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George Seferis and Dictatorship*

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Until recently, any attempt to define the extent of George Seferis's attitude to the Greek regime which seized power on 21 April 1967 seemed to be exhausted by a consideration of a few key documents. They are, first, his poem "The Cats of Saint Nickolas", completed on 5 February 1969; second, his famous Statement of 28 March 1969; third his two-line poem "Out of Stupidity"; and fourth, his last poem, "On Aspalothoi", which he wrote on 31 March 1971 after an excursion to Sounio. Now, however, with the publication of "Manuscript October 68" in June 1986, it is necessary to take into account a number of its entries, for they throw new light on Seferis's progress from a reluctance to sign manifestos against the regime to the moment of the Statement itself, in which he emerges as a major critic of the junta. They also provide the context for his last, great poem.

Given Seferis's awareness of his pre-eminent position as a Greek poet, it was inevitable that he should wish to be cautious about committing himself to public statement. For whatever he said was bound to be widely reported, discussed and variously interpreted. At the time of the junta, Greek poets still spoke with the accent of authority, as indeed they still do so. This authority, which in a sense is endlessly part of Greek culture, had been especially pointed at the time when the struggle for liberation against Turkey reached its height. (Hence the Greek veneration of Byron. He had spoken out for Greece and could even be presented as having died for the cause.) The emergence of Solomos as Greece's "national poet" coincided with the triumph of that struggle, and inevitably meant that he gave utterance to the nation's newly-forged aspirations. Solomos bequeathed his image and its burden to his successors. As with other Greek poets, therefore, Seferis found it impossible to deny his national identity. Whatever he might say, he spoke "for Greece". At the time of the Metaxas dictatorship he had written a poem, "In the Manner of G.S." whose first line, "Wherever I travel Greece keeps wounding me", had become a virtual rallying cry for all those who yearned for the restoration of democratic government. That poem

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had been written in the late 1930s. Thirty years later there was another dictatorship. What was the poet to do?

The text of “Manuscript 68” shows Seferis worrying at this question. It includes a number of entries and notes made during the period 26 September–29 December 1968, when the poet was in America at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Princeton. According to the editor’s preface, “Manuscript October 68” is made up of a number of perforated sheets of paper, separate from the two diary note-pads which cover the period 1967–1971. The latter still remain unpublished, and undoubtedly there will be need for further revision and re-consideration of the issues in question when they appear. Seferis transferred some of his entries in the first note-pad (it covers the period 22 February 1967–29 December 1968) to “Manuscript October 1968” which he intended to form a sequel to “Synomilla meton Favricio” (Dialogue with Fabricius) published in January 1967. That “Dialogue” threw some light on aspects of Seferis’s politics and revealed his disgust at the Greek political world, as it had existed from 1940–41. Apart from the diary entries, the text of “Manuscript October 68” also contains extracts from newspapers which Seferis either copied or cut out. Some passages from “Manuscript October 68” were for the first time presented in an English translation by Kay Cicellis at the Cambridge Poetry Festival in April 1983. The complete text was read at a lecture in Salonica on 26 February 1986, and initially published in the journal *Diavazo* on 23 April of the same year, and then in an annotated edition by Pavlos Zannas.

“Manuscript October 68” opens with a brief description of Seferis’s house near the Princeton University Campus. There are mentions of the students, boys with beards and girls in mini skirts, and reference to the wedding of Onassis and Jackie Kennedy at Scorpio, which Seferis watched on a friend’s TV. Seferis confesses that his feelings are those of an outcast, a man in exile with no connections. He realizes that what he had written many years previously, under an earlier junta, as an epigraph to “Logbook I”, is still relevant:

Meanwhile it sometimes seems better to me to sleep than to be so completely without companions as we are, to be always waiting like this: and what’s to be done or said in the meanwhile I don’t know, and what is the use of poets in a mean-spirited time.¹

This latter time is also mean-spirited, but Seferis is not ready yet to condemn it publicly. Instead, he openly declares that he is against the involvement of poets with, and commitment to, politics, so that

although he is hurt by the political situation in Greece, he refuses to use his art as a weapon:

I underlined the words that are still hurting me today. Don't tell me that it is a sign of my arrogance to think that poets self-flattered with political or party rhetoric are unworthy. My writings till this day show the whole of my thought on this matter.²

He then refers to his present reading and work on Plato's Myths (published under the title *Metagraphes* in 1980). Plato, indeed, seems to have acted as a kind of medicine for him in hard times. He mentions his decision not to publish anything as long as censorship lasts and points out that the advent of the dictatorship has greatly distressed him:

A few days later the tanks and cannons of the military regime made everything fade, except for the habit of informing. This flourished to an unexpected degree whatsoever. You are greatly surprised when you begin to realise that we have the skills for such an achievement.³

His next entry, dated "Sunday, 20.X.1968", concerns Onassis's wedding. Seferis remarks that the signs of luxury in the ceremony are symptoms of the time and inserts an extract on the occasion from the *New York Times* as a prelude to his bitter remark, "These are the present 'Great Ideas of the Greeks'", a comment which leads to two short verses showing how much he felt a stranger at home. There is also an extract from the first junta referendum from the *New York Times*, followed by the mordant verses:

How distant is Greece
in the land of Christian Greeks!

Patission Street was a country road in those years.
I was an adolescent then.⁴

There follow two earlier entries in the diary, dated 28 and 29 April 1967 (Holy Week), which Seferis enters here in order to convey his feelings one week after the imposition of dictatorship. The two passages illuminate his convictions and express his disgust for the politicians as well as his disapproval of the communists' practices in 1944. The first passage is straightforward:

It's a week today. They might be right: possibly like those others in '44 they are filled with fear because they hold arms and like the other ones they do not want to let arms go from

their hands. They are probably right. But I beg God, I don't want to be like them or the other ones.

To hell with these days! All the old wounds from this land have opened again, and the years are gone.

Here Seferis compares the protagonists of the coup to the communist leaders during the civil war. What he finds common to them is their thirst for power.

The second passage is allusive and less particularized. Nevertheless, Seferis's invective shows his anger and indignation against the main protagonists of the junta:

Cheap politicians, mere rhetoricians just to make themselves heard, midwives of non-pregnant women. These concern yesterday's telephone call. Yesterday, a man inexperienced and uneducated in politics said "since they force me to face the dilemma: their dictatorship or . . .", but there is need for further development here.⁵

Seferis then records a number of apparently random memories of the junta's early days. He begins with a sentence written by a schoolgirl, who was instructed to add the letter "n" at the end of each word in order to write the purist form of Greek. This resulted in an ungrammatical sentence. Here Seferis shows his concern for the education of Greek students, which was in the hands of the junta. As a result of their nonsensical rhetoric, the colonels further distorted that pedantic form of Greek they had adopted:

– Education!
What can anyone do about it?
Passive resistance, o altria cosa.

But what is of greater importance here is that Seferis picks out three extracts from the colonels' speeches and adds his own withering comments in order to expose the pretensions of the regime. The first extract is from General Spandidaklis's speech and refers to the sacrifice of the Greek fighters at Arkadi (Crete) during the Tourkokratia. Being surrounded by Turkish forces and as further resistance was hopeless, they chose to die by exploding their shelter rather than surrender to the enemy. Seferis's remarks show how it feels when the men who deprived the Greeks of democracy put themselves forward as propagators of freedom:

The land we have loved is now doing whatever it can to kick us.

I have a country, which, to save itself, as they say, (but from

what?) tries hard to give birth to informers, traitors, Police Officers, Ptolemies etc.

Difference between 67 and the years 38–39.⁶

In addition, he refers sadly to all those who collaborated with the regime and parallels the present dictatorship to that of Metaxas.

Then Seferis comments on an extract from Patakos's speech, (Kozani, 19 July 1967) which claims that the officers are motivated purely by good intentions, that they desire to be the saviours of the nation.

Terrific demagogues would daily abolish democracy with their shamelessness and tread on every sacred symbol of the nation.

And then he condemns the shallowly patriotic sentiments of General Spandidakis's speech at Samos on 7 August 1967, when the coup was called an historical necessity.

As we are free to make up such rhetoric, we became the anomaly of the western world.

Suddenly in Greece we all became subjects. The military regime needs a victory: for the rest of us a defeat would suit.⁸

Seferis broods over his own attitude as a man of letters to the regime, which at the time amounted to passive non-acceptance, and he yet again declares his anti-communist views:

Of what significance is it when an author stops writing, if it is for the good of the country? But if I am against communism, this is because I think it is significant.⁹

Seferis obviously associates the authoritarianism of military regimes with the governments of communist countries:

It is our destiny to be the land of thoughtless political actions. In 1943 when Italy started fighting on our side and the left guerillas (EM) could collect arms from the surrendering Italians, they thought they were given the opportunity to exterminate their opponents.

Seferis is admittedly here offering a very personal and tentative view, but it has to be said that he was wrong to associate what had happened in the civil war with what happened in April 1967. On the former occasion, there had been an armed conflict between the left and the right, while on the latter occasion a minority of extreme right-wing Greek officers turned against all democratic Greeks, irrespective of their politics.

Seferis defines his own attitude:

“Consider reputation”, an author said to me, before I left Athens, in order to persuade me to make a statement against the junta. He was apparently considering reputation himself; as for me, reputation does not define my actions, nor do people who know me expect, at least I hope not, manifestations like those of Helen Vlachos, or those of Melina (Mercouri) or even those of Andreas Papandreou, in order to understand my political convictions. (See for instance *Epoches*, January 1967, “Dialogue with Favricious” (at the end, p6) and my letter to Franklin Ford, The Dean, Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University, on 27.XIII.1967, in which I refuse his offer to become Charles Elliot Norton Professor of Poetry).¹¹

The reference here is to a letter in which the poet makes it clear that his refusal to accept the post was due to the political situation in Greece. He points out that since 1962 he has abstained from politics and belongs to no party; and as the case is, since there is no freedom of speech at home, he feels it cannot exist anywhere: thus, if he cannot work productively at home, he cannot work abroad either.

After this declaration, Seferis makes four short remarks which reveal his disappointment and the frustration of his hopes for Greece’s future:

We have come to a point that the National Holiday will mean not celebrations but repentance for what we thoughtlessly did in the years of our freedom.

Our wounds again and again.

Our hopes in the time of war.

Our land, the land of Karagiozis.

Then, having read Karl Jasper’s English version of *The Question of German Guilt*, which touches on the distinction between political freedom and political dictatorship, Seferis notes down his own views in relation to the situation in Greece:

I thought that all those efforts and all those sacrifices had at least brought us to maturity. I was wrong. The class of the military has established dictatorship even today in 1967–1968: the class of the anti-military will unavoidably establish its own dictatorship. The country will go on like this.¹²

In addition, Seferis explains the reason why he has so far avoided a public condemnation of the regime:

But I want to go back to my country and I don’t want to give

anyone the means to prevent me from returning to my country.¹³

He goes on to defend himself against the accusations published in *Ellinocandikon Vima*, a weekly of the Greek diaspora. The paper blamed Seferis for remaining silent while other writers in Greece were prepared to suffer imprisonment and exile: it also accused him of having gone to Africa some time before the German invasion in 1941. Seferis asserts that in 1941 he joined the Free Government in moving to Crete, Egypt and then South Africa, because he had had information that the Germans had already proscribed him for being pro-British, and concludes with an outline of the tragedy he feels is in store for Greece:

Unfortunately, it seems that the junta has not cured us of rhetoric. That's what has been worrying me since 21 April. On that day, I felt great horror as we were entering into a situation with no way out. Once more a civil war, much worse than those we have had, was opening before us.¹⁴

Of particular interest are two incidents that took place before Seferis left for America on 26 September 1968. He recalls M. Theodorakis's visit to him and comments on the composer's suggestion to ask the junta for permission to give a public concert in the Stadium, as Theodorakis had set some of Seferis's poems to music:

I wondered what he had in mind by making this suggestion: Answer A: mere superficiality. Answer B: I am the winner either with a positive answer from the authorities or with a negative one. Because, if it is positive, there will be a first rate personal success for me as musician and a party-man: If it is negative, the attempt itself will bring me some benefit, and I will have involved S (Seferis).¹⁵

Unfortunately, we do not know M. Theodorakis's motives, and thus cannot say whether Seferis's interpretation of them is unfair to him or not.

The second incident concerns an ex-minister's wife who asked Seferis to plead with the junta for clemency for the poet Yannis Ritsos. Ritsos was due to be operated on, and the authorities had refused his wife permission to be near him at that time. Seferis points out that he finds Ritsos consistent to his ideology and that for a moment he felt like doing this favour. On second thoughts, however, he was forced to consider what the junta would ask of him in return. After this, the ex-minister's wife said she would contact him again, but two days later she telephoned and asked him to forget everything

they had said. Perhaps she feared for her own safety, perhaps for his peace of mind. Either way, it is an incident which brings starkly before us the terrible dilemmas facing the Greeks during the junta.

At the end of "Manuscript October 68", Seferis poses an issue that is a matter of conscience for himself as well as for others: to abandon Greece or to stay on despite the dictatorship. He finds a parallel between the present situation and the time of an earlier ordeal, in 1941, when he was forced to emigrate to the Middle East. He feels that it is better for all the Greeks to stay, unless there are particular reasons to leave because by going abroad as immigrants they degrade themselves. He points out that the experience of the dictatorship will direct the Greeks' thoughts and actions, argues for honesty and right judgement, and condemns all pompous exclamations. His answer to the question "How can you live in Greece under the present circumstances?" is:

I don't know your family's circumstances, but if I knew, would you allow me to ask you "How can you live with your family"? It is my country and I love it, and I don't recognize in anyone the right to prevent me from living in my country and hearing my language spoken, whether he is a General or a Colonel. As for the accusations, they are easily made by those who sit at ease abroad or whisper maliciously within the country.¹⁶

Seferis then makes two interesting remarks:

The military (the ones here, of America) caused the coup in Greece – (A friend Senator, Wash).

After Vietnam, for a long time this land will not intervene in any foreign country (22 Dec).

Seferis does not give the name of the Senator and 'Wash' is most probably an abbreviation for 'Washington'. Yet these remarks verify some of the claims that the USA government or its agents were partly responsible for the coup, claims which Seferis must have thought justified, otherwise there could have been no reason for quoting them. Nevertheless, he strongly believed that the Greeks were not exempt from responsibility for the fate which had overtaken them. Referring to the coup, he says "I hope that these deeds will give us the opportunity to ponder our foolish actions".

Now, however, the problem is what to do. He quotes from a letter he received from a younger Greek writer in London (once again we are not told who the writer is):

In the end, the only solution is abstention (from writing) or escape . . . I begin to feel disgusted with all these. But I don't

know if Greece will ever be saved by disgust only. Perhaps what is left is to save ourselves as much as possible.¹⁷

Seferis may have shared the young writer's disgust, but he did not share his escapism and the need which he felt to save himself. He quotes the letter in order to focus his disapproval, for his intention has always been to remain in Greece and share its people's misfortunes. At the same time the situation in Greece filled him with pain and anger, and these emotions are evident in the two-line poem "Out of Stupidity" with which "Manuscript October 68" closes:

Greece, Fire! of Christian, Fire! Greeks, Fire!
Three dead words, Why did you kill them?¹⁸

Seferis is known to have altered the second line into "Dead Words! Why did you kill them?", which changes the implication. He might simply be criticizing the Colonels for adopting the three words as a means of putting forward their false ideology and appearing as true patriots and Christians, or he might be attacking all manifestations of theocratic patriotism, which means that these words had already lost their meaning through overuse in slogans.

On 28 March 1968 Seferis's famous statement appeared. A tape with his recorded voice had been sent to London and given to the BBC and other radio and newspaper correspondents. The broadcast of the Statement and the publication in the press created a sensation all over the world. In Greece, the regime was, not surprisingly, outraged, and immediately sent out a press release in which it attempted to defend itself in the name of the Greek nation against Seferis's "unfair accusations". Following orders, the press gave the governmental critique sensational headlines such as "Mr Seferis Attacks His Own Country" while avoiding publication of the statement itself, with the result that the Greek reading public remained ignorant of what Seferis had actually said. Seferis was scathingly criticized as a man and a poet. He was denounced as an enemy within who shared the evil views of foreign enemies of Greece, such as Nenni, the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who had officially invited Andreas Papandreou to Rome some days before Seferis's Statement appeared. The junta considered such a meeting to constitute an act of interference in the political affairs of Greece.

The attack against Seferis was carried on for some days by the pro-junta newspapers *Nea Politeia* and *Estia* with equally scathing articles: "The Freedom of Spirit and Mr Seferis" (*Nea Politeia*, 2 April 1969), "The Razor-blade of his Silence" (*Estia*, 29 March 1969); but mainly by a series of articles in *Eleftheros Cosmos*: "A Reply to George Seferis" (1 April 1969), "The Ideas of our Struggles" (2

April 1969), "Responsibilities Past and Present" (3 April 1969), "Some Questions" (5 April 1969).

Nea Politeia and *Eleftheros Cosmos* did, however, consent to publish Seferis's Statement, because their readers could not be contaminated by the Seferian evil.

It is noteworthy that no newspaper dared publish any article in Seferis's defence because of the Pre-censorship Law, which was still in force. It was a year later that the occasion of Seferis's seventieth birthday offered the newspapers *To Vima*, *Ta Nea* and *Ethnos* the opportunity to publish dedicatory articles commending both the man and his work.

But what of the Statement itself? Why did it so upset the Colonels? The answer is that in his Statement Seferis condemns the junta and makes a plea for the end of "hamartia", the anomaly of the western world, which has brought Greece to the edge of the precipice. Seferis once again mentions his decision to keep away from politics, though he insists that he is in no sense indifferent to the fate of Greece. He also makes plain his decision not to publish anything as long as there is no freedom of speech in his country. It is his sense of duty, he therefore says, that makes him speak out in order unambiguously to condemn the regime. "A regime has been imposed on us which is entirely opposed to the ideals for which our world fought during the last War". As a result, all spiritual values in Greece "have been submerged in the muddy and stagnant waters of a swamp". Seferis points out that as in all dictatorships, tragedy awaits at the end, so "the longer this abnormal situation lasts, the worse it becomes".

Seferis was well aware that the junta which proclaimed at one and the same time its exclusiveness and its absolute cultural and moral value was a malign contradiction, an insult to the very Greekness it pretended to embody: it had to go. Therefore, his decision to speak out was, as the novelist Costas Tachtsis very rightly pointed out, the product of mature consideration and inner struggle. Seferis's stay in America, which gave him the opportunity to examine the whole situation from a distance, must have helped him towards taking it.

Eighteen Texts – a collection of poems, short stories and articles by eighteen different contributors intending to condemn the regime through implication and analogy – came out in July 1970. Seferis's exquisite poem "The Cats of Saint Nickolas" was given the position of honour. The poem is a testimony to freedom of the intellect as the highest virtue. This masterpiece of allegory dramatizes the misfortunes of Greece through the ages, and outlines a history filled with political passions, civil wars, and manslaughter. It is a poem in which the forces of good fight against the forces of evil, win, but suffer casualties in the struggle: "Centuries of poison, generations of

poison". Seferis uses an epigraph from Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* to bring to us the atmosphere of drama:

But deep inside me sings
the fury's lyreless threnody:
my heart, self taught, has lost
the previous confidence of hope.

It is the mood of a man in despair, of a man whose mind carries broken memories. Seferis adopts a narrator, the captain, who brings forth memories from medieval Cyprus: the helmsman stands indifferent beside him, while the traveller (the poet) listens. Though it is Christmas Day, the memories that come forth, as the boat sails past the Cape of Cats, are associated with death. "And old Ramazan, how he would look death square in the eyes/whole days long in the snow of the East". This is the setting where the drama of Greece is re-enacted, first through the mouth of the half-mad monk, "a kind of dreamer", and then through the mouth of the captain:

It was the time of the great drought
forty years without rain,
the whole island devastated,
people died and snakes were born.
This cape had millions of snakes
thick as a man's leg
and full of poison.
In those days the monastery of St Nicholas
was held by the monks of St Basil,
and they couldn't work their fields
and they couldn't put their flocks to pasture;
in the end they were saved by the cats they raised.
Every day at dawn a bell would strike
and the crew of cats would move out to battle.
They'd fight the day long, until
the bell could sound the evening feed.
Supper done, the bell would sound again
and out they'd go to fight the night's war.
They say it was a wonderful thing to see them,
some lame, some twisted, others missing
a nose, an ear, their hides in shreds.
So to the sound of four bells a day
months went by, years, season after season.
Wildly obstinate, always wounded,
they annihilated the snakes; but in the end they disappeared:
they just couldn't take in that much poison.

Like a sunken ship
 they didn't leave a thing behind them on the surface:
 no meow, no bell even.
 Steady as you go!

What could the poor devils do?
 fighting like that day and night, drinking in
 the poisonous blood of those reptiles?
 Centuries of poison: generations of poison.
 'Steady as you go', echoed the indifferent helmsman.¹⁹

Above all, the poem expresses Seferis's certainty, a prophetic one, that the forces of evil, the snakes, will finally be crushed. The wounds of Greece will, however, remain.

Seferis wrote his last poem "On Aspalathoi" on 31 March 1971, after an outing to Sounio, and it was first published in the newspaper *To Vima* on 23 September of the same year. The title of the poem refers to a wild thorny plant and its theme is the punishment of an ancient tyrant whose body is dragged among thorny aspalathoi. The lovely spring setting is dominated by the presence of these plants with their sinister connotations, and the ancient columns "strings of a harp/still resounding", a token of the classical world from which Seferis draws his parallel with the modern tyranny of Greece. The poem ends with the punishment of the ancient tyrant, one whose application to the present tyranny resonates within its lines. It is the catharsis in the drama Seferis had spoken of in his statement:

Sounio was beautiful again in Spring
 On Annunciation Day.
 Few green leaves round the rusty stones,
 red clay and aspalathoi,
 pointing their big thorns and yellow flowers.

At a distance, the ancient columns,
 strings of a harp, still resounding.
 Serenity.

What can it be that reminded me of Ardiaios?
 One word in Plato, perhaps,
 lost in the channels of my brain.
 The name of the yellow bush
 hasn't changed since that time.
 In the evening I came across the passage:
 "They tied him up", it says,
 "they forced him down and flayed him;
 they dragged him along and thorny aspalathoi
 tore his flesh: they took him to Tartarus

and threw him there, a wretch”.

That’s how the Pamphylian Ardiaios,
that most vicious tyrant,
paid for his crimes in the nether world.²⁰

The poem is not a warning. It does not naively point out to the colonels what is in store for them. Seferis was not naive; nor did the colonels take the poem as a threat. It is rather a poem whose language provides its own judgement on the barbarians, those tyrants who tried to wreck a nation and its culture. Seferis is telling the colonels what they are and what they deserve.

The poem thus triumphantly vindicates Seferis’s decision to speak out on behalf of his vision of Greece, the beloved republic. As is so typical of his great poems, “On Aspalathoi” provides a reading of the Greek landscape in a manner which allows access to the nation’s multi-layered history. Myth and legend are alluded to as a means of authenticating Seferis’s certainty that, no matter what the difficulties, the ideal Greece, home and inspiration of democracy, will survive the worst that can be done to it or that it can do to itself.

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20. Here I give my own translation.