society, its necessary humanity; they do so, moreover, upon highly demanding terms of real life, which are opposed to all utopias or any sort of "ivory-tower" game of make-believe.¹

This sense of purpose, which is inalienable from Seferis himself, endows his correspondence with particular significance: like the statues in his poetry, his letters have a value that is real and tangible, documenting, as they do, what we call, sometimes all too easily, the sense of an era. Yet they are also part of that

¹ G. Seferis, *Μέρες Δ'* (Athens: Ikaros 1977), pp. 331-2, entry for 10 May 1944 (on Malanos). Seferis's term is "πυργοελεφάντινος αισθητισμός". Unless otherwise noted, all English translations in this paper are mine.

“function of humanisation”, as he calls it in his crucial “Second introduction to *The Waste Land*” (1949), which lies at the centre of Seferis’s vision, in all its rich hues and connotations. There are many things that we are still trying to grasp regarding Seferis, not because we are merely curious, but because the man was – and is – important, as a man and as a poet. I believe that in his letters Seferis gives us an extraordinary wealth of indispensable signs so that we may indeed understand him. They are resonant with his poetry, his rare humanity, his sharp, more than often brilliant, mind. They show us, in the most unequivocal manner, how much of a vital, almost a practical, necessity literature was for him – and in their living quality they offer us what is perhaps the best expression of the meaning that Seferis gave to this act of creation to which he dedicated his life.

This is one answer among the many that we seek regarding Seferis and his poetry, his place in Modern Greek letters. It constitutes the subject of one of the most central examples of Greek literary criticism, “The Lost Centre” by Zissimos Lorentzatos, himself a good friend of Seferis.² The richness of the essay would demand more time than I have at my disposal. What I would like to do, however, is to suggest how, with the help of Seferis’s correspondence, Seferis’s own silence regarding that essay may be finally resolved. Lorentzatos wrote “The Lost Centre” για τον Σεφέρη – for Seferis; I would like, very respectfully, to dedicate in turn what follows to Zissimos Lorentzatos himself.

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Letters are important to Seferis throughout his life. He writes regularly and assiduously, laying repeated emphasis on the value

² “Το Χαμένο Κέντρο”, originally published in: *Για τον Σεφέρη: Τιμητικό αφιέρωμα στα τριάντα χρόνια της Στροφής* (Athens: Konstantinidis & Michalás 1961), pp. 87-146; now in: Z. Lorentzatos, *Μελέτες*. Vol. 1 (Athens: Domos 1994), pp. 334-419.

of complete communication. His letters are certainly quite lengthy, resplendent in their depth and richness when time permits it. He composes their text with conscious care, sometimes going through several versions, sometimes even sending off a well-crafted reply on the very same day. Yet the crux of his correspondence is its simplicity, its intense, personal human quality. Seferis writes concurrently to several friends or more “formal” colleagues at any one time, yet he is able to keep meticulous track of his correspondence. This may be attributed in part to the keen attention to order that would be essential to Seferiades the diplomat, and it is Seferis himself who keeps the two apart, as separate manifestations of himself. What transpires, nonetheless, from the letters, is a serious commitment to personal relationships – a declared need for deep human friendship, and for honest intellectual dialogue. Indeed, the words “friend” and “dialogue” are used time after time and have a weight that is only commensurate to his esteem for literature and for the value of life itself. In one of his earlier diaries he writes that letters “are the only means available so that one may receive some sign or other from a human being, in this chaos of our lives”³ – a vision of connectedness that permeates (or dictates) more than his private existence. As he will assert adamantly in one of his letters to the Greek critic and poet Timos Malanos, art itself “is not an isolated pastime or amusement” but “a serious intercourse with others”.⁴

By means of letters, Seferis will consciously forge a complex network of such human beings, with whom he exchanges the vital signs he yearns for. He maintains, with every correspondent, a direct, unbroken line of communication, reserving for each a fully distinctive voice and precious intimacy. Each epistolary relationship, as Seferis makes clear, is to him unique

³ G. Seferis, *Μέρες Β'* (Athens: Ikaros 1975), p. 48. Entry for 28 February 1932.

⁴ G. Seferis and T. Malanos, *Αλληλογραφία (1935-1963)*. Φιλολογική επιμέλεια Δ. Δασκαλόπουλος (Athens: Olkos 1990), p. 237. Letter of 13 May 1944.

and personally necessary: he calls it “επαφή ζωής” – a vital touch with life.⁵ At the same time, it becomes evident from the undeniable intensity and the sheer volume of these letters that what Seferis desires reaches far beyond the personal. What he is creating is a surrounding circle of humanity, which will draw its life-breath from the answer that its members may give regarding their greatest debate: the purpose of Literature and the meaning that literature could have, should have, in a world whose disintegration and crisis they all suffer deeply and profoundly.

As Seferis insists throughout and invariably, everything depends on this value of literature as not merely an aesthetic theory of art, but also – or especially – as an urgently required art of living. It is in this sense that poetry and letters are for Seferis a “vital, primal need”,⁶ and as such they are equally a precise and most demanding labour: they call for

all the responsibility of a battle between life and death. Surrounded by a raging or a muted humanity, what, if anything, shall [the poet, “the sound craftsman”] salvage from it all? What can he salvage? What are the things that he ought to forsake from within this shapeless human substance, which is, nonetheless, frighteningly alive, and which haunts him even into his own private dreams?⁷

This fundamental synergy between life and art, this serious commerce with literature as a form of vital action, is certainly not unique to Seferis: perhaps the most exciting feature of European Modernism is this sense of an implicated, interested community that existed between writers and artists alike, and Seferis as a poet and as a critic is very much a part of that

⁵ *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου (1948-1968)*. Επιμελήθηκε Ν. Δ. Τριανταφυλλόπουλος (Athens: Domos 1990), p. 165. Letter of 14 April 1962.

⁶ “Ημερολόγιο ενός ποιήματος” – sent to Lorentzatos 4 September 1948; see *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου*, p. 190.

⁷ G. Seferis, *Δοκιμές*. Πρώτος τόμος (Athens: Ikaros 1944, reprinted 1984), p. 267.

world. We know that he studied carefully the published correspondence of others, of Yeats, Gide or Claudel, for example, and we may therefore say that he acknowledged it as an essential part of the quest for adequate literary expression. In this respect, Seferis's correspondence is certainly intentional, more than a chat between friends or fellow-writers. And even though his letters show the finest degree of intimacy and a lack of all ceremony, they are never casual, nor are they ever simply conversational. Their deep humanity never outbalances their sense of purpose, which is always that of the meaning which must be given to every creative act. Yet it would also be right to say that, if for the great majority of writers letters became a *forum* for discussion, for Seferis they constituted *part of a way of life*. Creation and humanity are emphasised as inextricable parts of each other, and together they attain the state of solidity and of faith that Seferis sought throughout: "So that I may step on the firm stone that each of us must have inside him" (Να πατήσω την πέτρα τη σκληρή που ο καθένας πρέπει να έχει μέσα του).⁸

Among all his exchanged letters, the correspondence between Seferis and Zissimos Lorentzatos must hold, I think, a rather special place. It is indeed tremendous in its human quality, remarkable in its profundity and intellectual intensity, and no less momentous in the effect that it came to have on the literary consciousness of Greece, not only in Seferis's time, but well into our own. This relationship begins in 1947, grows excitedly warm and close during the years 1948-55, intense and urgent during 1955-62, and almost mysteriously still from that year on and until Seferis's death in 1971. The divisions are not arbitrary. They are the result of defining moments in the dialogue between Seferis and Lorentzatos, concurrent, every time, with something new and equally defining in the work of each. From N. D. Triantaphyllopoulos, we know that their friendship began in a similar way, after Lorentzatos sent to Seferis his

⁸ *Μέρες Β*, p. 60. Entry for 14 May 1932.

study on Solomos – the first of what was to become a life-long series of seminal studies in literature.⁹ The first letters that they exchange show that there was immediate recognition of all that they had in common, and after a mere five months Seferis establishes this feeling of mutual complicity of minds and of spirits with unequivocal mischief: “the name Zissimos”, he writes, “feels too cumbersome” – would Lorentzatos mind terribly if he called him “Ζη”?¹⁰ Not in the least, and Seferis himself becomes “Σε” in Lorentzatos’s reply. The spell remains strong and unbroken until Lorentzatos resumes the greeting “my dear George” once on 17 February 1954, and then again on 7 March 1956, insisting on it even after Seferis tries “Ζη” for one last time in his own reply a month later. From that date, Σε and Ζη become once again George and Zissimos until the very end.

That first eight-year-long period of “Ζη and Σε”, of “letters between two Chinamen”, as Lorentzatos will playfully write at one point,¹¹ gives us the clearest image of what went into the building of their relationship, and also the signs which will determine their individual courses. For Lorentzatos, Seferis has an almost numinous aura. Self-consciously the younger of the two, by fifteen years, Lorentzatos describes Seferis as the poet he has read avidly and whose “moon-silvery tracks” he had long followed even before their meeting: he has “found Seferis waiting for him at every crossroads”¹² of his own journey. In his letters, respect and eager affinity are only matched by Lorentzatos’s own extraordinary passion for literature and by the richness and the scope of his knowledge and his intellect. For Seferis, in turn, this correspondence is, I believe, equally

⁹ *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου*, editor’s note, p. 11. Triantaphyllopoulos cites George Savidis as his source.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35. Letter of 26 August 1948.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39. Letter of 2 October 1948.

¹² Both from “The Lost Centre”: Lorentzatos, *Μελέτες*, p. 392. For the second, cf. *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου*, Lorentzatos to Seferis, 17 March 1949: “I have met you before, in many dead-ends” (p. 57).

unique. It has all the seriousness, the immediacy, the bond of friendship and the intellectual honesty of the rest of his letter-writing, yet the tone that he adopts here has an added quality to it: more than interest, it shows affectionate care, the feeling of identity between an older man and his own younger self – who is at all times his intellectual equal:

Your letter reminded me of my own years of “toiling” (take the word as you wish) 1925-27, perhaps 1928 as well. [...] My loneliness at the time was devastating, and yet Palamas, Sikelianos, Malakasis were still alive at the time. [...] I felt that when I spoke in Greek I couldn't keep myself from stuttering, that those who spoke to me were tongues without bodies, Aeolian harps strung by the winds of rhetoric or clever mockery. Sometime we will talk again about these things. I am telling you all this hoping that you will find support in the similar experiences of someone older.¹³

If the prevailing principle in all other instances is a common purpose or vision, in Lorentzatos's case the words that Seferis uses throughout and until his very last letter are “I follow your steps”, “I read your latest text with great attention”, “I know how you write”, above all, “Σε προσέχω με φροντίδα” (“I watch over you with care”) and repeated injunctions to “write”, “complete your thought”. In giving his comments on Lorentzatos's study of Gide's *Thésée*, this is how Seferis sees his younger friend:

It shows a man who knows how to think, who can dedicate himself to his work, and who likes to stand on his feet (this is a special term: one day we must have a talk about the feet of *angels*); also, I was forgetting, it shows a man who has love and who labours for love.¹⁴

Seferis does not only look closely at Lorentzatos, he invites the same gaze back on himself: the simple, open human-

¹³ *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου*, p. 135. Letter of 2 December 1951.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79. Letter of 11 September 1949.

ity with which he talks of his personal feelings, thoughts and experiences in his letters shows a rare, natural faith in their relationship that we do not find in his other correspondences, at least not in the ones that are so far available to us, and excepting his letters to his wife Maro and to his sister Ioanna. Seferis desires sincere matter-of-factness, critical responsiveness and clarity regarding their respective work, and a very fine quality of dialogue – with all of which “Ζη” easily agrees. There is one silent condition that Seferis will insist on however: the relationship, even at its highest, most theoretical level, must be recognized as being quintessentially personal – neither is to become the intellectual “subject” of the other. Seferis being Seferis, this is not as easy as could be wished: as early as 1949, if not before, Lorentzatos finds himself seriously under siege by the forces of no lesser man than his cousin George Katsimbalis, the “Colossus of Maroussi” himself, clamouring for a study on Seferis. Reporting this back to Seferis, Lorentzatos writes: “I said to him, ‘It is too early still for me, cousin; if I live that long, I will write in thirty years. You must find someone else for now’”, having stated previously: “I want to write definitively (if that is possible).”¹⁵

In a brief paragraph at the heart of his own letter, Seferis makes his feelings quite clear:

Your answer to the cousin was a good one, I am content, I mean in a purely selfish sense, imagine what a nuisance it would be for me to have to start looking at our relations from a different angle, from that of subject and critic, and then at the offices of Ikaros, [...], when asked “and how did you find the essay by Mr Lorentzatos on your work, Mr Seferis?”, to be obliged to reply with some half-witted nonsense. No, I’d rather have our letters and your conversation, only those thirty years you blurted out are causing me great anxiety. I tell myself $30+49=79$, I start counting the petals of imaginary daisies: he lives – he lives not, etc. And what if he lives? [...] Do you want to turn me into the King Lear of literature? If I am to go

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 64. Letter of 22 May 1949.

that far, I want to do so in peace and grow a long white beard. So please, write back to that cousin of yours: "I retract my previous statement, seeing things now more clearly, I will write on S. in 50 years' time." Do it quickly, I beg of you, so I may find peace.¹⁶

Neither schedule was kept, as it turned out, or at least not exactly: Lorentzatos's first essay on Seferis, "The Lost Centre", appeared 12 years later, in 1961, in a collection of texts commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of Seferis's *Turning point*. In 1979, the year marking the thirty years he had promised, and after Seferis's death, as the latter had asked, Lorentzatos will again write on Seferis, for the second and last time.

That first crucial essay, however, came during what was perhaps the most turbulent phase of their relations: since around 1951 Lorentzatos had embarked upon a vigorous revision of his perception of things, seeking this time firmer spiritual foundations. He looks for more than a "Sacred Way" as Seferis will call it:¹⁷ he needs to identify with a sacred tradition he may call real and his own, and which will articulate this conscious spirituality as a complete vision of existence. What was expressed before as a general sense of human crisis is now being re-examined with the purpose of retrieving a lost connection with a lived reality that did meet such terms. By this time, Lorentzatos has also become friends, at the recommendation of Seferis himself, with a man who will be an important influence in this process, Philip Sherrard, Hellenist and student of the philosophy of religion. Sherrard himself has arrived at a crucial distinction at the time: namely, that in the West secular humanism, rationalistic thought and religious piety have dissolved the true notion of the sacred, and divorced man from his own existence, which is, for Sherrard, an indivisible part of the world's divinity. In the East, on the contrary, and especially in the context of Orthodox Christian theology,

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-7. Letter of 26 May 1949.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149. Letter of 16 January 1955.

Sherrard believes that the natural link between man and Creation, between man and God, is still retrievable. What has made this possible, from a historical point of view, is the East's long isolation from the European Renaissance, and the subsequent thought and worldview that was generated there, as a result of its occupation by the Ottomans.

Lorentzatos's own formulation of this position, with specific reference to Greece, constitutes the first, extensive part of "The Lost Centre". The second part is an equally lengthy examination of the poetry of Seferis from within this new perspective. Lorentzatos's analysis is rich and sensitive, and also endowed with a language of its own – his diction is strong and visionary, poetic and logoplastic, the flow intense and personal. It has Yeats's realism, Pound's richness of metaphor, the Greekness of Seferis himself, and a generous pinch of philosophy and religious history. In this reading, Seferis holds a unique position with respect to the majority of his contemporaries, since he has not lost what Lorentzatos calls the "touch with metaphysical reality", and he has moreover been able to convey this feeling of eternity and of hope in his poetry. His deep humanity has kept him "metaphysically open" and "that opening, that crack, is wide enough so that the heavens may one day enter". In order for that to happen, nonetheless, we need a different perception of literature that will be aware of this retrieved world, consciously and actually. Seferis, in Lorentzatos's view, feels the need, but has not yet articulated it to himself: he "searches anxiously under the 'light' [...] yet without being aware of the desired outcome of his search".¹⁸ That unconscious ambiguity is his risk, or the direction of a necessary next step, and that step would be a leap of faith not simply in personal terms, but above all in terms of Greece's own sacred (and literary) tradition. In doing so, Seferis would become exemplary not only as an individual poet but, especially, and this is Lorentzatos's own crucial distinction, as the voice of a

¹⁸ Lorentzatos, *Μελέτες*, p. 407.

true identity and of a way of existence. The Lost Centre, therefore, does not refer to Seferis or to his poetry, but to a point within the tradition for which Seferis, in his role as its poet, is here answerable, and which he can retrieve.

This discussion and its dilemma are closer to Seferis than the essay might seem to allow for. Lorentzatos's concluding pages, moreover, will introduce a new angle that will confuse the issue, as well as Seferis's own initial reaction. In his "Second Introduction to the Waste Land", Seferis had written: "We are a people with Great Church Fathers but without mystics." In closing his own study, Lorentzatos will argue that this exemplifies in the most powerful (and devastating) manner the adverse effects of humanism and of rationalism, evident here even on Seferis himself: a whole sacred tradition has been cancelled out of memory, since, as Lorentzatos points out, that statement, which he takes at face value, is dangerously inaccurate as he also goes on to prove by means of a long series of examples.

The only known public reaction from Seferis was that he revised that disputed phrase so that it would read, in all subsequent editions, "We are a people with Great Church Fathers but *now* without mystics." In 1996, however, Edmund Keeley asked me to transcribe on behalf of Zissimos Lorentzatos and himself an assortment of incomplete notes for a letter to Lorentzatos regarding "The Lost Centre": it is a letter that Seferis starts and abandons four times between 31 March and 28 November 1962. Keeley discusses one of its points briefly in the introduction to his own correspondence with Seferis,¹⁹ and we will see how this is important below.

Throughout these notes, Seferis's reading of "The Lost Centre" is meticulous, though he stresses that he finds its language or the coherence of its argument very difficult to follow. His notes show a clear desire to discuss the essay point by

¹⁹ G. Seferis and E. Keeley, *Correspondence 1951-1971*, ed. E. Keeley (Princeton: Princeton University Library & The Program in Hellenic Studies 1997), pp. 34-5.

point, and on the most solid, affectionate grounds of their friendship and long relationship. Seferis also wants to clear up the important question of “mystics”, and we see here the process that led to the choice of the revised version of the phrase. The phrase is incomplete, Seferis admits, and, as a result, Lorentzatos’s interpretation has inadvertently misconstrued its meaning. The underlying cause, he notes, is that their contact has been less frequent in these last years, years that have been so important to Lorentzatos’s formation; inevitably, the immediacy of a more natural, mutual understanding may have grown somewhat rusty. Seferis’s own aim in his letter would have been to retrieve that essential basis of their dialogue – something that, as he writes, he misses greatly. Yet in the same way that Lorentzatos has misunderstood Seferis’s meaning, Seferis too singles out in Lorentzatos’s essay only its strict theological dimension.

What interests Seferis, above all else, is the question of tradition and the question of literature, and in his attempt to articulate an adequate response, he tentatively defines tradition as being separate from faith: “tradition is secular and belongs to a people, faith belongs to God, it is metaphysical and ecumenical. It is the eternal irrespective of tradition.”²⁰ He has taken Lorentzatos to mean that faith should be sought exclusively and unilaterally (something that Lorentzatos himself does not intend to say), and this, in Seferis’s view, creates a conflict of identity regarding what seems to him to be a demand for a poet who is also (or primarily) a holy man. This leads Seferis to insist further on the importance of literature, again reading Lorentzatos’s attempt to redefine its basis as being an act of total rejection. As he stresses through an odd assortment of examples, drawn from personal biography or from literary history, to him too the lost centre might indeed be the ultimate salvation, yet there is more urgent and great need, Seferis writes, for real spiritual education, for *servants* of God, rather

²⁰ Manuscript fragment dated February 1962.

than holy men: there is a need for poets. In this time of need, Seferis emphasises, we should not be condemning literature, for even its "heretics" might have some small wisdom to offer. The notes are copious but reiterative, moving in their insistence on closeness and humanity, on memory and on the physicality of this crucial value of sacredness, but they are also without a more clearly defined sense of purpose.

Taken in isolation, the manuscript would seem scant and disappointing – sadly so, since it might even make us think that Seferis somehow grew weary of formulating an answer. Given the particular quality of the friendship that bound him to Lorentzatos, that answer was both necessary and almost yearned for by his friend. Given the enormous significance of the question raised in Lorentzatos's essay, the same answer is as yearned for by anyone with a love and a concern for Modern Greece and its literature, as Edmund Keeley will note in his own comments on the manuscript.

This is where our understanding of Seferis's correspondence as a single breathing entity becomes crucial. First of all, it provides us with a full context of interpretation, with comparable cases, and with a clearer indication of Seferis's customary manner of responding on similar occasions. It teaches us, we might say, Seferis's own language now that the man is no longer here to speak it himself. It also makes us aware of that most prominent feature of this correspondence, namely its intentional emphasis on "salvaging", to use Seferis's term again, what is most important from a world in ruins – on setting humanity back on its feet. If each correspondent is a distinct individual for Seferis, a friend with a particular, inalienable position in his life (and in his heart), the purpose of letter-writing is declaredly public and in this manner – we could describe it as a modern quest for a living grail, by a scribbling, rather than jousting, vociferous Round Table. As Lawrence Durrell wrote to Seferis himself, the latter did, after all, and above all, search for "a

statement of the unnamable thing”, which, as Durrell would add, he would always “find [...] in landscape”.²¹

On that level, communication becomes openly shared, a communal act that extends beyond the personal, and Seferis’s letters abound in expressions such as “I wrote to X on this”, or “As I told Y”, or “Z, too, has written to this effect”. When an answer is particularly important, Seferis will make it the common ground of a discussion within and beyond the letters themselves: “have you read this?”, he will write, or “read this and then give it to so and so to read as well”. The most frequent participants of this elaborate discourse are George Katsimbalis, Zissimos Lorentzatos, Andreas Karantonis, George Theotokas, Philip Sherrard, George Apostolidis, Nanos Valaoritis, George Savidis and Constantine Tsatsos.

More than a private act, letter-writing in this respect serves their common business – and I use the word in its fullest sense of serious personal responsibility regarding the reasons, the motives, the desired value and results of what they all do: they read and write literature, and this, according to Seferis, demands full moral commitment to humanity itself. As he will write to Timos Malanos in 1944, stressing the point for a second (and by no means last) time, “I do not think that a writer ought to say ‘Thank God we still have Literature’”, an expression that Malanos had used in his own letter to Seferis,

especially not when the phrase resembles an exclamation of the type “Thank God we can still have women, holiday-trips, wine, opium” or I don’t know what other sort of drug to name. One shouldn’t say that, because *art is not the grand oblivion, it is the great conscience, and it is not a consolation, it is a labour, a struggle on behalf of man or of humanity*, perhaps the most difficult thing in the sort of world that we live in.²²

²¹ Lawrence Durrell to Seferis, 29 March 1944, quoted in George Thaniel, *Seferis and friends*, ed. E. Phinney (Stratford, Ontario: The Mercury Press 1994), p. 88.

²² G. Seferis and T. Malanos, *Αλληλογραφία*, p. 235. Letter of 12 May 1944 (my emphasis).

I think we need to place Seferis's notes for an answer to "The Lost Centre" within the larger context that such explicitly sincere and demanding principles circumscribe.

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Long before Lorentzatos's study, there had been three other cases of essays written by people close to Seferis in which the concerns (though not the conclusions) are similar, and which occasioned letters of some form or other. These are two reviews by Takis Papatsonis, the first published on 13 March 1932 in *Καθημερινή*, and the second coming 16 years later, on 15 March 1948 in *Νέα Εστία*; and, finally, a comprehensive study of Seferis's poetry by Timos Malanos, which appeared in 1951.²³ All three texts address the following points: the crisis of literature, Seferis's poetry with respect to it, and with respect to a European or a Hellenic tradition of literary influence, and consequently Seferis's poetry as part of the effort towards a much needed cultural or civilising consciousness for Greece. Namely, the same focal points as those in "The Lost Centre".

Both of the writers are poets themselves and declared literary enthusiasts, members of Seferis's circle of friends, and his regular correspondents. The debate, moreover, is a heated one, extending beyond Seferis himself and to a choice that Greece is asking itself to make at the time: is it going to be Modern West or Traditional East? A Search for the New or a Return to the Roots? There appears to be no available (or credible) middle voice, and for a newly reborn nation ravaged by political discord and recent historical tragedy the answer holds more than a nominal value: it will determine the possible or impossible existence of its people. Even before "The Lost Centre", therefore, Seferis's work is not being judged simply for its poetic

²³ T. Malanos, *Η ποίηση του Σεφέρη* (Alexandria 1951).

merit: it is being measured for its loyalty, or for its ability to show a new way.

Although Seferis will never deny the general soundness of this enquiry for a conscious identity, he will, nonetheless, vehemently question the basis on which he sees it conducted all around him. As he will note in the draft for a letter to Andreas Karantonis dated 10 February 1950:

The only thing that holds any sway today is the skin-deep, the outright fake, the quack's sham and mere, empty rhetoric. [...] Now they have gotten hold of the ancients and they have turned them into street-corner fare [πατσά νυκτός]. They call it "cultural revolution". [...] "Out with the foreigners! Long Live the Greek tradition!" – and just look at them! When serious academics write this sort of thing, what can you expect from "journalists"?²⁴

Seferis is not in the least unconscious of his past: on the contrary, he has only been able to become a poet "by passionately rooting himself into the soil of his people", to quote Henry Miller.²⁵ That past is to him very much present and indeed very much alive, and he insists on this, as Edmund Keeley records from his first visit to Seferis in June 1952:

those statues my dear [...], those statues are not always symbols. They exist. If you travel to Greece, you will see that statues belong to the landscape. They are real. And the stones. The stones are there under your feet, my dear, or there in front of you for your hand to caress.²⁶

Seferis therefore does not dismiss "Greekness", past or present, nor does he object to being himself weighed up for

²⁴ G. Seferis and A. Karantonis, *Αλληλογραφία 1931-1960*. Φιλολογική επιμέλεια: Φ. Δημητρακόπουλος (Athens: Kastaniotis 1988), pp. 176-7.

²⁵ H. Miller, *The Colossus of Maroussi* (New York: New Directions 1941), p. 47.

²⁶ Seferis and Keeley, *Correspondence*, p. 13.

what he can offer as a consciously *Greek* poet, as he will stress in the same draft letter to Karantonis:

This man says that I am out to become the national poet; that man says I aspire to the place and the glory of Palamas; a third says something different. What I can say to you, now that we have twenty years of friendship and of company behind us, is that my only desire is to keep alive some few things till a better man comes along. And you may be sure that when he does, I will say with the very greatest relief: "*nunc dimittis*".

What Seferis does insist on, however, is the need for wise, or at least measured, choice:

Our dilemma is relentless: we can either face up to western civilisation, which is in large part our own, and study its living sources with lucid and composed courage – *and I cannot see how we could do this without taking our strength from our own roots or without showing meticulous care for our own tradition*; or we can turn our back on the West and ignore it, allowing it to overpower us in some underhanded way, through its industrialised, its vulgar, its very worst form of influence.²⁷

What Seferis seeks is a necessary balance between living, sustaining memory and present life:

What can a flame remember? If it remembers a little less than is necessary, it goes out; if it remembers a little more than is necessary, it goes out. If only it could teach us, while it burns, to remember correctly. I am done. If only someone could begin anew from where I left off...²⁸

"Remembering as we should" – this injunction, dating from 1932 – will be Seferis's marked position for the rest of his poetry, for the rest of his life. As for the exact content of that

²⁷ "Second Introduction to *The Waste Land*", April 1949. Now in *Δοκίμés. Δεύτερος τόμος. 3η έκδ.* (Athens: Ikaros 1974), pp. 28-9.

²⁸ *Ο Στρατής Θαλασσινός – «Αντρας»* (1932): G. Seferis, *Collected poems*. Translated, edited and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (London: Anvil Press Poetry 1982), p. 147.

remembrance, there is no need, as Seferis believes, to make a more precise, separate declaration of it; if it is of any real worth, it will be clear in everything he will have written, and this is something that he insists on, as for example in the following scene from his novel *Six nights on the Acropolis*. The scene takes place at a “literary salon” in Athens, and is part of a discussion on the meaning of poetry between an unnamed lady of great sophistication and distinctly western education, and the novel’s hero, Stratis, a character quite close to Seferis himself:

“And who cares the least bit for your puny little emotion! [the lady said]. Real poetry can only be made by the prophet who will give the world a new faith.”

“I am under the impression,” replied Stratis, “that this is something entirely different. Though I do believe that if someone can succeed in truly expressing the emotion that the world gives him, he is helping others not to lose the faith that they should have inside them.”

“But which emotion? Will just any do?”

“It seems to me that it will.”

“So you have no theory about life?”

“My theory about life will come, should anyone want it, out of my finished work.”²⁹

That lady would not be the only one to ask for a specific statement of purpose from Seferis, for a “theory about life”. Like his character Stratis, Seferis too wished this so-called theory, more correctly “this faith that [all] should have inside them”, to emerge from his poetry or from his essays on literature, and after the manner of what Edmund Keeley has aptly called his “humanistic mysticism”,³⁰ rather than through the prophecy that Stratis’s lady seeks, or through some form of aesthetic experimentalism and abstraction. Unlike Stratis, however, Seferis will not always be able to shoo away his critics by

²⁹ G. Seferis, *Έξι νύχτες στην Ακρόπολη* (Athens: Ermis 1974), p. 8.

³⁰ Edmund Keeley, private conversation. See also Seferis and Keeley, *Correspondence*, pp. 34-5.

means of aphoristic wisdom. He will indeed express himself explicitly in such cases, though never in a formally publicised manner. He will choose instead what I would call the *social privacy* of his "Dialogue on Poetry" with Constantine Tsatsos, of the "Conversation with Fabrice" written for George Theotokas (1967), and finally the equally public privacy of his personal correspondence and of his selectively circulating (as we know) excerpts of his diaries. As he will, once again, underline, "I never sought to express myself through philosophy, but rather through poetry and action."³¹

The cases of Papatsonis and Malanos that I have singled out, and which I will be contrasting here to that of Lorentzatos, represent in this respect the two most prominent occasions when Seferis did openly break his silence on the subject of the meaning and the purpose that he gave to his art. Let us look briefly at how he did so with each.

In his first review of 1932, Papatsonis ruthlessly criticised Seferis's seminal collection *Turning point* as being an appalling imitation of the foreign models of Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Valéry and Léon-Paul Fargue, even to the point of plagiarism, and a failure at that. Seferis's language is also under fire: his French is too loud, his native Greek outright abortive. The tone is simply vitriolic, yet Papatsonis's underlying thesis must be noted: in his view, Greek writers suffer a serious handicap compared to their European colleagues, since their vital instrument, language itself,

will not obey them, being outdated, faded and colourless, unbearably separated from the coherence of its spiritual tradition. Such is the disorder of our language, after all that it has gone through.³²

This almost insurmountable discontinuity of language throughout Greek history is the real tragedy for Papatsonis, pointing,

³¹ "Η συνομιλία με τον Φαβρίκιο", *Εποχές* 45 (January 1967); now in: *Δοκιμές*, Β', p. 298.

³² "Νεαροί υπερόπται", *Καθημερινή* (13 May 1932).

inevitably, to a corresponding gap in Greek cultural identity; the only available solution would be

either to resume Tradition [capitalised] at the point where it was broken [...], a Herculean task, or to behave like a new, primitive, newly-fledged race, like the Slavs, adapting to the latest cosmopolitan ideal; and that would be a shame, since we would be giving up all that treasure.³³

Papatsonis concludes his article quoting the words of the Fascist Italian Minister of Culture and Education, dating, indicatively, from 1926:

artists must prepare themselves to serve the new sovereign purpose intended for our national art. We must above all, and categorically, impose the principle of Italianism.

This is not at all a bad idea, Papatsonis will write, and in his second, 1948 review of Seferis's poetry, he will identify Greece's own point of severance from its tradition: the Fall of Byzantium. This, according to Papatsonis, is where we must go back to, in order to begin anew, retrieving, as we do, our true "cultural orthodoxy". The (Cavafian) title that Papatsonis chooses states his purpose in no uncertain terms: it is "Ὁ ἐνδοξὸς μας βυζαντινισμὸς" – "Our illustrious Byzantinism", and this time Seferis has failed in preserving these Byzantine roots by again being too open to western influences.

Seferis responds each time with a private letter, dismissing in the first any facile question of influence as being unworthy of a serious critic. As he would say later in his life, half in jest and more in earnest, "Do not ask me who has influenced me; a lion is made up of the lamb he has digested and I've been reading all my life."³⁴ His reply to Papatsonis's second critical attack is more substantial and indeed more serious:

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Quoted in *Life Magazine* (17 January 1964).

I have neither the inclination nor the time to get mixed up in pointless literary quarrels. I have therefore always avoided them, but I must tell you, Takis, that, this time, your distinction between “*orthodox*” and “*heretics*”, and the principles on which you make it, has to do with something other than mere literature. What you propose is an entire vision of Hellenism, separating the “damned” from the “elect” on grounds that I for one would not be prepared to accept, and which compel me to reply to you, although I have long refrained from doing it. What forces my hand is the feeling that you are proposing to us a Greece that must become regressive and backward-looking, threatened by spiritual suffocation; also, that your project is all the more dangerous since those who read you have no way of knowing that you yourself have the closest ties with that West that you hold up (or pretend to be holding up) to public obloquy.³⁵

The precise diction of the letter indicates that Seferis was quite willing to argue a point when he felt that the urgency was genuine – as he clearly does in Papatsonis’s case. He can also state his position with critical severity, even when friendship might have made this difficult, since, oddly enough, Seferis and Papatsonis share quite a long, respected history as friends, and for all the latter’s rather obviously peculiar character.

If Seferis disagrees with Papatsonis on serious, ideological grounds, and certainly in terms of world perception extending beyond poetry itself, his difference with Malanos addresses literature as a stance adopted towards life, as well as the question of ethical integrity in literary criticism. It all begins as a dialogue on a remark by Malanos, the phrase “Thank God we still have Literature” commented on above, which led to a volley of letters exchanged privately in 1944. In his own response, Malanos will argue that Seferis must admit that, even for him, Literature has above all the value of an alternative world of possible escape, a reserved private “Domain” that

³⁵ Seferis to Papatsonis, 23 September 1948 (Gennadius Library, Seferis Papers, Folder 8, No. 62); quoted in French translation in D. Kohler, *L’Aviron d’Ulysse: L’Itinéraire poétique de Georges Séféris* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1985), p. 747.

compensates, if only for a moment, for the failure of an outside world. This is, as he claims, the reason why Seferis's poetry is so symbolic, so internally significant, and its intended result, whether Seferis wishes to admit it or not, is to "discontinue all relations with the WORLD OUTSIDE, with those, therefore who gave you your SUBJECT".³⁶ Seferis's reaction is as strong as it is immediate – he writes, in fact, back to Malanos on the very same day. He feels fundamentally misunderstood, trapped within this purportedly philological analysis of his work; above all, he feels betrayed in what he finds most central in that poetic act, namely its humanity:

Since you are so infatuated with detail, take care: it often leads to contradiction, and, even worse, it sometimes nullifies man himself.³⁷

Five years later, in December 1949, Malanos reclaims the phrase in his greetings to Seferis for the New Year:

I am well; at least to the extent that this is possible for an intellectual. Thank God we still have poetry and literature. I know you do not like this expression, but I find rest in it.³⁸

In the published correspondence of Seferis and Malanos the next letter comes from Seferis, dated 21 May 1951. It is biting-brief, acknowledging receipt of Malanos's study *The poetry of Seferis*. Seferis is not simply reacting to Malanos's interpretation of his work: he is reacting – strongly – to his intentional distortion of its meaning, and of the meaning of Seferis's own letters to him, which he has misquoted in the study and without permission. Seferis will only send one more letter, requesting the return of all manuscripts that he had given to Malanos. By August of the same year, he will have drafted a

³⁶ G. Seferis and T. Malanos, *Αλληλογραφία*, p. 242. Letter of 15 May 1944 (original emphasis).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 243. Letter of 15 May 1944.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 312. Letter of 28 December 1949.

full, definitive response, quoting at length and with great precision from the letters of 1944, to be sent as a statement of position to Katsimbalis with explicit instructions for publication in the *Αγγλοελληνική Επιθεώρηση*. The letter would remain in Seferis's "for publication" files in his archives, as we are told by the editor of the correspondence.³⁹ Yet once again, we see Seferis fully determined to set things right, especially when what is at stake is his serious commitment to literature and to the meaning of both art and life.

While Lorentzatos's own study is certainly unrelated to those of Papatsonis and Malanos by virtue of its ethos, depth and calibre, it does ask, if only indirectly, that Seferis clarify his own position with regard to the meaning of his poetry and with regard to the direction that Greek poetry, including his own, ought to take. Given their mutual respect and friendship, and as Keeley also asks, why does Seferis not engage in a dialogue with Lorentzatos, as he did, for example, with Tsatsos? It would have been indeed an extraordinary meeting of minds, of literary forces. The absence of Seferis's response, moreover, has led to mixed critical reactions, and specifically to two supporting, mutually exclusive, sides. I think, however, that Seferis's silence is not a refusal to speak. Instead, it shows the greatest care for Lorentzatos as a friend, as well as as a new, important intellectual voice.

* * *

Among Seferis's notes on "The Lost Centre", there are also a limited number of seemingly tangential, personal prompts: jotted ideas, references to people by name, or in quotation. The "ideas" are mostly images from Seferis's childhood in which he tries to describe an organic coexistence with that "metaphysical reality" in the practices of everyday rural life. The two most central names mentioned are Claudel, whose

³⁹ Ibid., p. 327.

“pietism”, in Seferis’s words, “gets on one’s nerves”, and Papatsonis, underlined in the manuscript as Claudel’s Greek counterpart. The quotations are mostly jingles of popular wisdom, illustrating the fundamental mistrust of the Greeks for the West – including a celebrated aphorism dating from the time of the Ottoman Empire, which shows the Greeks consciously preferring the turban of the Turk to the skullcap of the Frank. These reappear in each new version of the letter, showing that Seferis intended quite an extensive response, if not a definitive answer. Certain key words and turns of phrase also show that the basis of his discussion would not have been the essay of Lorentzatos alone: Seferis would be taking the occasion to respond also to Papatsonis’s second essay, “Our illustrious Byzantinism”, as the references to the “heretics of literature” and to other points taken from Papatsonis’s text indicate. Seferis would have argued his case in two ways: using examples from literary history and criticism, or by means of a parable, which he would have made the centre of his own exegesis. The manuscript contains such a fragment: it is an allegorical dream involving Seferis as a gate-keeper to the gates of Mount Athos, standing here for Greece itself, and in what is clearly, for Seferis, an insular vision of the future.⁴⁰

The notes also show that this syncretism between Lorentzatos as his friend, “The Lost Centre” as Seferis reads it, and Papatsonis’s own essay in all its ramifications, causes an almost violent, and in the manuscript unresolved, conflict in Seferis. He appears very unclear regarding the direction his own judgement of all three must take, crossing out ideas, adding qualitative new points, shifting from pure criticism to reminiscence, to history, coming always back to personal attachment and to his own faith in literature and in the lived experience of the sacredness of things. My belief is that Seferis is not uncertain about *what* to say, but that he is uncertain about whether he has chosen the right occasion – the right justification – for such an

⁴⁰ Cf. *Δοκιμές*, Β', pp. 326-7.

apology. Namely, about whether this is really a case of genuinely contrasting positions, especially with respect to Lorentzatos. I base this belief again on one of Seferis's letters, the original draft of a letter he sent to Lorentzatos in May 1956. That draft is the climactic point of a heated discussion which began in 1954, when Lorentzatos sends to Seferis his first collection of poetry, *Mikra syrtis*, describing it as "his act" and asking for Seferis's comments. Uneasy with the word "act" in its connotations of a public act of conversion after the manner of Claudel, Seferis responds primarily as the poet, giving earnest, though strict, stylistic advice. Two years later, when Seferis's Cypriot collection of poems makes its own appearance, Lorentzatos's appraisal is severe, introducing in their dialogue an as yet unprocessed and mostly apophthegmatic version of the main thesis of the first part of "The Lost Centre". In the sent and the unsent form of his own reply, Seferis gives us, I think, the answer that we are looking for.

The unsent version is the longer, the more detailed, and the one in which Seferis allows us to see the same sense of conflict as the one we are confronted with in the manuscript. He also states, however, in this case, the real cause of this conflict:

What can I possibly have to say to you when you accuse me of having all these theories of artistic purism and self-autonomy that I do not feel in the least? Philip, too, struggling as he does with the higher substances of this world, wrote to me the other day, like yourself, on Dante and literature. I swear to you, in the name of the Holy Virgin, that I almost turned around to see who is that stranger behind me that you both seem to be talking to.⁴¹

And again: "You are preaching to the converted." In the sent form of the letter, none of this will appear. Instead, Seferis writes that he cannot see clearly what the new Zissimos, the one who has renounced his past (as Lorentzatos had declared to have done) is now seeking: he will wait for an answer in

⁴¹ Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου, p. 205. Draft of 25 April 1956.

Lorentzatos's next book. The only severe remark that he allows himself is to caution Lorentzatos against abstraction, against an intellectualisation that would endanger the human side of things: "Your risk is that of becoming a prophet of abstractions." Taken as a personal remark, the words would seem harsh; this, however, is a term that Seferis has used before and as a philosophical category: he applies it to Ravel, describing him in an early diary as "un entrepreneur d'illuminations",⁴² and, in the context of a serious critical analysis of his music, which he finds too cerebral, too empty of feeling.

This precedent is important, since Seferis is making the words the centre of a comparison between Ravel and J. S. Bach, in order to enhance the higher, fuller spirituality of Bach's music, which is grounded, in Seferis's view, in the recognition and embrace of the human dimension in its totality, and within the expression of the sacred. In this context, Lorentzatos too should seek this second, more positive quality. We know from their correspondence that Lorentzatos and Seferis share a mutual passion for Bach's music: perhaps we may assume, then, that this allusion would be familiar to Lorentzatos, enabling him to understand the true sentiment of Seferis's comment in this case. What is certain is that in his letter Seferis does indeed underline the positive grounds for his severity: again it is his concern for Lorentzatos, whose steps "I follow always, and with great care".

I think that similar reasons induce Seferis not to write a response to "The Lost Centre": the first would be that his own affinity to many of Lorentzatos's points in the essay would make the reply redundant and unnecessary. I also believe that the essay came at a turning point for Seferis, especially since critics such as Keeley, and Lorentzatos himself, have shown that Seferis's later poetry, most centrally the *Three secret poems*, reveals a more pronounced sense of this "metaphysical reality" in Seferis himself, now "increasingly drawn to the

⁴² G. Seferis, *Μέρες Β'*, p. 47. Entry for 25 February 1932.

Christian tradition, after "*Thrush*", for certain otherworldly images".⁴³ I think that the manuscript, and the difficulty that Seferis shows in articulating a distinct, separate position, show that this strong attraction was already active, as we can also infer from his consistently more frequent references to a Byzantine rather than to a Classical Greece throughout his diaries and his correspondence, almost always prefaced with words to the effect "I need to understand". A result of this conscious need would be that Seferis would also be required to distinguish expressly between the "illustrious Byzantinism" of Papatsonis, and the more complex ethos of Lorentzatos's "sacred tradition". This would be a second important reason why a letter at that point, and in the form suggested by the manuscript, would have been unnecessary.

Would there not have been, however, some later appropriate time and way for an expression of Seferis's views? Keeley records in his introduction to his correspondence with Seferis that in 1971 he had asked Seferis for a reader's report on Lorentzatos's essays and in support of an English translation of a suitable selection of his writings. Seferis replies: "Let us postpone explanations till I see you in Athens. Z. certainly important," but also that he himself does "not know enough of the American public" to serve that purpose well.⁴⁴ On the evidence of the letters exchanged between Seferis and Lorentzatos in the last years of Seferis's life, I would like to suggest a third reason for Seferis's silence: though the letters are much less frequent during those years, less bountiful in their expression, they show what is perhaps a stronger profusion of friendship, and a calm acknowledgment of relatedness. They also show that Seferis continues to follow Lorentzatos's work. The most crucial passage is from 10 August 1966:

Maro and I spent our first days here in your company. We read your *Meletes*. I am not going to write to you my comments,

⁴³ Seferis and Keeley, *Correspondence*, p. 34.

⁴⁴ Seferis and Keeley, *Correspondence*. Letter of 11 February 1971.

you know them already. Only looking at the book in its totality, I think that what renders it incomplete is precisely its *incompleteness*. I would say that it is filled with conceptual silence marks. Every now and then, I would find myself in a closed corridor. You say at some point that you will later develop something that you do not develop, in the end, in this book – something that you *can* develop, and you alone, so that your thought may be rounded off and find completion.⁴⁵

In the case of Lorentzatos, his own most crucial passage is the penultimate letter of their correspondence:

The only sign that we are reaching or that we are approaching a certain wisdom is increasingly more love, more hope. Away from love and hope there is no wisdom, only *amathia* (Plato), darkness, disloyalty, doubt, grotesque mockery, death [...] Those “depths”, real depths, lead there and there only. I would like to copy for you [...] just one verse that I love so much. It is by Hölderlin:

*Wer das Tiefste gedacht, liebt das Lebendigste*⁴⁶
(Who has thought deepest loves what is liveliest).

I dare not translate it into Greek.⁴⁷

My view is that Seferis’s silence is in a sense a conscious act of patience and of anticipation, that *nunc dimittis* he had described to Karantonis: he sees in Lorentzatos, if not the “better man”, then the “good man” of a next generation, who will take care of those few things left to Greece with as much care as Seferis himself. That is why Seferis is such a demanding critic, yet also such a generous one: all he asks for (by no means a little thing) is that Lorentzatos *complete* the work, be an equally precise guardian of his own directions. For Seferis, the authentic cannot be attained through amputation, but through conscious choice – through the digestion of those lambs that do

⁴⁵ *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου*, pp. 170-1. Letter of 9-10 August 1966.

⁴⁶ “Sokrates und Alkibiades” (1798).

⁴⁷ *Γράμματα Σεφέρη-Λορεντζάτου*, pp. 173-4. Letter of 17 November 1968.

not change the lion from being a lion. This is not assimilation (Lorentzatos's concern), nor emulation, but itself an act of understanding of all that may be true and enriching. In his letter on "*Thrush*", Seferis gives us this significant image regarding the meaning of creation:

Climbing down the mountain, I thought of Basho's teaching to Kikaku: We must not humiliate God's creatures; a haiku must always be inverted.

Not: ..

A dragonfly
Remove its wings
A chilli-pepper

but:

A chilli-pepper
Add to it a pair of wings
A dragon-fly.⁴⁸

I do think that Seferis recognises in Lorentzatos an important addition to his own contribution regarding what they both seek in their common tradition. I also think that his public silence was necessary so that Lorentzatos could develop his own strength, stand, in that sense, on his own "angelic" feet, as Seferis hints. If Seferis himself is the Socrates of Hölderlin's poem quoted above by Lorentzatos, one of Seferis's favourite figures, and a persona he is often associated with, then Lorentzatos should not be Hölderlin's Alcibiades, but a fully-fledged Plato: not a figure *in the line of* Seferis, but one more important line to add to literature, to that literature's identity that they both so love. Above all, there should be no abstraction, but rather an enriched, matured fertility.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 193.