

“ ... the Agapanthi, Asphodels of the Negroes ... :” Life-writing, landscape and race in the South African diaries and poetry of George Seferis’

Abstract

The Greek poet George Seferis (1900-1971) spent 10 months in South Africa during WWII as a senior diplomatic official attached to the Greek government in exile. Drawing on his diary entries, correspondence and poetry this article challenges earlier interpretations of his work best described as a ‘synchronic panoptic vision’ (Bhabha). Beginning with an exploration of the troubled relationship between the ‘glory that was Greece’ and the failure of its early 20th century nationalist, expansionist and modernization projects, the article argues that Seferis tried to overcome alienation from landscape and a crisis of creativity in two ways: he transcribed and commented on Cavafy’s poetry, but was unable to resolve his relationship with the latter; by reaching down into the ruins of ancient Greece and back into its mythological past, through a process of negative displacement he transforms these crises into a descent to the world of the dead. Unlike Odysseus, he receives no guidance from its inhabitants, for they speak only the language of flowers and there are none. Accompanying Seferis’ dual purpose use of classical mythology as national heritage and ironic device is a more problematic aspect of modernism – the relegation of Africa and its sub-Saharan inhabitants to a primitive otherness that, he felt, limited his ability to express himself, and which generated some of his greatest poetry.

Keywords: Seferis, poetry, diaries, exile, South Africa, race, landscape, Odyssey, Hellenism, Greece.

In early July 1941 the poet Greek poet George Seferis (1900-1971) and his wife Maro arrived in Durban from Egypt. Like his much younger compatriot the future South African human rights lawyer George Bizos, Seferis had fled to Crete from the Greek mainland to escape the Nazi invasion, then to Egypt and finally South Africa. Seferis was a senior diplomatic official accompanying the Greek government in exile. While WWII, the Greek Civil War, educational opportunities and a commitment to justice persuaded Bizos to make South Africa his home, Seferis’ professional responsibilities and personal desire to be as close as possible to Greece meant that he would return to Egypt and the Middle East in late April 1942. This article explores what his diaries and poetry express about landscape, race and feelings of homelessness during those ten months. It also argues that several of his South African poems reflect on the nature of poetry.¹

Born in Smyrna (now Izmir), at that time the home of a substantial Greek community, Seferis’ family moved to Athens in 1914. Though never strictly speaking an exile from Turkey, he retained a deep sense of loss for his childhood home. He studied law and literature in Athens and Paris before entering the Greek diplomatic

service, where he remained until he retired in 1961. He published 13 volumes of poetry, receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1963. The role of disengaged, apolitical diplomat suited him and often gave him plenty of time to write. His initial public reaction to the *coup d'état* of 1967 stressed personal silence and he refused to publish for its duration. Though mild, his public criticism of the Greek junta shortly before he died was uncharacteristic. It saw thousands attend his funeral in Athens. Calotychos comments that this intervention 'was esteemed more than his poetry in some ways' (228). As we shall see, silence and an ambivalent response to African otherness would become significant responses to the various personal, poetic and political obstacles and crises he would encounter in South Africa.

From at least the age of 24 until his 60s, alongside his own poetry, fiction and literary criticism Seferis kept several simultaneous diaries. These included private personal diaries, private diplomatic and political diaries, and diaries reworked for future publication. Conscious of very different forms of personal reflection, he was not always confident that he could successfully preserve the specificity of each style or genre in which he worked, and was anxious to protect his poetry because he worried about the presence of a 'diary style' in his 'other writing' (Beaton 66; *Diaries* 27, 37, 68; *Levant* xiii-xv). One of the ways in which he tried to demonstrate that he could hold the line between diary-writing style, poetry and literary criticism was by actively cross-referencing his diaries with marginalia that refer to letters and poems which he wrote and/or received at that time (*Diaries* 14), and through indirect references to some of his photographs (69). By reminding himself and leaving a record of the associations he had made, he enacts control over the material. The autobiographies of other poets have achieved the same goal through different strategies: throughout *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*, Chris van Wyk inserts into his narratives of childhood poems about that childhood which he wrote many years later, while in *Mr Chameleon* Tatamkhulu Afrika informs his readers that he will pass over certain events because he has already dealt with them more effectively in his poetry (67-68). In Seferis' case then, the extant material speaks to a writer who combines personal reticence and awareness of his status as poet in the present with the assumption that he will bequeath a revised public diary, which directs readers and critics towards (auto)biographical interpretations.

In their editions of his diary entries in South Africa and the Levant, Macnab and Beaton have inserted some of this correspondence and the poems to which it and the diary entries refer. While their aim is to provide a quicker, more integrated understanding of the poet, this practice has several consequences: it assumes an unmediated relationship between these forms of writing; it blurs the boundary between memory and archive, and between autobiography and biography. Their interventions contribute to what Carl Pletsch calls the formation of an 'autobiographical life', a category of writing 'in which the biographic subject is a great writer whose lifework has been to produce an elaborate and finished fiction or myth of himself [sic]' (408, 407, 415). Under these conditions, he argues, there is little to be gained by searching for the core truth or reconstituting 'the actual life'. The

biographer's only viable alternative, he suggests, is to acknowledge that she can do little more than deliberately work up the available mythology (418, 413). By consolidating an (auto)biographical reading of his life and poetry which draws together a variety of texts such as diary entries, letters and the poems themselves, and by assuming that whatever he thought about appears in his poetry (Said 'Importance' 170), Beaton and Macnab have subjected Seferis to what Homi Bhabha calls a 'synchronic panoptical vision' (1994: 86) in which all texts are equally accessible and can be interpreted in the same way. This makes Seferis' life and work more accessible and coherent, but it also draws attention to the multiple constructedness and interdependence of 'Seferis', 'his' diaries and 'their' editors. This article argues that if their approach serves to explain his poetry, it must also explain his ideas about landscape, race and poetry. This does mean that the correspondences they assume are direct or that his poetry simply repeats his politics (Said 'Importance' 172).

For Jerome Bruner autobiography is the process through which 'we set forth a view of what we call our Self and its doings, reflections, thoughts, and place in the world' (25). In this instance it may be more useful to draw on Judith Lütge Coullie's notion of life-writing as that overdetermined 'range of representational practices in which the subject seeks to depict the lived experiences of her/his own life or another's' (6). No one could accuse Bruner of a simplistic approach, for he pays particular attention to autobiography's literary determinants and the complexity of 'Self' as a social construct (27, 35-36), but Coullie's definition more easily accommodates the many instances of complicity and collaboration at work in the textual construction of Seferis' autobiographical self.

No sooner had Seferis crossed the equator than he recorded 'a great nostalgia for the Northern Hemisphere'. He had entered 'a universe of which the ancients, the earliest people,' by which he meant the inhabitants of ancient Greece, 'knew nothing' (*Diaries* 17). Some of this cultural, historical and geographical dislocation and otherness had its roots in the topographical imaginary of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Greek nationalism. In part the successful prosecution of the Greek War of Independence from Ottoman rule between 1821 and 1830 relied upon the ability of the Greek progressive bourgeoisie to transform 'Western European Hellenism' into an 'Indigenous Hellenism' (Klironomos 83, 88; Hamilakis 97). Two factors were fundamental to this transformation. (1) Greeks should accept that the route to modernity required them to recognize continuity between Enlightenment-based representations of their classical past and their own time (Hamilakis 113), suppressing the consequences of centuries of Ottoman rule. This became evident during the War of Independence through three connected processes: (a) 'the *purification* of the landscape, by removing all remnants that polluted the material traces of the golden age of the classical period'; (b) 'the rebuilding and *re-creation* of symbolically important monuments'; and (c) 'the *designation* and *demarkation* of localities with ancient remnants as archaeological sites, and their *exhibition* as monuments' (Hamilakis 86; emphasis in original). (2) The citizens of the nascent

Greek state should divest themselves of a backward, oriental identity, yet they should retain their faith in the Greek Orthodox Church, so that religion could become the conduit for nationalism (Hamilakis 114) and territorial consolidation. This could not but affect Greek poetry of the time.

In addition, French Symbolist and Modernist poets, and T.S. Eliot all directed Seferis, whose Greek translation of *The Waste Land* appeared in 1936, towards contemporary modernist form and mythological content (Myrsiades, 66; Beaton 43, 122, 150). This much is clear from Seferis' 'The King of Asini'. Standing among 'ancient monuments and...contemporary sorrow' in a purified landscape its speaker asks:

...does there really exist
among these ruined lines, edges, points, hollows, and curves
does there really exist
here where one meets the path of rain, wind, and ruin
does there exist the movement of the face, shape of the tenderness
of those who've shrunk so strangely in our lives,
those who remained the shadow of waves and thoughts with the sea's
boundlessness
or perhaps no, nothing is left but the weight
the nostalgia for the weight of a living existence
there where we now remain unsubstantial, bending
like the branches of a terrible willow-tree heaped in unremitting
despair
while the yellow current slowly carries down rushes uprooted in the
mud
image of a form that the sentence to everlasting bitterness has turned to
stone:
the poet a void.

Shieldbearer, the sun climbed warring,
and from the depths of the cave a startled bat
hit the light as an arrow hits a shield:
'Ασίνη τε... 'Ασίνη τε... If only that could be the king of Asini
we've been searching for so carefully on this acropolis
sometimes touching with our fingers his touch upon the stones.

Asini, summer '38 – Athens, Jan '40
(Complete 134-136)

Not all Greeks had identified with this form of Hellenism however, particularly those who were living or had lived in areas under Turkish control. They were, says Myrsiades, less middle-class and less literate, and their outlook less purist (66). For those who supported the imported 'Indigenous Hellenism', its most significant

political, practical effect was the 'Great Idea', a nationalist expansionist fantasy project to harmonize ancient and modern political, territorial, national and cultural Greek spaces and identities. Its attendant military campaign sought to extend the modern state to those areas inhabited by Greek communities in Turkish-controlled Asia Minor. For Klironomos it was an 'idealized self-projection' (79) which sought to incorporate areas previously associated with or part of the Byzantine era such as Constantinople (Istanbul), the seat of the Greek Orthodox church – the Oecumenical Patriarchate – and Smyrna into a 'greater Greece'. Its catastrophic failure in 1922 saw defeat of the Greek army in Turkey and a massive influx of refugees who were driven from their generational homes such as Smyrna to a putative country of origin with which they had, at best, no more than an abstract identification. Those least drawn to the 'Great Idea' constituted the bulk of its victims.

Since the 'Great Idea' relied on a degree of self-surveillance based on 'western idealized perceptions of classical antiquity' (Hamilakis 82) and nationalist modernization, a spectral contradiction between the purified ruins and landscapes that posed as the foundations of western civilization on the one hand, and a pre-modern, oriental other evident in centuries of Ottoman rule, economic underdevelopment and the failure of the 'Great Idea' on the other came to haunt the national imaginary of those Greeks, like Seferis, who looked west. They would be left with a sense that if the related projects of (a) modernization to make it part of Europe, (b) territorial consolidation to ensure coherence, and (c) incorporation of the past into the present that would return it to pre-eminence had not completely failed, they could not be discarded either. Perhaps more rationalization than solution, a shift from territorial and material to more idealist notions of Greek nationalism offered one escape from this problem: contemporary Greekness would return to pre-eminence by becoming relatively autonomous from the Greek nation state. We can see this at work in Seferis' diaries. In South Africa in September 1941, as he reflects on the ideological legacy of the Metaxas regime and glosses over the period of Ottoman rule, he writes that through continuity between ancient, 19th and 20th century Greek literatures and canonical figures such as Shakespeare and Bach, 'Hellenism also means humanism', and that 'Greece has never had a life that was independent of or separate from Europe' (*Diaries* 31, 30). Ten months later in Jerusalem, having achieved his goal of greater proximity to Greece, he has less faith in the project of modernity and Greece's European connection. He writes that 'European civilization is bankrupt' and that the collective fate of Greeks always places them 'at the exact point where the balance tips between Greece and the East' (*Levant* 31).

If Seferis found it difficult to fix Greek identity on north-south/west-east axes, for many English- or Afrikaans-speaking white South Africans, Greek immigrants were not always welcome as 'Europeans' in the South African sense, because they were seen as insufficiently Aryan. In effect they were too eastern and too southern. There are numerous accounts of prejudice against Greek immigrants and South Africans of Greek or Greek-Cypriot origin. Bizos recalls that the train from Durban

did not stop at Johannesburg station in order to avoid a possible demonstration by 'Nazi sympathisers ... who accused Prime Minister Jan Smuts of bringing the *vilgoed* [filth] of Europe into *their* country' (49). That Bizos and his father had to apply for visa extensions at the 'department of immigration and Asiatic Affairs' (69) after the end of WWII offers another insight into their 'other' status in South Africa's racial hierarchy.

Seferis hoped that feelings of geographical and historical homelessness and unfamiliarity in South Africa would foster creativity. The reversal of the seasons disrupted and bothered him (*Diaries* 18, 79). 'We are going backwards to spring between strong winds and extraordinary thunderstorms' he would write to Lawrence Durrell (45), one of his earliest English translators. As we shall see, through a negative, downward displacement, in his poetry Seferis would transform reversal into descent to the world of the dead. The built environment and landscape offered little pleasure: Johannesburg was 'built in square blocks as in America' and 'impossible to get lost in' (18-19); Pretoria was sepulchral (26, 20); in both cities he felt he was being buried alive, or was living among 'shadows' (20), but without any sense that the latter could help him as they had helped Odysseus – a significant figure in his poetry – when he visited the underworld for advice about how to reach home. Dated October 1941, 'Kerkstraat Oost, Pretoria, Transvaal' mourns the journey south. The city's only redeeming feature is its flowering jacarandas in spring. Richard Wagner was one of Seferis' least favourite composers, and drawing on the former's combination of northern European and classical mythology (Donnington 86) to criticise Herbert Baker's combination of classical, Renaissance and Cape Dutch architectural elements (Greig 176-181), Seferis describes the Union Buildings with heavy irony as that

Venusberg of bureaucracy with its twin
towers and twin gilt clocks
profoundly torpid like a hippopotamus in blue sky (*Complete* 143).

He concludes on an anticlimactic note, comparing two birds in the Pretoria and Cairo zoos: the 'silver pheasant of China' and 'Onokrotalus the Pelican':

At the end of the street waiting for us___
strutting idly about its cage___
was the silver pheasant of China,
the euplocamos Nychtemerus, as they call it.

And to think we set out, the heart full of shot,
saying goodbye
to Onokrotalus the Pelican___he
with the look of a trampled prime minister
in the zoological garden of Cairo (143).

'He stands by the hour without moving. Clearly an intellectual' (*Levant* 10), is how Seferis' records his visit to the Cairo zoo, and Beaton has included Seferis' whimsical sketch of the bird on the facing page. Despite the tone of pain and frustration in many of his entries, Seferis retained a sense of humour. Of the four photographs that he took in Cape Town, one was of the Spotty Dog, an American-style roadhouse in the shape of a seven meter high cartoon-type dog. He also committed himself to the daily production of sometimes 'ribald' limericks and occasional *calligrammes* (Beaton 207, 208).

In late January 1942, he and Maro took the Blue Train to Cape Town, following most of the embassy staff. By the time they arrived there, his longed-for return north had been confirmed. Emotionally, therefore, in Cape Town and during the rest of his stay in South Africa he was 'already travelling' north and back to Egypt (*Diaries* 69). His first experience of Egypt had not been positive; despite the presence in Alexandria of so many positive mythological and historical signifiers of Hellenism to which he refers in 'Days of June '41' (*Complete* 139), Egypt's unbroken horizon was 'depressing' (Beaton 198). Now South Africa's interior was 'naked' (*Diaries* 32, 77), and the landscape 'cruelly monotonous' (26). Where, according to J.M. Coetzee, earlier travellers such as William Burchell had ultimately accepted that appreciation of this unfamiliar environment required a different, un-European aesthetic (36-44), Seferis acknowledges that it is difficult to disentangle impressions of space and place from historical memory, but steps back from the possibilities these admissions offer. He asserts a deep reluctance 'to impose upon [him]self a colonial background' that would enable him to find positive value in the landscape. His thoughts about the sea gives us some indication of what he felt about parts of the vast undifferentiated South African interior: to sail beyond the horizon, losing sight of land, is to cut oneself off from the source of all intellectual and emotional life (*Diaries* 72). Nor, as the train journeys south through mountains outside Cape Town is he open to the sublime, for the mountains of the Cape are 'decapitated' (71), and though this region is often associated with a Mediterranean climate, it still requires someone to 'give it voice' (71-72, 76-77).

In his diary, Seferis wrote that what he saw was significant for what it could not communicate, what it lacked and for the ways in which it reminded him of what was not associated with Greece. In this context, his silence about Rhodes Memorial on the slopes of Table Mountain cannot be ignored. He comments on 'the old Dutch homesteads of the first settlers' (*Diaries* 72) and other aspects of their material culture, but not on that monument to Cecil John Rhodes' rapacious imperialist Cape-to-Cairo 'big idea', and the journey Seferis himself would soon undertake. The model for Rhodes Memorial is a Greek temple at Pergamon (modern Bergama), not far from Smyrna (Greig 111-113). For Seferis to pass over this monument, which condenses the signs of purified classical Greece, childhood Turkey's absence and presence, the tension between a European Hellenism based on the Enlightenment, and Greece's enduring and painful connection with Asia Minor, means that he

silently affirms that he is 'nothing without the substance of [his] country'. This country becomes both 'wound' and 'weight' (*Diaries* 68). A personal photograph of Poros dominated by a 'large anchorage' creates sensations too overpowering to foster creativity. Echoing the opening line of 'In the Manner of G.S.' – 'Everywhere I travel Greece wounds me' (*Complete* 52-53) – what he needs now, he notes in the diary, is a form of psychic cutting: 'It is by wounding oneself that one writes' (*Diaries* 30). Thus self-inflicted stigmata become the means of return to a national identity that can only be sustained by problematizing the notion of home.

Seferis' attitude towards his compatriots was equally conflicted. Cosmopolitan, literary and aware of differences within the relatively uneducated exiled and immigrant Greek community, his responses range from forthright criticism of reactionary politics, to sympathy and snobbery. Drawing on the trope of the Lotus-eaters from Book Nine of the *Odyssey*, he recognizes that due to cheap black labour, job reservation, a limited economy and restrictive immigration policies many of his compatriots had eaten 'the largest and most prolific flower...mental laziness' (*Diaries* 28). He had little time for the politicians, bureaucrats and the cabinet of the Greek government in exile: '[p]eople who, had they not suddenly become cabinet ministers, would have passed their lives in a small Greek village, talking to the policeman, waiting for the newspaper of the day before from Athens ... have become destiny's wrecks but are the leaders – for God's sake, the leaders! and thinking of them makes one feel like weeping' (19).² He battled to find what he regarded as worthwhile literature, and continued a project started in mid-1937: transcribing and writing commentaries on Cavafy's poems (*Diaries* 69). According to Beaton, Cavafy was 'the literary predecessor with whom he would have the greatest difficulty, in future, in coming to terms' (150). This project was incomplete when he presented a lecture on T.S. Eliot and Cavafy in Athens during December 1946 at the start of the Greek Civil War ('Cavafy and Eliot'). This relationship would remain unresolved (Beaton 200; Calotychos 181).

Seferis regarded himself as superior to white South Africa, for he lamented having to mix with 'Jewish gold-seekers and British colonial snobs' (*Diaries* 19) despite his belief that they shared with him a deep alienation from their surroundings (77). Where possible, he preferred the company of members of the international diplomatic corps, and those fellow Greeks who had retained, he felt, a quintessential Greek authenticity and simplicity (22-23, 69). While the leaders imposed on them and himself only acknowledged the international crisis in order to change their behaviour and attitudes as little as possible – many looked forward to a fascist victory – the ordinary people were unable to make themselves heard, for 'there is no one who speaks their language' (76). Having left Greece 'to serve the struggle', the government in exile and its entourage had 'quickly neutralized' (21) him. Some of the poetry he wrote in South Africa would express this inability to communicate and to be heard, and through a series of transitions and transformations it would also demonstrate his racism.

As might be expected, Seferis interprets South African language policy through a Greek lens, and this has implications for his views on race. In February 1942 he notes several words of English origin that have entered the vocabulary of Greek speakers in South Africa, and he draws on the conflict between advocates of pure (kathaverousa) and demotic Greek to criticise the ambassador's view that Greece has 'many languages depending on one's education', and the latter's analogy with South Africa 'where there is Afrikaans and English as well as several dialects of the blacks' (72, 75, 81).³ The diary entries do not explain why Seferis felt this, but several possible reasons present themselves: Seferis was an advocate of demotic Greek ('Makryannis' 60) and since one of his own linguistic models was Makryannis, a self-taught leader during the War of Independence and whose diary he treated as a kind of *vade-mecum*, he would have rejected the ambassador's link between formal education and expressive ability (Hadas 30); that he saw the Greeks as a nation does not mean that he would have accepted or imagined a racially integrated South African nation (*Diaries* 53); finally, as the term 'dialects' suggests, he acknowledged only two languages (English and Afrikaans) in South Africa.

While the diary does not express the stark responses which Frantz Fanon describes in the opening of 'The Fact of Blackness' – "Dirty nigger!" Or, simply, "Look, a Negro!" (109) – Seferis' opinions are jarring for contemporary readers. At the end of his second day and shortly before he leaves, he mourns the loss of an assumed African innocence. Adopting an ostensibly universal, impersonal tone, he comments that 'one' feels sorry for the 'blacks, dressed like Europeans', because 'one hankers after the age of the noble savage' (*Diaries* 18, 88). This explains his observation that a contemporary trend among black South Africans to name their children after war-time words such as 'Moses, Hitler, France, Axis ... Crisis, Parachute, Hurricane ... rests purely on their sound ... without any understanding of their true meaning' (84). It also points to his inability to consider the possibility that the enemy of one's oppressor is a potential ally, or that these name-choices express a desire for modernity and political power. After his return to Egypt has been confirmed, he includes black South Africans among 'the people' of South Africa, provided that they are 'real natives', ie authentically other and precolonial, and not those 'manipulated by the whites, despised, wearing the uniform costume of European civilization. Only if one really pays attention to them does one notice the rhythm they have in their movements and in their voices; and a greedy love of ornament' (77, 88). In contrast to this preference for a harmless, precolonial African, during the early- to mid-1950s his Cyprus poems do not contain a single reference to Turks or Turkey (Calotychos 189). Seferis' position on 'the native question' was contradictory: Beaton describes Seferis' references to race and barbarism in 'Syngrou Avenue II', an unpublished poem from the mid-1940s, as 'tasteless' (136); in South Africa he condemned eugenics and defended the actions of a Greek arrested for publically advocating racial equality, though from the perspective of the right to support the idea of equality. He also records Prime Minister Smuts' refusal to substitute with guns the spears that African soldiers carried, because this would

threaten white control, unless South Africa faced a Japanese invasion (82, 80). This complicates Beaton's claim that Seferis 'found the South African blacks more admirable than their colonial masters' (207).

The context of 'Crickets', the last poem with a South African dateline, is the speaker's painful sense of a world at odds with itself. This is a world of arrhythmia, deviations from the expected, and in which there is neither justice nor an expression of the desire for justice:

The house is full of crickets
beating like rhythmless clocks
out of breath. And the times

we live beat that way too
while the just remain silent
as though they had nothing to say (*Complete* 265).

However, it then proceeds to a crude distinction between the intellectual north and the emotive south, for in the world of this poem its speaker acknowledges identity in suffering with 'the negroes', but does not extend equality to all. Racial and racist hierarchies prevail, because there are radical differences in the expression of that pain: those from the north suffer stoically, while those 'who live at the equator' express their pain atavistically:

But now

we've flipped the leaf of fate
and you've known us as we've known you
from those who live in the north

to the negroes who live at the equator
all body without mind
who bellow in pain.

I suffer and you suffer
but we don't yell or cry
or whisper even, because

the machine is very quick
at horror and contempt
at death and life...(265)

Seferis feels that active political intervention prevents him from writing poetry (*Diaries* 43); accordingly, he retrieves and preserves Greek civilization and Greece in

silence. These acts of retrieval and preservation rest on refusal to adopt the perspectives that would enable him to interpret the local landscape more positively, and belief that in their 'natural' state the continent's indigenous inhabitants are of a lower intellectual order or, when westernized, struggle to use language symbolically. Whatever other interpretations it sustains, the poem also suggests that those who display a 'natural rhythm' will not find it easy to write poetry.

Seferis' correspondence affirms this split between a primitive south and a pharonic north. The former remains in the past while the latter, with its great technical achievements, is the gateway to a useable past with which he has an ambivalent relationship. He shares this ambivalence with those expressions of negritude that highlight the glories of the great sub-Saharan precolonial kingdoms in order to deflect attention from Africa's current predicaments (Irele 206). In a letter to Henry Miller he expresses the desire

... to start an exploration of this continent ... from the Cape of Good Hope...following the track of the old navigators, or the oracle of some witchdoctor, forgetting everything about colonies and European civilization which substituted the ancient death by the modern, white and hygienic passing-away. I should like to go further and further till the Nile, and then to the huge revolving geometrical tombs, as the light fades – the pyramids – and emerge somewhere by the sea of Proteus, into my world (*Diaries* 78).

Here he displays a modernist fantasy with the idea of a journey to and through an authentically primitive Africa that will enable him to reconnect with both home, rationality and poetry, for Enlightenment Hellenism saw Greece as the origin and model of reason and art.

That this journey is a fantasy of restitution points to the difficulties that Seferis experienced in South Africa, and what I want to turn to now is how those thoughts about his country expressed in the various forms of emptiness and alienation that he articulated in South Africa, and his views on black South Africans contributed to his poetry with an explicitly South African content or subject matter. By this I mean that the poems 'Days of June '41' (*Complete* 139), 'Crete' (*Diaries* 31-32), 'Postscript' (*Complete* 140) and 'The Figure of Fate' (*Complete* 141-142) were all written in South Africa, but are retrospective because their subject matter and setting look north and to the past to that place and time which, despite the chaos of war and the sense of country cut off from its heritage, represents a problematic but familiar order (*Diaries* 45). In these he reflects on: the German invasion of Crete; the confusion of his thoughts about Crete exemplified by the Minotaur's lair; the sense of despair and betrayal he feels at the fate of Greece and her government in exile; the difficulties of trying to connect his experiences of contemporary Alexandria with its founder Alexander the Great. It is only in 'Testament' (*Diaries* 37-39), 'Kerkstraat Oost, Pretoria, Transvaal' (*Complete* 143), 'Stratis Thalassinou Among the Agapanthi'

(*Complete* 144-146) and 'Crickets' (*Complete* 265) that he focuses directly on South Africa. Having already dealt with 'Crickets' and 'Kerkstraat Oost, Pretoria, Transvaal', the rest of the article concentrates on the remaining two.

'Testament' moves through memories of displacement and disorientation that accompany his transition from autumn to spring and 'the land where humble jacarandas flowered' (*Diaries* 37) to a turning point. In this nine-stanza poem, in the middle of the middle stanza, the speaker ends his description of flight and pain, and addresses the decision to start writing again – whatever the outcome of the war:

While trying to understand what has happened
who brought such great injustice
without thinking, I took up my old pen
and decided to begin once more
without knowing where luck would lead me;
there are birds building in disaster
and leaving their nests to the storm (38).

The memory of Hymettus, a region famous for honey and marble, holds the experience of a contradiction between an 'unutterable smile' and 'the resemblance of pain', and between 'the killer's/hand' and 'the beloved face' in the sixth and eighth stanzas respectively. While the first pair refers to pleasure that cannot be adequately described and suffering which could have been (but was not) reproduced, the second refers to expressive but silent body parts that are murderous and the object of affection or desire respectively.

If 'Crickets' sets the conditions for creativity – the silent retrieval of Greek civilization and poetry – 'Testament' begins and ends with a challenge to the acts of interpretation and creation: its first stanza plots the sensation of life in a setting that the speaker cannot decipher; the last begins with a question that does not have a question mark:

In the year one thousand nine hundred and forty-one
in the land where humble jacarandas flowered
covering with a violet dust
the thousand faces of small children
asleep in an immense dormitory,
in the land where I was searching for the Southern Cross
among the illegible shapes of stars.

...
How could I speak when so many others were speaking
I was only staring at you in the dark streets
as dimly lit as a clinic by the lights
of hurrying cars and to right
and to left on the pavement slabs

I could hear the creeping and the clattering
sticks of the wounded ...

G.S Pretoria. October 1941

(*Diaries* 37-39).

Here in the 'How' that is simultaneously a request for information about the way he acted and an expression of self-criticism, the speaker commits himself to a creativity that is tempered with uncertainty about its morality or efficacy in the context of a life-or-death struggle for freedom. The 'How' also points to another issue: within this question(less) mark that facilitates and silences the speaker's creativity lies his unresolved relationship with Cavafy. The penultimate line of Cavafy's poem 'Waiting for the Barbarians' is 'Καὶ τῶρα τί θὰ γένουμε χωρὶς βαβάρους.' [And now what will become of us without the barbarians.] (14-17). As Dimiroulis points out, the majority of translations end this line with a *question mark*, whereas the Greek original ends with a *full stop*. In Cavafy's poem this 'assertive question' derives its power partly from the fact that all of the poem's preceding questions end with question marks. The final interrogation, Dimiroulis argues, is haunted by an other which can never arrive because the nature of the utterance cannot be fixed, or 'attained' (101-102). It therefore remains an enduring statement about poetry. In part, then, Seferis' working definition of poetry rests on an unresolved relationship and an unresolvable utterance which he posed in an alienating environment.

In the letter to Lawrence Durrell referred to earlier, Seferis writes about waking up to the sensation that he was 'a golden fish in a bottle of electric liquid' (*Diaries* 45). During subsequent correspondence with Timos Malanos during early December 1941, Seferis notices that he has 'marked...the word Agapanthus; it is a flower with a stem like an asphodel, with a violet coloured flower, tasseled at the edge. The Greek dead go to the fields of asphodels – the blacks to fields of agapanthus' (51). In the version of 'Stratis Thalassinos Among the Agapanthi' which Macnab includes, he and his translators have replaced 'negroes' (νέγρων), found in the standard Keeley and Sherrard translation (*Collected*, 286-287) with 'blacks'. I believe this reflects a contemporary sensitivity with which Seferis would have been unfamiliar, and since Macnab uses Keeley and Sherrard for 'Crickets' with its reference to 'negroes', the result is two terms with different connotations in one work. Though I may be accused of trying to make a political point at Seferis' and Macnab's expense, 'negroes' is the more appropriate translation here, since it conforms to the thinking of his time. As Beaton points out, in Egypt Seferis does not refer to 'Egyptians' but to 'Arabs', and he comments negatively on them (*Levant* xxii). Wherever he went, by today's criteria Seferis appears to have been equally prejudiced.

Seferis goes on to ask, perhaps rhetorically, if he 'should make it [agapanthi] the subject of a poem' (*Diaries* 51). That month a diary entry describes the Highveld as 'the country of violet flowers, jacarandas, dahlias, bougainvillea, agapanthus. The violet colour of the background, together with the darks skins of the blacks, does not

give one, in the abstract, a bad idea of this country where we are living' (53). One month later, he says in the diary, he wrote the poem 'Stratis Thalassinos Among the Agapanthi', and repeats the view that too much time has passed since he wrote any poetry (64). The name 'Stratis Thalassinos' appears in several of his poems. Equivalent to 'Wayfarer Seafarer', it is variously Seferis' 'alter ego', and his introverted and ironic pen-name (Beaton 104, 62, 116, 149), to which Stallings adds 'a Greek sailor far from home', one of Odysseus' crew, and 'sometimes Odysseus himself, though adrift off the coast of South Africa' (166-170). While the range of voices and speakers associated with the name suggests that at least one of the poem's meanings must be – like Cavafy's unmarked question – a surplus of meaning, this should not prevent us from exploring some of its aspects.

What strikes me about the poem, is the extreme discomfort caused by the confrontation between three factors: the beauty and sadness of its imagery; the fact that in the secular and religious traditions with which Seferis was familiar, the word ἀγάπανθοι [agapanthi] combines ἀγάπη which evokes 'brotherly love', 'the love of enemies', 'respect and sympathy between equals' (Stauffer 54-55), and ἄνθος [flower]; the proposition that Seferis' land of the dead is racially segregated.

As the poem opens its speaker, an Odysseus-figure finds himself in a land of the dead without 'asphodels, violets or hyacinths'. Since the dead use flowers as their means of communication, they must 'travel and keep silent, endure and keep silent' towards visitors, and between and within themselves. Nor, if we return to the unmarked question, does the speaker have permission to speak. Should he 'call out – /the agapanthi order silence', and so he cannot receive advice on how to return home. In this repetition he finds himself in a similar position to Odysseus when his crew inadvertently released the winds from the bag that he received from Aeolus. Odysseus and his ships sail for Ithaca, but when they are close enough to 'see people tending their fires' (Homer 144), he falls asleep, the crew opens the bag, the winds escape. That the speaker wakes up in the middle of a Highveld thunderstorm suggests that he realizes clearly the obstacles that his desire to return home faces. In this (under)world he cannot speak or understand, and the agapanthi prevent the dead from speaking to or guiding him on his journey, or of realizing his dream of home:

There's no other way: the moment I fall asleep
the companions cut the silver strings
and the pouch of the wind empties
I fill it and it empties, I fill it and it empties (Complete 144);

Since he writes so frequently about separation from Greece, this repetition is, I believe, Seferis' experience of exile, particularly in South Africa, where he stands outside himself and the religious 'ek-stasis' of the third stanza's last line which he asks about and cannot 'grasp'. For Seferis, exile, like religious belief, becomes an experience that is known but never fully subjected to reason, even in moments of

reflection. This is also the poem's great set piece (lines 20-30), which rests on the experience of a contrast between lightning and the tiny movements of the agapanthi before he consigns 'the negroes' to a separate realm and acknowledges a crisis of belief:

I wake
like a goldfish swimming
in the lightning's crevices
and the wind and the flood and the human bodies
and the agapanthi nailed like the arrows of fate
to the unquenchable earth
shaken by convulsive nodding,
as if loaded on an ancient cart
jolting down gutted roads, over old cobblestones,
the agapanthi, asphodels of the negroes:
How can I grasp this religion? (144-145)

Where 'The King of Asini' establishes a metonymic association between purified, archeological and Homeric remains, and modern Greece's 'unsubstantial' present, in 'Stratis Thalassinos Among the Agapanthi' Seferis describes but does not grasp the transfer of his own inability to communicate in a self-reflexive poetic register onto those whom 'Crickets' had rendered 'all body without mind'. Thus he retains the ability to speak – about his silence – by acknowledging what he shares with those whom he denigrates. Out of a desire to find his own poetic voice, he surrounds himself with those he has rendered voiceless or silenced. If by chance they do speak, it is without knowing what they mean.

The first five lines of the last stanza (lines 31-35), explore what the speaker feels he ought to experience and do: love, live and procreate through erotic desire sublimated into *αγάπη*. They foster the illusion that a final homecoming is possible:

The first thing God made is love
then comes blood
and the thirst for blood
roused by the
the body's sperm as salt.
The first thing God made is the long journey;
that house is waiting
with its blue smoke
with its aged dog
Waiting for the homecoming so that it can die. (145).

Capri-Karka argues that since two entities cannot both be first, they must be the same, and that the journey home is 'a metaphor for the quest for fulfillment in love'

(26). There are at least three reasons for questioning her argument. Firstly, if Seferis' Christian beliefs accept three simultaneous entities in the 'Trinity', then two simultaneous entities should also be possible; here Capri-Karka appears to overlook the manner in which the 'Great Idea' accommodated tradition in the form of Greek Orthodoxy and a modernizing, western European Hellenism. Secondly, if Beaton is right that the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus was a major influence on Seferis (135, 173), then a tension between two firsts and two opposing interpretations is both desirable and inevitable. Thirdly, she does not explain the transition from Venus, a proxy for eros, to agape, or their coexistence in tension.

That Odysseus returns to Ithaca alone and disguised but is recognized by his old dog who has delayed death for this moment suggests the difficulties that Seferis through Stratis Thalassinis will experience, for Odysseus cannot rest, Teiresias has already predicted, until he has taken 'a well-cut oar' and journeyed until he has found a community whose members 'know nothing of the sea and never use salt in their food'. When Odysseus encounters a 'traveller' who describes this oar as a "winnowing-fan", he will have found this community (Homer 163), and can propitiate Poseidon, the god who has pursued Odysseus because he killed his son, the Cyclops Polyphemus. Both Odysseus and this community must know what a winnowing-fan is and share the same word, but each must refer to a different object; both must know what salt is and share the same word, but must not use it for identical purposes. Here language as ever-expanding set of internally coherent set of terms and a correspondence between sound and object promotes (mis)communication and (mis)recognition.

Where 'Testament' draws on memories of dislocation and disorientation, and the experience of contradiction, then challenges the value of interpretation and creation before it finally affirms them, 'Stratis Thalassinis Among The Agapanthi', as it moves towards its conclusion, confronts the exile's and the poet's anomaly: what they communicate is always simultaneously a (mis)communication and (un)known because it relies on a degree of (mis)recognition attributable to experiences that are only partially shared and to language's capacity to constitute and limit experience. 'Stratis Thalassinis Among The Agapanthi' also confronts two very different deaths: Elpenor's 'foolish', anticlimactic ending, and a collective suicide bombing during the Greek War of Independence that is the subject of Dionysios Solomos' 1825 poem 'The Destruction of Psara':

But the dead must guide me;
it is the agapanthi that keep them from speaking,
like the depths of the sea or the water in a glass.
And the companions stay on in the palaces of Circe:
My dear Elpenor! My poor, foolish Elpenor!
Or don't you see them
--"Oh help us!" --
on the blackened ridge of Psara? (145)

These two deaths serve different purposes. The drunken Elpenor fell off the roof of Circe's palace, and broke his neck; he never reached home (Homer 158, 160); in Solomos' poem, the inhabitants of the island of Psara, close to Smyrna. Instead of being captured, they preferred to kill themselves and some of the joint Turkish-Egyptian force that had taken the island (*Complete* 282; Woodhouse 142). Here I think Seferis' unambiguous question points to deaths that made it possible to find and found an independent Greece to which Stratis Thalassinos will not return. Seferis also tries to treat the body as an entity which can halt the proliferation of meanings and substitutions. He does so in order to extract himself from a discourse that combines a non-referential theory of language with an analysis of pain. He wants to reach a conclusion that generates no further signification but cannot because, as I have argued earlier, he draws his examples from poetry that speaks to the aspiration for a national identity.

In this article I have collaborated with and contested Beaton's and Macnab's 'panoptic vision'. By accepting its synchronicity I have presented alternative readings of life-writing, landscape and race in Seferis' South African diaries and poetry. By providing an historical context, I have argued that in 'The King of Asini' Seferis reflects on the 'Great Idea' through a metonymic chain of associations between purified remains, Homeric mythology, and modern Greece's 'unsubstantial' present. Through his comment that he was 'going backwards to spring' and through the poem 'Stratis Thalassinos Among the Agapanthi'. Seferis transforms the experience of reaching down into the ruins and back into the past into reversal and descent to the world of the dead. In turn, the north becomes the world of life, and the south becomes the land of the dead. In this silent world communication about how to return home can only take place through flowers, but there are no flowers there except agapanthi, and they 'order silence' or are the possessions of those without language. While Stratis Thalassinos experiences silence and the impossibility of communication, Seferis and the ordinary people discover that 'there is no one who speaks their language' (*Diaries* 76). 'Crickets', with its distinction between 'those who live in the north' and 'the negroes who...who bellow in pain' (*Complete* 265), and the letter to Arthur Miller in which he separates primitive south and pharonic north Africas, contradicts the notion that for Seferis 'the negroes' are ordinary people. In part, Seferis resolved the crisis of creativity he experienced in South Africa by refusing to make the aesthetic adjustments that would have rendered the landscape less alien, and by transferring what he feared he could not achieve onto the most available and oppressed other. The results were, as Said has suggested in *Orientalism* and in some of his writing on Seferis' least favourite composer 'productive' and deeply problematic (14). His unresolved relationship with Cavafy's poetry was equally fruitful. Both processes remind us how often the silent quest for one's own freedom rests on another's continued negation or oppression.

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NOTES

¹ My thanks to the anonymous reader, Rita Barnard, Vangelis Calotychos, Julia Martin and Constantin Sofianos for comments on earlier versions.

² These men and their families were products of an earlier government led by General Metaxas, a fascist and admirer of Mussolini and Hitler. Greece was drawn into World War II when Metaxas refused the Italians passage through Greece, not because he disagreed with Italy's politics at the time but because this would have compromised Greek national sovereignty. When the Greek army repulsed the Italians, the Nazi army came to their rescue and effectively took control of the country, imposing a brutal occupation in which thousands of Greeks were killed or starved to death.

³ According to Hadas, demotic Greek is 'the vernacular form of spoken Greek which developed from the post classical period...to become the language used in writing (as well as the universal form of speech)...at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Demotic contains many loan words (especially from Turkish) and in it the classical declensions and conjugations are considerably eroded'; katharevousa is 'the "clean" or learned tongue...but with many neologisms and artificial archaisms. Katharevousa ignored all words of non-Greek origin. Used in official documents, government newspapers...taught in schools by rightist governments...[t]he split between demotic and katharevousa...has been a subject of intellectual and political debate in Greece...ever since the liberation from the Turks in 1821' (44).