

I have often reflected on what is it that gives his thinking its unusual depth, its capacity to shed a sudden shaft of light on themes that hitherto seemed quite ordinary, prosaic or intellectually dry. The answer to that question, I believe, lies in some measure in this correspondence. For one of the great events of Sherrard's life, as he affirms in these early letters and subsequently on other occasions, was the discovery of the inner reality of Greece through the poetry of George Seferis.

The letter that Sherrard wrote in 1947 to a Greek poet was to George Seferis. The meeting of these two minds, of the young English soldier-poet and the older Greek poet-sage, as it unfolds in the letters, has a kind of archetypal quality. At the time the correspondence began Sherrard was 24 years old, recently released from his commission in the British Army and searching for a life-orientation following the cessation of the Second World War; Seferis, the mature poet and diplomat, was at the height of his creative powers and had just completed perhaps his greatest poem, *'Thrush.'* The correspondence that followed between the two men over the next 25 years was not extensive, but it possesses — for this reader at least — a power to hold one's interest and to raise one's contemplative level, because the dialogue between Sherrard and Seferis is a kind of sustained contemplation of the role of poetry in human consciousness and spiritual development of the like we seldom see any more. We live in an age in which poetry has been relegated to the decorative edges of our culture, suitable for confessing personal triumphs and tragedies or expressing consoling aspects of life's unexpected and uncalculated beauties, or exhorting us to 'wake up and smell the roses'. These are good intentions in themselves, but they do not go very far. It is hard to imagine a time when poetry was understood to be a power sourced in divine inspiration, an essential link between human society and the universal principles of life, whose mission 'begins where dogma ends, where philosophies founder and where politics reveal their incapacity to grasp the deeper levels of human and historical life'.¹ And yet it was not so long ago that the greatest poets were understood to be prophets and seers capable of grasping and disclosing the deeper

¹ Philip Sherrard, *The Wound of Greece: Studies in Neo-Hellenism* (London and Athens, 1978), p. 86, where he quotes approvingly from Angelos Sikelianos's article, 'The Life and Work of Pindar' (*Anglo-Hellenic Review*, vol. 3, no. 7, Athens, 1947).

levels of human and historical life, and the greatest poetry was expected to have prophetic, moral and visionary dimensions. Such poetry was not meant merely to console and comfort; it was meant to pierce with the sword of truth, to shatter the darkness with the mystagogy of light, to 'afflict the comfortable' as well as 'comfort the afflicted', as is said of the best preaching. This understanding of the role of poetry has been revived in varying degrees in recent times with regard to Blake and Yeats, and in the reception of Eliot's poetry from the time *The Waste Land* burst upon the poetic landscape in 1922; and such were the concerns of Sherrard and Seferis during the ten years between 1947–57 and are revealed in the intensity and seriousness with which they discuss the purpose of poetry in the imaginative life of human individuals and society.

Seferis was a mentor of the poetic imagination for Sherrard, and the encounter with the older man set the younger man on his life's path. These letters and the various texts they sent to each other indicate the issues and themes that were of primary importance to both men, those of literature, art, religion, culture, and the special quality of the Greek imagination to the further contemplation of which both Seferis and Sherrard dedicated the greater part of their lives.

Young as he was, his spirit wounded and confused by his war experiences, and, as he was later to admit, even close to despair, Sherrard responded instantly to the confrontation with Greece incarnated initially through his discovery of the poetry of George Seferis in 1946. In that first letter to Seferis, written in early 1947, in which he asked for permission to translate some of his poems, he writes:

While, last year, in Athens, I found your poems, translated into French: the Levesque translation. Even in a language not their own, their impact on me was great, as it cannot fail to be great on whoever reads them. Their importance is international: although Greek, they speak to countries as opposite as England. I speak only of the value of the experience which your poetry will give, even translated, to those who read it — an experience which should not be denied, so profound it will be.¹

¹ See p. 54 below.