

on the road to Thebes, Oedipus encountered the Sphinx that posed the riddle to him, his response was: *man*. This simple word destroyed the monster. We have many monsters to destroy. Let us ponder on Oedipus's answer.¹ Unlike Sherrard, Seferis never developed an aversion to the rationalism that has been associated by western thinkers with the Classical period of Greek civilization; indeed, as his *oeuvre* progressed, Seferis's references to ancient Greek literature tended to move away from Homer and even Aeschylus towards Euripides, the last of the great Athenian tragedians. It is significant that even as early as '*Thrush*', Seferis's speaker seems to reject the divinely-inspired mantic wisdom of Tiresias in favour of the humanistic outlook of Socrates, whose 'conceptual absurdities' are dismissed with contempt in one of Sherrard's letters (p. 213). Twenty years later, when Seferis applied for a visiting fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 1968, it was to work on Plato, but in particular on 'those *rational* elements in his writing' (my italics).²

With hindsight, there seems to be a significant difference between the ways in which Sherrard and Seferis responded to the mountains of Attica on their walk around Kifissia during their first meeting on 29 December 1950 — a meeting that Sherrard was later to describe as 'a revelation'.³ According to Sherrard's contemporary record of their meeting (see pp. 167–8 below), Seferis felt the *solidity* of the Attic mountains, while Sherrard himself saw them as 'moving living folds of a curtain or thin veil covering a woman's body'. It is significant that Sherrard's view combines a greater sensuality with the feeling that visible nature is ultimately a veil masking a deeper reality.

Isolated within a world in which most of the people he came across seemed to him to be both morally flawed and inadequate to assist him in

¹ Georges S  feris, *Discours de Stockholm* (Athens, 1963), p. 14. The Sphinx stopped every Theban wayfarer and asked him the following riddle: 'What being, with only one voice, has sometimes two feet, sometimes three, sometimes four, and is weakest when it has the most?' Before Oedipus, everyone had failed to find the answer and had been put to death and devoured by the Sphinx. When Oedipus replied, the Sphinx killed herself (Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (London, 1955), vol. 2, p. 10).

² Edmund Keeley, 'Introduction: corresponding with Seferis', in *George Seferis and Edmund Keeley: Correspondence, 1951–1971* (Princeton, 1997), p. 53.

³ Letter of 24 September 1971 to Seferis's widow (p. 323).

his spiritual and poetic quest, Seferis found consolation in the reality and solidity of natural objects within the Greek landscape and the Greek light. He wrote, in a statement that Sherrard was to quote several times: 'My task is not to do with abstract ideas, but to listen to what the things of the world say to me, to see how they are interwoven with my soul and my body, and to give them expression.'¹ This is what Sherrard aptly calls Seferis's 'physical metaphysic' (7 August 1950, p. 346). But Seferis was unwilling to go so far as Sherrard along the metaphysical path.

The extent and quality of Seferis's religious belief is a very difficult question.² He had been brought up in the Orthodox Church, and his mother (though not, it seems, his father) was known for her piety. There is no doubt that the Orthodox tradition had a profound influence on his outlook, and he writes to Lorenzatos from Ankara on Easter Saturday 1948, for instance, that he is reading St Matthew and trying to fast. Later that year, as Christmas approaches, he tells Lorenzatos that 'Ankara is the first town without a church that I've known' and goes on to say that 'although I'm not specially religious, I feel I'm lacking something — like when you've run out of cigarettes.'³ We may be struck by Seferis's *physical* need for religious observance, yet we cannot help thinking that Sherrard would hardly have shared Seferis's attitude as it is expressed here.

In 1950 Seferis visited the rock-hewn Byzantine churches and monasteries of Cappadocia. This journey was both a return to his family past — some of his ancestors on his father's side had come from Caesarea [Kayseri] in Cappadocia — and an investigation of an area of Byzantine

¹ 'Μιά σκηνοθεσία για τὴν "Κίχλη"' ['A Mise-en-scène for "Thrush"'], *Δοκίμεις* [*Essays*] (3rd edn, Athens, 1974), vol. 2, p. 50 (see Liadain Sherrard's translation in this volume, pp. 104–26). This was a favourite passage for Philip Sherrard: see, e.g., his English rendering of it, p. 328.

² Beaton (George Seferis. *Waiting for the Angel*, pp. 109–10) has some pertinent remarks about what he calls the 'erotic mysticism' of Seferis's early poetry, especially *The Cistern* (1932). In the same year that this poem was published, however, Seferis wrote to his brother-in-law Konstantinos Tsatsos: 'I have so little inclination towards mysticism' (quoted by Beaton, p. 109). In Seferis's last book of poetry, *Three Secret Poems* (1966), Beaton observes 'the affirmation of a presence that is at once sensual and divine, and eludes any formal statement of religious belief' (p. 371).

³ *Letters, Seferis – Lorenzatos*, pp. 24–5, 45.