

## The universalization of the poetry of George Seferis: the significance of English translations

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*The English socio-cultural context was crucial to the dissemination of the work of George Seferis in Europe. Early translations appeared in both French and English, but it was the English versions that propelled Seferis toward international recognition and the Nobel Prize, and gave rise to translations into more peripheral literatures such as Spanish. The wide social circle Seferis enjoyed in the English-speaking world was a key factor in his early success in the United Kingdom. Other determinants were British intellectuals' empathy for the Greeks during the Colonels' dictatorship and their liking for modern poetry similar to that of T. S. Eliot.*

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In the process of the European reception of the Greek poet Giorgos Seferis or George Seferis, as he became known in English, the English socio-cultural context laid the foundations for the universalization of his poetry. Great Britain and specifically the English speaking world was the main vehicle for the dissemination of Seferis' work in Europe and in the United States, thanks to the early involvement of such notable literary figures as Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller. The English and French languages are considered as occupying a central position in the world of letters, capable of exporting their symbolic capital widely and thus encouraging the establishment of their values and aesthetics throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> Languages such as Spanish or Italian are relegated to a peripheral position, their ability to export symbolic capital being much lower. It has been observed that translation generally flows from the centre to the periphery and rarely conversely, and that communication between peripheral languages tends to pass through the intermediary of the centre. The more central a language, the greater is its ability to function as a vehicular language.<sup>2</sup> The most commonly-spoken language in

1 P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA and London 2004).

2 J. Heilbron, and G. Sapiro, 'Outline for a sociology of translation. Current issues and future prospects', in M. Wolf and A. Fukari (eds), *Constructing a Sociology of Translation* (Amsterdam 2007) 93–108.

Europe during the 1930s and 40s was probably French, yet it was the English translations of Seferis' poetry, specifically *The King of Asine and Other Poems*,<sup>3</sup> that contributed most to the universalization of Seferis' work and his subsequent receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

### First English translations

We know from Seferis' own statements that the first readers of his poetry in English were Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller, thanks to unpublished translations made by George Katsimbalis.<sup>4</sup> However, the first English translation of a Seferis poem to be published appeared in Samuel Baud-Bovy's article 'A Greek poet (G. Seferis)',<sup>5</sup> in a 1938 issue of *The Link*. Nicholas Bachtin, the editor of the journal, translated the poem from Baud-Bovy's French.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the same issue, Bachtin includes part of his comparative study on Seferis' Greek translation of Eliot's *The Waste Land*. It is likely that the decision to publish the article was influenced by the presence on the editorial board of George Theotokas, a writer and personal friend of the Greek poet. In addition, both Baud-Bovy and Bachtin had been interested in Seferis' work and maintained frequent correspondence with the poet since the mid-30s. In a letter to Seferis prior to the publication of the article, Bachtin says: 'Due to lack of time, I only managed to read part of your translation of *The Waste Land*, but I consider it extremely good and I am eager to read *Mythistorema*'.<sup>7</sup> During these years, Greek poet Andreas Embirikos also translated *Mythistorema* into English, as Nanos Valaoritis notes<sup>8</sup>, although his translation does not appear to have been published. Although he and Seferis were very different as poets, Embirikos was very attracted by this book of poems.

The interest Katsimbalis' translations had aroused in Lawrence Durrell soon led the latter to collaborate with Katsimbalis on translations of several poems which were published in *New Writing and Daylight* in 1941. A couple of years later, Durrell published *A Private Country*, a book of poems including 'Letter to Seferis the Greek' and other Greek-themed poems.<sup>9</sup> In 1946, he published *Six Poems from the Greek of Sikelianos and Seferis*.<sup>10</sup> That same year, Nanos Valaoritis and Bernard Spencer published 'Two

3 G. Seferis, *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, trans. by B. Spencer, N. Valaoritis and L. Durrell (London 1948).

4 G. Seferis Papers, American School of Classical Studies, Gennadius Library Archives. Collection No. GS 037 (Athens): Folder 35.

5 S. Baud-Bovy, 'A Greek poet (G. Seferis)', *The Link* 1 (1938).

6 Baud-Bovy appears to have translated *Mythistorema*, and written a prologue ready for publication, as early as 1935, but this translation, together with two other Seferis poems he translated some years later, was never published. G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folders 43 and 27.

7 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 43.

8 Statement made during a personal conversation with Valaoritis in Athens. Valaoritis also affirms that Embirikos' son Leonidas is currently considering its publication.

9 L. Durrell, *A Private Country* (London 1943).

10 *Six Poems from the Greek of Sikelianos and Seferis*, trans. by L. Durrell (London 1946).

poems' by Seferis in *New Writing and Daylight*. By this time, John Mavrogordato, the Bywater and Sotheby Professor of Byzantine and Modern Greek at Oxford University, had translated 'The mood of a day' and 'Fog', although it seems these translations were never published.<sup>11</sup> Nanos Valaoritis had already published an English version of *Gymnopaedia* in *New Writing and Daylight* in 1945.<sup>12</sup> Seferis introduced Valaoritis to John Lehmann and Cyril Connolly, among other publishers he had met during his short visit to London the previous year. Valaoritis, who had come to the United Kingdom with the firm aim of bringing Modern Greek literature to a wider audience, went on to make connections with such relevant contemporary British writers as Stephen Spender, Louis MacNeice, Dylan Thomas and T. S. Eliot, and began to plot the coordinates that would underpin Seferis' success in the English-speaking world. In fact, in a letter to Seferis dated May 1945, Valaoritis remarked that 'nowadays Seferis is the best known Greek poet in the United Kingdom'.<sup>13</sup>

Bernard Spencer met Seferis in Cairo while working for the British Council. A friendship developed which included other members of the Cairo poets group such as Lawrence Durrell, Robert Liddell and Robin Fedden, and led to the publication in 1948 of *The King of Asine and Other Poems*.<sup>14</sup> This first collection of Seferis poems in English was translated by Valaoritis, Spencer and Durrell. According to Roderick Beaton, the Greek's interaction with the poets who compiled *Personal Landscape* was a determining factor in his subsequent international reputation and paved the way for his award of the Nobel Prize in Literature.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted, however, that Valaoritis' article 'Introduction to modern Greek literature', which included most of the writers of the Greek Generation of the 1930s and analysed the similarities and differences in their poetics, was published in *Horizon* in 1946.<sup>16</sup> The article is of great importance because it was the starting point for Modern Greek literature to become known to an English-speaking readership. Through Valaoritis, British intellectuals of the time were able to acquire the knowledge of Modern Greek literature which later enabled them to appraise the work of Seferis.

In a letter to Seferis dated 1944, Lawrence Durrell remarked that, in their efforts to translate the Seferis poems that would make up *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, he and his collaborators were finding it difficult not to make them sound like Eliot.<sup>17</sup> After

11 As we know from two letters sent by Mavrogordato to Seferis in July 1944 and August 1952 found in G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 47.

12 G. Seferis, 'Two poems', trans. by N. Valaoritis, *New Writing and Daylight* 6 (London 1945) 20–2.

13 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 35.

14 The presence of the British army in Egypt during World War II resulted in the concentration of a group of poets in Cairo and stimulated literary and publishing activity from 1942 to 1944. One of the main focuses of this activity was the magazine *Personal Landscape*, founded by Lawrence Durrell, Robin Fedden and Bernard Spencer, in which works by many notable poets were published.

15 R. Beaton, *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel: A Biography* (London 2003) 228.

16 N. Valaoritis, 'Introduction to modern Greek literature', *Horizon* (1946) 205–22.

17 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 43.

publication of the final version in 1948, however, Durrell felt that they had done a good job, and Valaoritis remarked that the translation was well received, having enjoyed fourteen press reviews and the congratulations of Eliot himself. In fact, a review by John Stainer Walter in the *Times Literary Supplement* remarks, 'in English translation, excellently done in the present volume by Messrs. Spencer, Valaoritis and Durrell, Mr. Seferis has become an elegiac poet with more to offer than most contemporary British poets'.<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that this *TLS* review, which was published anonymously, seems to indicate that English readers should perceive Seferis' poetry as 'elegiac'.

Eliot and Pound were two important literary models for Seferis. The influence of Eliot's work in Seferis' poetry has been widely discussed in Greece and abroad for decades.<sup>19</sup> The relationship between Seferis and Eliot started when Seferis translated *The Waste Land* into Greek. In 1948, when Eliot received the Nobel Prize, Tambimuttu and Richard March published a tribute volume to Eliot entitled *T. S. Eliot: A Symposium*, which included an essay by Seferis. After a productive and lasting relationship, Eliot nominated Seferis for the Nobel Prize in 1961. Also, Maurice Bowra, a well-known classical scholar at the University of Oxford, had been writing to Seferis from the 1940s until the last days of his life. Seferis systematically sent him the English translations of his work, as his learning across several languages and literatures made him a valuable critic. When Bowra received *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, he recognized that, while not all the versions were of the same high standard, this was the only way that an English audience might have access to Seferis' work.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, Seferis considered Bowra as one of the few Europeans still left in Europe and mentioned him twice in his *Essays*, the second time comparing him to Eliot.<sup>21</sup> Both intellectuals had a close relationship and Bowra contributed greatly to the dissemination of Seferis' poetry in the UK.

The success of *The King of Asine and Other Poems* in English was crucial to the future European dissemination of the poet's work and may have had much to do with the 'similarity' between his poetry and Eliot's, which suggested that his language was somehow already *prepared* for translation into English, as a result of Seferis' relationships with leading contemporary British and French poets. Seferis' style took a similar direction to Eliot's and Pound's, close to the tastes of British readers at the time. In 1948, Rex Warner decided to publish his translation of 'Thrush' in the magazine *Orpheus*. Seferis met Warner when the latter was working for the British Institute of Higher Studies, the teaching branch of the British Council in Athens. Warner would soon become one of the English translators in whom Seferis placed the greatest trust.

18 [J. Stainer Walter], 'A poet of Greece', *Times Literary Supplement* (1948) 431.

19 Edmund Keeley was one of the many who wrote about that influence: 'T. S. Eliot and the poetry of George Seferis', *Comparative Literature* 8.3 (1956) 214–26.

20 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 43.

21 G. Seferis, *Δοκίμεις*, II (Athens 1974) 333–8.

In 1949, Rae Dalven's anthology *Modern Greek Poetry* was published,<sup>22</sup> which included Seferis' poem 'The Cistern'. The book, although not a great commercial success, was very well received by critics. The following year, Edmund Keeley and George Seferis began a correspondence of which the main focus was Keeley's preparation of his Oxford doctoral thesis on the work of Seferis and Cavafy. A year later, Seferis was posted to the Greek Embassy in London and Keeley was able to meet him in person.

Three years later, in 1952, the *New York Times Book Review* published the poem 'Interval of joy' from the collection *Log Book I*, in Kimon Friar's translation. More of Seferis' work would not become available in English until 1955, when several poems appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in translations by Durrell, Spencer and Valaoritis, with the additional help of Kimon Friar. However, Seferis appeared to have no great liking for Friar. According to a letter from Seferis to Friar in September 1959, Seferis was unhappy that Friar, without asking the poet's permission, seemed to consider himself the owner of the American rights to Seferis' work, only asking the poet for permission when the publishing house requested it.<sup>23</sup> In 1963, Friar began publishing a new magazine, *Greek Heritage*, and dedicated the second issue to Seferis.

Edmund Keeley's first translation of Seferis' work, 'Four poems', was published in *Accent* in 1956. Over the course of the following years, Keeley continued to publish English translations of Seferis' poems in various magazines and soon began to translate them in collaboration with Philip Sherrard. Sherrard published in 1956 in London an expanded version of his thesis on the poetics of Solomos, Palamas, Cavafy, Sikelianos and Seferis, titled *The Marble Threshing Floor*, which included some excerpts of Seferis in Sherrard's translation. In 1955, when Keeley and Sherrard first met, they decided to compile an anthology of Greek poets, which was to be the first of a series of six volumes of translations published by the two men until Sherrard's death in 1995. Keeley published several English translations of poems by Seferis during the 1950s and early 60s. This caused Michalis Pieris to suggest, in a speech at the ceremony to award an honorary doctorate to Keeley at the University of Cyprus in October 2010, that Keeley's translations were a significant factor in the granting of the Nobel to Seferis. Seferis indicated, however, in an interview conducted by Keeley himself, that his poetry was already widely known in Britain in the late 1940s,<sup>24</sup> thanks to the translations by Spencer, Valaoritis and Durrell. Furthermore, in any case, prior to the award of the Nobel Prize, in 1960, Rex Warner had published *Poems*,<sup>25</sup> a collection of Seferis' poems in translation that received the Foyle Poetry Award (until then granted only to British writers) and which at that time was the most comprehensive collection available in English, since Keeley's Seferis translations appeared mostly in journals, and *The King of Asine and other poems* had included only a selection of Seferis' earlier work. Although there is no

22 R. Dalven, *Modern Greek Poetry* (New York 1949).

23 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 44.

24 E. Keeley, *Συζήτηση με τον Γιώργο Σεφέρη - A Conversation with George Seferis* (Athens 1986).

25 G. Seferis, *Poems*, trans. by R. Warner (London 1960).

doubting the importance of Keeley's translations in disseminating Seferis' work among American readers, American interest in Seferis' poetry was to begin later and would always remain rather limited.<sup>26</sup> Translations by Valaoritis, Durrell and Spencer were published in several British journals, along with an article and a cartoon by Osbert Lancaster,<sup>27</sup> with whom Seferis also enjoyed a close friendship. Subsequently, the ongoing work of Warner, Keeley, Sherrard and Friar began to transform American and British perceptions of Greece. All of these scholar translators, advised by Katsimbalis and Seferis, worked to focus attention on modern Greece.<sup>28</sup>

In 1958, Seferis' poem 'Agianapa-Cyprus', translated by Stavros Papastavrou, was published in the *TLS*. Another of Papastavrou's translations, of the poem 'Euripides the Athenian', is found in Seferis' personal archive and is probably still unpublished.<sup>29</sup> That same year, the London magazine *Vogue* dedicated a full-page article to Seferis, featuring Rex Warner's hitherto unpublished translation of the poem 'Memory, I' and a photograph of the poet.<sup>30</sup> The article introduced Seferis and Cavafy as contemporary Greece's greatest poets. Two years later, Keeley and Sherrard had almost completed the anthology of poems they had been working on for several years when Seferis asked them to include only the third part of his three-part poem 'Thrush'. Rex Warner's anthology, including the same poem, was about to be published and Seferis, who favoured Warner on more than one occasion, preferred the poem to appear in Warner's anthology only. Keeley and Sherrard were quick to defend their version, however, and eventually Seferis and Warner agreed that the whole poem could be published in the Keeley-Sherrard anthology. *Poems*, translated by Rex Warner, the result of a remarkable collaboration between Warner and Seferis, was published in 1960 by The Bodley Head in London and by Little, Brown in Boston, while Keeley and Sherrard's *Six Poets of Modern Greece* was published by Thames and Hudson in London in 1960 and in 1961 by Alfred A. Knopf in New York.

In 1962, *The London Magazine* published a short interview with Seferis.<sup>31</sup> Between 1963 and 1967, English versions of Seferis' poems were published in various literary and cultural journals. It was also during this period that Keeley asked permission to translate Seferis' essays, although these were eventually translated by Rex Warner. Although Keeley is keen to assert his later friendship with Warner, it is clear that the two continually competed to translate the works of Seferis into English. The poet appeared to favour Warner, which is understandable since, at that time, Warner was

26 The eminent and publicly prominent poet Archibald MacLeish dedicated his *Herakles* (1967) to Seferis, whom he described as one of the most important poets of the century.

27 In the *TLS* in 1950 (p. 748) Lancaster published a review of Rex Warner's book *Views of Attica* in which he praised Warner for introducing Seferis' poetry to British readers. Later, in 1971, Lancaster published a cartoon commemorating Seferis in the *The Cornhill Magazine*.

28 R. Beaton, *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel*, 260.

29 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 28.

30 G. Seferis, 'Memory I', trans. by R. Warner, *Vogue*, July 1958, 54.

31 G. Seferis, 'Interview', *The London Magazine* 1.11 (1962).

already a reputed writer and translator of the classics in the United Kingdom while Keeley, at the beginning of their acquaintance, was only just embarking on his literary career.

### The Nobel Prize in Literature

The Swedish Academy maintains absolute secrecy about Nobel nominations for fifty years after the award of the Prize. Speculation indicated that Saint-John Perse, a French poet, diplomat and friend of Seferis from his time as ambassador in London, might have nominated Seferis, since we know from one of Nanos Valaoritis' letters dated 1945 that Perse considered Seferis 'not only the most important Greek poet, but the best critic'.<sup>32</sup> Hjalmar Gullberg was another possibility. A member of the Academy, he had published Swedish translations of several poems by Seferis in *Prisma* in 1950,<sup>33</sup> and included fragments of Seferis' work, in Swedish translation, in a volume of foreign-language poetry published in 1956.

At the end of the fifty-year silence, it became known that George Seferis was in fact first nominated for the Nobel in 1955 by Romilly Jenkins, who at that time held the prestigious Koraes Professorship of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature at King's College, London. The correspondence between Romilly Jenkins and Seferis in the 1940s and 50s shows that Seferis sent Jenkins his works (as he did to other British intellectuals such as Maurice Bowra) in Greek, or in French, through Nanos Valaoritis.<sup>34</sup> Seferis was already well known in certain British literary circles of the time and Jenkins apparently flirted with the idea of translating some of his poems, but it seems that Rex Warner beat him to it and Jenkins resigned himself to writing a review of Warner's work. Jenkins invited Seferis to lecture at King's College on many occasions, although his invitations were always declined. A few years later, in 1961, As I have already mentioned, T. S. Eliot nominated Seferis for the Nobel, and a year later, the poet and classical scholar Constantine Trypanis together with the Swedish writer Eyvind Johnson, nominated him as well.

But none of these proposals bore fruit until 1963, when Seferis was nominated (again) by Eyvind Johnson, then a member of the Nobel Committee. Of the eighty nominations that year, twenty were first-time nominations, including the French President, Charles de Gaulle, and the Jewish German poet and playwright, Nelly Sachs, who was awarded the prize in 1966. The Nobel Prize Committee shortlisted the six nominations it considered of greatest importance that year, including Seferis, W. H. Auden, the Danish novelist Aksel Sandemose, and the Japanese novelist, poet and playwright Yukio Mishima. The remaining two, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda and the Irish novelist, poet and playwright Samuel Beckett, received the award in 1971 and 1969 respectively.

32 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 35.

33 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 57.

34 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 45.

Of these six nominees, the Committee narrowed down the choice to three: Seferis, Auden and Neruda. Finally, the 1963 Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded to George Seferis 'for his eminent lyrical writing, inspired by a deep feeling for the Hellenic world of culture'.<sup>35</sup>

In the correspondence between Seferis and his friend Sture Linner, there are a number of English-language documents that may have served as a dossier to his *curriculum vitae* for the Nobel nomination. These include views on Seferis and his work by celebrated literary figures such as Rex Warner, Maurice Bowra, Cecil Day-Lewis, T. S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish and Louis MacNeice, among others, as well as the press reviews on the occasion of the publication of *The King of Asine and Other Poems, Six Poets of Modern Greece* and *Poems* in the United Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> Seferis' reputation in the English-speaking world did not have to await the international recognition provided by the Nobel Prize, as Seferis' English-language reputation had already been established thanks to a particular confluence of taste and personal connections. But the importance of the British influence on the international dissemination of Seferis' work is indisputable.

### The consolidation of Seferis' reputation in the English-speaking world and its subsequent decline

In February 1964, Keeley and Sherrard proposed to publish a bilingual version of the complete works of Seferis for publication in the United States and Britain. Although British versions of Seferis' work were available in North America, even after the Nobel the poet was little known to American readers. Seferis agreed to the proposal on condition that Rex Warner approved the idea. Warner thought the publication of a complete edition of Seferis' work in America was a very positive move, and thus once again favoured Seferis' interests over his own. In 1967, Keeley and Sherrard published *Collected Poems (1924-1955)*.<sup>37</sup> Keeley and Sherrard's translations seem to use a neutral English, neither obviously British nor American, as the edition was intended for simultaneous publication in both countries.<sup>38</sup>

When Seferis published *Three Secret Poems* in 1966, he deliberately delayed sending the volume to Sherrard and Keeley, not wishing it to be included in *Collected Poems*. He preferred the poems to exist only in Greek for a time, before being translated into English. It should be noted that, in general, English versions of Seferis poems were published very soon after the publication of the original Greek, and never more so than in the case of *Three Secret Poems*. This immediacy of publication of foreign-language

35 A. Österling, 'Nobel prize for literature presentation speech', *Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967* (Amsterdam 1969).

36 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives folder 46.

37 G. Seferis, *Collected Poems*, trans. by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (Princeton 1967).

38 V. Raizis, *Greek Poetry Translations* (Athens 1981).



versions of the poems was due to the prestige afforded by the Nobel. Just one year after this new work appeared in Greece, Paul Merchant, without Seferis' consent, translated *Three Secret Poems* and published it in *Modern Poetry in Translation*.<sup>39</sup> Then in the winter of 1969, Peter Levi published a special issue of *Agenda*, in which Peter Thompson offered his translation.<sup>40</sup> Walter Kaiser, Harvard's Professor of English Literature, was scathing in his criticism of Thompson's translation, however, saying that it was written in a kind of *non-English* that was not faithful to the original Greek.<sup>41</sup> Kaiser himself worked closely with Seferis on his version, which was published by Harvard University Press. Keeley and Sherrard finally included *Three Secret Poems* in an expanded edition of *Collected Poems* published first by Princeton University Press and then by Anvil Press Poetry in London in 1981. That same year, translations by Keeley and Sherrard of the work of Seferis, Cavafy, Odysseus Elytis and Nikos Gatsos were published in *Four Greek Poets*.<sup>42</sup>

The publication of Rex Warner and Th. D. Frangopoulos' translation of Seferis' essays *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism* in 1966<sup>43</sup> was widely accepted as being influential in attracting British readers to the social and cultural world of modern Greece. In 1971, Keeley organized a four-week course on the poetry of Seferis at Princeton University. That same year, Peter Levi published his own translation of 'On gorse ...', Seferis' last poem, in the *TLS*.<sup>44</sup> On the occasion of Seferis' death in 1971, several of his poems appeared in translation in literary journals, but in subsequent years poems by Seferis appeared only sporadically in translation. In 1974, Athan Anagnostopoulos published *A Poet's Journal: Days of 1945–1951*, and three years later, Mary Cooper Walton published a bilingual edition of *Mythistorema and Gymnopaedia* in Athens. From 1981 onwards, the year when Keeley and Sherrard's translation of *Collected Poems* was issued, English translations of Seferis' poems have continued to appear in academic and cultural journals, but no further anthologies have been published.

During the late 1970s, only a couple of articles by Beaton and Levi were published, and an exhibition on Seferis was organized by Ian Scott-Kilvert in London. In 1983, *Labrys* magazine dedicated an issue to the memory of the poet that included photographs of Seferis, translated poems and essays and original material, as well as hitherto unpublished correspondence with Osbert Lancaster and Henry Miller, and contributions by Roderick Beaton, Patrick Leigh Fermor, Steven Runciman and Peter

39 G. Seferis, *Three Secret Poems*, trans. by P. Merchant, *Modern Poetry in Translation* 4 (1968).

40 G. Seferis, *Three Private Poems*, trans. by P. Thompson, *Agenda* 7.1 (1969) 35–49.

41 W. Kaiser, 'Translators of Seferis', in 'To the editor', *The Times Literary Supplement* (1970) 686–7.

42 E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, *Four Greek Poets [Penguin Modern European Poets]* (Harmondsworth 1966).

43 G. Seferis, *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays in Poetry and Hellenism*, trans. by R. Warner and Th. D. Frangopoulos (Boston and London 1966).

44 P. Levi, 'The unity of Greece', *Times Literary Supplement* (1971).

Thompson, who also provided English translations of Seferis' last three poems: 'Olympia: 20th century AD', 'Hippius Colonus' and 'On gorse...'.<sup>45</sup>

By the 1990s, the publishing market in Britain and America had entered a decline in terms of European literature in translation. The absence of translations of Seferis' works, and of contemporary Greek literature in general, is due in part to a hostility to modernism during these years, which included the work of Eliot and, by association, that of Seferis, as well as to a change in literary perception. Durrell no longer enjoyed the renown he had in the 1960s and 1970s, and appreciation of the classics experienced a decline in the United Kingdom. Moreover, bilingual editions were no longer published because the increased price of paper made this publishing model prohibitively expensive. The 1990s was undoubtedly the poorest decade for the dissemination of Seferis' work in the English-speaking world.<sup>46</sup> Interest in the poet was not regenerated until the centenary of his birth in 2000.

In 2000, a lengthy article on the Greek poet by Katerina Krikos-Davis was published in the *TLS*.<sup>47</sup> More recently, in 2003, David Ricks provided his own versions of several poems by Seferis for inclusion in *Modern Greek Writing* published by Peter Owen.<sup>48</sup> That same year, Roderick Beaton published his biography of the poet, *George Seferis: Waiting for the Angel*, which informed English readers about the diplomatic and human aspects of the celebrated poet.

In 2004, to coincide with the celebration of the Olympic Games in Athens, two new anthologies of Modern Greek poetry were published: *A Century of Greek Poetry* published by Cosmos, including translations by Peter Bien, Peter Constantine, Edmund Keeley and Karen Van Dyck, and *An Anthology of Modern Greek Poetry*, translated by Nanos Valaoritis and Thanasis Maskaleris and published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

In July 2004, David Mason's poem 'The bay of writing' bears the epigraph 'And I with only a reed in my hands', the first line in English of Seferis' 'Memory I',<sup>49</sup> which Mason himself had translated for an article dedicated to Seferis, 'Close to Seferis', published that spring in *The Hudson Review*. More recently, in 2007, Roderick Beaton's translation of selections from Seferis' journals was published as *A Levant Journal*, and in 2016 Beaton published a translation of Seferis' *Mythistorema* in English under the title *Novel*.<sup>50</sup>

45 P. Thompson, 'Seferis against the colonels', *Labrys* (1983) 17–19.

46 Oddly enough, it was the best decade for his poetry's dissemination in Spain due to the late reception of his work in that country.

47 K. Krikos-Davis, 'At the Smyrna merchant's: aspects of George Seferis as revealed in his personal diaries', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 20 October 2000, 13–14.

48 D. Ricks, *Modern Greek Writing* (London 2003). Most of the translations of Seferis included in this volume had already been published in various volumes.

49 D. Mason, 'The bay of writing', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 30 July 2004, 10.

50 G. Seferis, *Novel*, trans. by R. Beaton (Athens 2016).

## Traces of Seferis in the work of English-language poets

Traces of Seferis' poetry can be found in the work of English-language poets, a remarkable example being Demetrios Capetanakis. Although Greek by origin, Capetanakis wrote in English and his poem 'The Isles of Greece' is reminiscent of Seferis' *Turning Point* or *Mythistorema* in both style and imagery.<sup>51</sup> Another Greek poet, Nanos Valaoritis, describes the futility of World War II in English, in 'Factual poem', from the collection *Diplomatic Relations*: 'When 60 million people died for NOTHING'.<sup>52</sup> Seferis had already expressed a similar sentiment in his poem 'Helen': 'That so much suffering, so much of life / Fell into the abyss / For the sake of an empty garment, for a Helen'. Seferis' tone continues in 'Factual poem II', in which Valaoritis refers to Seferis' funeral: 'An imposing demonstration on ex-Premier Papandreou's funeral / And the chill wind of protest at George Seferis' inhumation / Have troubled the five year old calm'.

Bernard Spencer, who collaborated with Valaoritis and Durrell in the first translations of Seferis' poems into English, also developed a productive career as a poet. His article 'The wind-blown island of Mykonos' ends with a few lines from the eighth poem of *Mythistorema*, translated into English in 1938 by Nicholas Bachtin, in which Seferis writes: 'We knew that the islands were beautiful / somewhere around where we are groping / a little higher, a little lower / a tiny distance'. One of Spencer's recurrent themes, the various Mediterranean civilizations, owes a clear debt to Seferis, and Spencer makes no attempt to conceal Seferis' traces on his work. Discussing the origin of inspiration in his poetry during an interview, he says, 'I learnt long ago from the Greek poet George Seferis to think of poems as sometimes waiting around to be written, perhaps in certain parts of town, until a poet comes along'.<sup>53</sup> Spencer also alludes to Seferis and Elytis in the poem 'A spring wind'.<sup>54</sup> His poetry reveals both conscious and unconscious inspiration from Seferis. These derived, on the one hand, from the time and effort Spencer devoted to translating and therefore understanding Seferis' poems, and on the other, from his personal friendship with Seferis, with whom he shared the literary scene in Cairo and London, as well as mutual friends in the literary and artistic circles of the time. Without a doubt, Spencer also contributed to the dissemination of Seferis' poetry in the United Kingdom, as demonstrated by the fact that Spencer's recently-published *Complete Poetry* includes his translation of *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, which is still considered an essential part of Spencer's work.

Lawrence Durrell also makes reference to Greece and its mythology in his poetry. Thanks to his years in Greece and Cyprus and the literary circles in which he moved, Durrell was well acquainted with Greek literature, which found its way into his poems in dedications to poets such as Cavafy. Durrell's *Collected Poems*<sup>55</sup> contain themes

51 D. Capetanakis, *The Isles of Greece and Other Poems* (Athens 1981).

52 N. Valaoritis, *Diplomatic Relations* (San Francisco 1972).

53 B. Spencer, 'Interview with Peter Orr', in *Complete Poetry* (Tartet 2011) 298–304.

54 Spencer, *Complete Poetry*, 101.

55 L. Durrell, *Collected Poems* (London 1960).

found in Seferis' poems: the feeling of eternity, faith in humanity, love as saviour, light, statues, the idea of return, the injustice of memory and the sense of the continuity of history. Durrell, who never enjoyed huge critical acclaim in the United Kingdom as a writer, much less as a poet, dedicated two poems to Seferis: 'Letter to Seferis the Greek' and 'Seferis'. Certainly Durrell's poetry is much more intimate than that of Seferis, and the universe behind the imagery of a single Seferis poem is infinitely greater than that suggested by all of Durrell's poems combined. In the first of his poems dedicated to the Greek poet, the highly metaphorical language in verses such as 'The history, the inventions of the sea: / Upon all parallels of the salt wave, / To lovers lying like sculptures', is suggestive of 'Here end the works of the sea, the works of love' in Seferis' *Mythistorema*. In the second poem, published two years after Seferis' death, images of 'fire' and 'secret whisperings' are reminiscent of the themes running through Seferis' *Three Secret Poems*. A reminiscence of Seferis is evident in the majority of Durrell's poems, and Seferis must have felt this, as he translated Durrell's poem 'Mythology' into Greek and included it in the first edition of his *Log Book II* (1944). The poem has a curious history. In one of his diaries,<sup>56</sup> Seferis recalls a feverish delirium on his way from Crete to Alexandria in 1941, during which he dreamt of the Spanish writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna riding an elephant, from a memory of when Seferis met the Spaniard in Paris, where he was presenting his aphorisms in a circus. 'Mythology' refers to Gómez de la Serna, probably because Durrell looked after Seferis during that febrile episode and witnessed his delirium, and because the British poet had a tendency to use personal experiences in his poems.

The poetry of Philip Sherrard, another of Seferis' English translators, may at first glance seem to have little in common with that of Seferis, the religious component being extremely important in Sherrard's work. In addition, Sherrard lived much of his life in Greece and was very knowledgeable about its literature and classical culture, making it particularly difficult to distinguish traces of Seferis from traces that were merely Greek. However, in *Motets for a Sunflower*,<sup>57</sup> a small, dark collection of 22 poems, elements of the classical tradition are not in evidence, yet several of the poems are reminiscent of Seferis. For example, Poem 14 shares the pessimism of those poems of *Log Book II* in which Seferis feels himself to be a prisoner of events and places, or even of *Mythistorema*. Poem 20 of Sherrard's collection talks of the miracle of love, life, and of being reborn after the act of love, or the memory of it; while Seferis, in many poems, as in those of *Mythistorema*, refers to the erotic spasm as a 'suspension of time' during which one dies and is reborn. Both poems also share the leitmotif of love as saviour.

Since Seferis' death, several British poets have alluded to him in their poems, either citing him or using him as a reference or a creative starting point. Cecil Day-Lewis, for example, published a poem dedicated to Seferis,<sup>58</sup> called 'The Room', in *The London*

56 G. Seferis, *Μέρες Δ'. 1 Γενάρη 1941 – 31 Δεκέμβρη 1944* (Athens 1993).

57 P. Sherrard, *Motets for a Sunflower* (Ipswich 1979).

58 C. Day-Lewis, 'The room', *The London Magazine* 1.11 (1962).

*Magazine* in 1962.<sup>59</sup> Almost ten years later, on the occasion of the death of the Greek poet, he dedicated ‘Hellene: Philhellene’, published in *The Cornhill Magazine*,<sup>60</sup> to Seferis and Maurice Bowra, who died that same year, using the poem to pay tribute to the influence of these two great literary figures. Cecil Day-Lewis enjoyed a close friendship with Seferis. They met during Seferis’ stay in London as ambassador, and they maintained a close correspondence from 1960 until Seferis’ death in 1971. Day-Lewis was also dedicated to disseminating Seferis’ work through readings at universities, which were always well received by students.<sup>61</sup>

Peter Levi was another British intellectual who tried to encourage the reading of the Greek poet in the United Kingdom (although belatedly, after the Nobel), and in whose poems we find traces of Seferis. Levi and Seferis maintained an epistolary relationship after their meeting during Levi’s visit to Athens in 1966. Levi’s poetry is one of landscapes, of light and shade, often politically-themed, with simple, direct syntax, which lacks the depth of Seferis’ work. Although Levi denied any influence, Levi’s ‘Fragments of colour and night’ is somewhat reminiscent, as is Poem 172, in which the line ‘And the sea dies’ recalls the question in Seferis’ ‘Andromeda’: ‘The sea, the sea, who will be able to drain it dry?’, a paraphrase of a line spoken by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*. After Seferis’ death, Levi dedicated his poem ‘In memory of George Seferis’ to the Greek poet.<sup>62</sup>

Patrick Leigh Fermor alludes to Seferis on two occasions in his book of travels in northern Greece,<sup>63</sup> claiming, curiously, to possess no book by either Cavafy or Seferis, despite having heard of them. However, Leigh Fermor had enjoyed a close relationship with Seferis since the 1940s. Their correspondence was abundant, and postcards sent by Leigh Fermor during his travels are found in Seferis’ archive. In one postcard, dated to approximately 1948, Leigh Fermor writes of ‘navigating through seas without gorgons’, in reference to a line from a Seferis poem, and ends with a line from *Mythistorama*: ‘But what are they looking for, our souls, that travel [...]’, demonstrating that he must in fact have read Seferis. In the mid-1950s, Leigh Fermor and Seferis spent time together in Beirut and Damascus. During that time, Leigh Fermor carefully read Seferis’ book of poems dedicated to Cyprus and declared ‘Salamis in Cyprus’ to be his favourite.<sup>64</sup> With regard to the Cyprus dispute, Leigh Fermor’s letters expressed his empathy with the Greeks and his support for the union of Cyprus with Greece, as shown by a postcard in which he writes ‘Long Live Enosis!’<sup>65</sup> Leigh Fermor even translated ‘The King of Asine’, although his version was never published. It remains a mystery,

59 In 1965, Day-Lewis published *The Room and Other Poems*, titled in honour of Seferis, as Day-Lewis told Seferis in a letter dated May 1965 (G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 43).

60 C. Day-Lewis, ‘Hellene: Philhellene’, *The Cornhill Magazine* 1070 (1971) 99–100.

61 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 43.

62 P. Levi, *Collected Poems 1955–1975* (London 1976).

63 P. Leigh Fermor, *Roumeli: Travels in Northern Greece* (London 1966).

64 A. Sisman (ed.), *Dashing for the Post: The Letters of Patrick Leigh Fermor* (London 2016) 124–5.

65 G. Seferis Papers, Gennadius Library Archives, folder 46.

therefore, why Fermor would assert that he barely knew the poet's work when Seferis had even advised him on the book in question, telling him to be careful not to 'penelopeize it'.

Richard Burns published *Black Light* in 1983,<sup>66</sup> a collection of poems in tribute to Seferis, specifically to 'Thrush'. Each of the twelve poems that make up this tribute begins with an epigraph, the majority taken from Seferis' poems or diary entries, which provides the key to the poem. In Burns' poem 'Nada: hope or nothing', from the collection *The Blue Butterfly*,<sup>67</sup> the heart-breaking cry of despair is reminiscent of the empty tunic in Seferis' 'Helen'.

### Irish and Caribbean poets inspired by Seferis

The impact Seferis had on Irish poets such as Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon is evident in quotations cited by both writers in their poems. Perhaps these poets identified with Seferis by the fact of living in a small country with a need to reaffirm their linguistic variety, and in *Mythistorema* they found the drama needed to capture the difficult time of the civil strife encompassing Ireland. Heaney's poem 'To George Seferis in the Underworld', published in the collection *District and Circle* in 2006,<sup>68</sup> is a posthumous tribute and begins with a quotation from the end of Beaton's acclaimed 2003 biography. The poem references asphodels and *aspalathos*, and Heaney also uses the Irish word *seggans* (a kind of wild iris), all of them flowers characteristic of Irish and Greek landscapes that were used in Heaney's poem to champion the cause of his native dialect, in a continuous struggle for identity, as Seferis championed his native Greek. There are also references to black and white, light and shade, and the harshness of war. Heaney's poetry is dense, suggestive and deep, similar to that of Seferis. The connection between Heaney and Seferis may have stemmed from the Irish poet's links with Princeton University, where he may have met Keeley and been introduced to the Greek poet's oeuvre. Equally, his interest in Greek culture was considerable and he may have accessed Seferis' work directly.<sup>69</sup>

In the case of Derek Mahon, however, the similarities may have more to do with the poetry of Eliot. Mahon's poem dedicated to Seferis, 'A disused shed in Co. Wexford', included in his *Collected Poems*,<sup>70</sup> presents unexpected changes in emphasis. These constant changes of perspective are reminiscent of the many voices of Eliot's poetry. The poem's title is concrete yet anonymous, since the action is located in a southern county of Ireland, in a hidden and little identifiable place reminiscent of the hidden or mysterious nature of Seferis' *Three Secret Poems*. The epigraph is adapted from a line in Poem 24 of *Mythistorema*, 'Let us not forget them, the weak souls among the asphodels', and

66 R. Burns, *Black Light: Poems in Memory of George Seferis* (Cambridge 1983).

67 R. Burns, *The Blue Butterfly: Selected Writings* (Cambridge 2006).

68 S. Heaney, 'To George Seferis in the underworld', in *District and Circle* (London 2006) 20–1.

69 About Seferis' influence on Heaney it is worth reading R. Fowler, 'Plato, Seferis and Heaney: Poetry as redress', in D. Tziouvas (ed.), *Re-imagining the Past* (Oxford 2014) 318–29.

70 D. Mahon, 'A disused shed in Co. Wexford', in *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle 1999).

transmits the tragedy and drama of the historical moment. In addition, Mahon also uses the first person plural in the poem, which reflects the idea of collective consciousness and inevitably reminds us of Seferis who, from 1936 onwards, began to put aside the 'I' in favour of a diachronic 'we'.

The poetry of the Irishman Louis MacNeice, a friend and contemporary of Seferis,<sup>71</sup> has often been described as a reaction against darkness, suggesting a search for light, similar to the poetry of Seferis. In 'Thalassa', one of MacNeice's last poems, dated to approximately 1963,<sup>72</sup> there are certain allusions to Seferis, specifically to 'Argonauts' and also in his last poem 'Ravenna' the verse 'the sea today is behind the scenes' has an echo of Seferis' *Mythistorema*. Although it is clear that Seferis and MacNeice, as members of the London literary circle of the time, knew each other and each other's work, there are only a few poems by MacNeice where any trace of Seferis is detectable. The rest of his poetry differs substantially from the Greek's, despite both poets having been substantially influenced by readings of Pound and Eliot. Regarding Seferis' poetry MacNeice was attracted by the images of voyage as well as by Seferis' lost, anonymous heroes. But the influence of Seferis on MacNeice has yet to be fully investigated.

Derek Walcott, a native of St Lucia who writes in English, is a curious example of Seferis' inspiration in the Caribbean islands. While no evident connection exists between the work of the two poets, we do know that Walcott has long been aware of the work of Seferis: Walcott's 1981 poem 'From this far'<sup>73</sup> was dedicated to Seferis. Moreover, George Kalogeris, a Greek poet and Walcott's student at Boston University, tells of having described for Walcott the effect of reading Seferis' poetry in Greek, since Walcott had only read it in translation.<sup>74</sup> In 'From this far,' Walcott establishes a dialogue with Seferis and uses a Greek oil tanker at sea as a metaphor for the oneness of poetry in order to discuss the complex relationship between modern poetry and classical antiquity, whose difficult legacy Seferis strove to recover in his work. In Walcott's poem, the vessel becomes a cultural vehicle with a cargo of 'marble heads', through which the poetic imagination can bring even the dead gods back to life, while in Seferis' poetry, marble statues and ruins symbolize those historical periods of Greek culture that cut across the present. As Walcott's poem progresses, the allusions to Seferis' work become more concrete. In part III, Walcott writes, 'I remember you holding a heavy marble head', alluding to the third poem of *Mythistorema*, in which the line 'I awoke with this marble head between my hands' symbolizes the cultural burden of classical antiquity in Greek literature. Years later, Walcott went on to pay tribute to Seferis again with the inclusion of an excerpt from Seferis' 'Upon a foreign verse', in English, in the

71 They met when MacNeice was serving at the British Council in Athens.

72 L. MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London 1966).

73 D. Walcott, 'From this far', in *The Fortunate Traveller* (London 1981).

74 E. Greenwood, *Afro-Greeks: Dialogues between Anglophone Caribbean Literature and Classics in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford 2010).

programme presenting his play *The Odyssey*, which premiered at the Barbican Pit Theatre in 1993.

These Irish and Caribbean poets whose own poetry was inspired by reading Seferis are clear evidence that Seferis' traces spread far beyond his immediate circle of poet-translators, fellow writers and compatriots. The many poetic allusions to Seferis and the possible influence that his work has had on the poets mentioned above, as well as on other poets that may have escaped our study, are among the most revealing barometers of the Greek poet's reception in the English-speaking world in general.

## Conclusions

Foreign literary works translated into English account for less than 3% of the annual publishing output in English. Works translated from the original Greek are published by modest publishing houses specializing in small print-runs and aimed at a sophisticated, cosmopolitan audience. However, this proved no obstacle to modern Greece's two most representative writers, Cavafy and Seferis, who forged close links with Britain and English literature.

The British reception of Seferis' work has evolved in its form. From the first translation in 1938 until 1960, most of the translations were published in literary journals. After 1960, complete collections of his poems were published, although these were few in number. Since the turn of the century, many anthologies of poetry have included poems by Seferis. Before the poet's death, the most comprehensive examples of his work in English were published by Bernard Spencer, Lawrence Durrell and Nanos Valaoritis (1948), Rex Warner (1960), and Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (1967).

The British reception differs from other European receptions in that, in the United Kingdom, Seferis' poetry was introduced on a personal level. His friends and acquaintances at the British Council were fundamental for his reception in the English-speaking context. Seferis moved in British literary circles and was known to many British intellectuals and celebrated literary figures, who helped to diffuse his poetry throughout the English-speaking world. His English translators and editors were driven by quite different motives than those of other European models of reception, in France, Italy and Spain, for example. The political commitment of many British intellectuals to Greece, the socio-literary network that Seferis enjoyed, and the Modernist similarity of his poetry with that of Eliot, prepared the ground for the fruitful reception of Seferis' work in English.

Notably, the earliest versions of Seferis' work in a European context were translations into French. In 1937, Elli Lambridi published the first French translation of a Seferis poem in the journal *Revue Internationale des Etudes Balkaniques*. A year later Samuel Baud-Bovy published a French version of 'Argonauts' in the journal *L'Hellénisme Contemporain* together with an article titled 'Un poète grec', the original version of the article published in *The Link*. Moreover, in 1945 the first book of Seferis' poems in French, translated by Robert Levesque, was published first by the French Institute in



Athens and, later that same year, by Icaros. The status of the French language as the gateway to the international intellectual market meant that the French versions afforded Seferis prestige and recognition among intellectuals and writers.<sup>75</sup> Nevertheless, it was the English translations of his work that would prove to have the greatest international impact. The consecration of a writer in the English capital is synonymous with literary authentication, global visibility and an international literary presence, given the size of the English linguistic area and the current dominant position of English. Both the French and the English translations contributed, in different ways, to the granting of the Nobel Prize.

The early translations made by Nicholas Bachtin in 1938, Lawrence Durrell in 1941, and Durrell in collaboration with Nanos Valaoritis and Bernard Spencer in 1948, the first versions to appear in English, were crucial elements in the reception of Seferis, the prestige of their authors proving an invaluable introduction to a British readership. These translators were moved by their friendship with the poet, and paved the way for the reception of his poetry in the United Kingdom. The similitude between Seferis' poetry, particularly *The King of Asine and Other Poems*, and that of Eliot, together with his close acquaintance with many of the leading literary lights of the post-war period, afforded Seferis a wider acceptance than Yannis Ritsos or Odysseus Elytis at that time. Cultural ties between Greece and Britain were strongest during the 1940s and 1950s, and some literary figures served at the British Council in Athens after the war,<sup>76</sup> where they had the opportunity to meet Seferis. Subsequent translations by Rex Warner and by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard would immortalize him in the United Kingdom and the United States.

All of the foregoing, reinforced by the nominations of Maurice Bowra, Cecil Day-Lewis, Louis MacNeice and T. S. Eliot, among others, propelled Seferis toward his acceptance of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1963. By means of the core language of English and the English-speaking context, his poetry was universalized and became known throughout Europe, eventually reaching even the most peripheral languages.

75 For example, Philip Sherrard first encountered Seferis' poetry in Levesque translation: see D. Sherrard (ed.), *This Dialectic of Blood and Light: George Seferis – Philip Sherrard, An Exchange: 1947–1971* (Limni, Evia 2015) 55.

76 The importance of the relationships forged within the framework of the British Council between Seferis and British poets is further analysed in P. Mackridge and D. Ricks (eds), *The British Council and Anglo-Greek Literary Interactions, 1945–1955* (forthcoming).