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## SOME COMMON FEATURES IN THE TECHNIQUE OF T. S. ELIOT AND G. SEFERIS

George Seferis (1900-1971), Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1963, admitted that on first reading T. S. Eliot's (1888-1965) poems, he was unable to enter the inner regions of *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*. The same difficulty is often experienced by people who read Seferis' poetry for the first time. In a letter appearing in the Symposium on Eliot's 60th anniversary, Seferis writes:

*.....there are critics in my country who say that in the few poems I have written they discern the influence of Eliot. This does not surprise me, for I believe there is no parthenogenesis in art. Each one of us is made up of a number of things, and the lion too, <est fait de mouton assimilé>, wrote Paul Valéry. Precisely for it is the assimilation that matters.....<sup>1</sup>*

The poetry of Seferis and Eliot has some common features, and this brief survey will attempt to bring out some obviously similar aspects in the technique of the two poets.

One may begin by considering the following extract from *The Waste Land*:

*There I saw one I knew, and stopped him, crying: «Stetson!»  
‘You who were with me in the ships at Mylae!  
‘That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
‘Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year?  
‘Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed?*

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1. T. S. ELIOT: A Symposium edited by Tambimuttu and Richard March, Frank & Cass Co. Ltd., 1965, p. 126.

*'O keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men,  
 'Or with his nails he'll dig it up again!  
 'You! hypocrite lecteur! - mon semblable, - mon frère!*<sup>1</sup>

These lines contain quotations from Webster's *The White Devil* and from Baudelaire's Preface to *Fleurs du Mal*. These are the references given by Eliot himself in his notes. Then we have *Mylae* which is a location in Sicily, where in 260 B.C., Duilius defeated the Carthaginian fleet. The reference seems to be to war in general. But the difficulty is not solved by this explanation. *Mylae* was a Phoenician colony, and the reference is also to the drowned Phoenician sailor appearing elsewhere in the poem. The last line may mean that people in the *Waste Land* are dead, and that we, the living, with our hypocritical attitude do not realise it, or do not want to admit it. These few lines conceal a wealth of meaning which the unaided reader cannot hope to uncover.

Writing on the subject of Eliot's allusiveness, Seferis comments:

*In order to understand this work fully, one must  
 acquaint oneself with the whole of poetry starting  
 from Sappho, and accept six or seven languages  
 simultaneously. Such a burden of references, a  
 critic has said, would have been enough to sink  
 any poem. And yet, The Waste Land has not sunk*<sup>2</sup>

Commenting on Eliot's poetry, Seferis writes: Eliot .... a difficult poet. First of all, I would like to remind you that, as poetry, all poetry is difficult<sup>3</sup>. In another context, he argues what is certain, however, is that in our times, poetry has become more dense, more elliptic, more difficult<sup>4</sup>.

Density of thought and elliptic expression characterise the poetry of Seferis. The following lines provide an example:

*The sea that embittered us is deep and unexplored  
 and unfolds a boundless calm.  
 Here among the pebbles we found a coin  
 and threw for it.*

<sup>1</sup> T. S. ELIOT: *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber and Faber Limited, 1963, p. 65.

<sup>2</sup> Θ. Σ. "ΕΛΙΟΤ, Η ΕΡΗΜΗ ΧΩΡΑ και άλλα Ποιήματα. Μετάφραση Γ. Σεφέρη, Γ' έκδοση, Αθήνα, Ίκαρος. 1965, σελ. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Γ. ΣΕΦΕΡΗΣ, ΔΟΚΙΜΕΣ, Β'. έκδοση, ΦΕΞΗΣ, 1962, σελ. 75.

*The youngest won it and disappeared.  
We set out again with our broken oars.*<sup>1</sup>

In the above lines, a situation is barely suggested, its full significance to be grasped only after the reader's imaginative participation has made its contribution. Two apparently insignificant events have occurred, the discovery of the coin and the gambling that follows. The youngest wins the coin and disappears. The ship leaves without him, and what is more important, without having effected the necessary repairs. These events may suggest that everything we do is futile; we never create but passively accept decay and loss. We seem to be satisfied with our minor gains and forget the more important issues. The above extract does not have the allusiveness of the quoted passage from *The Waste Land* and generally, Seferis' references lack the variety and wealth of those found in Eliot's poetry. His poems, however, often suggest more than they state. The poet supplies only the bare outlines of a situation, leaving the reader to supply the necessary detail.

Though Eliot's poetry is undoubtedly hard, it is not obscure. He himself argues that:

*The most bungling form of obscurity is that of the poet who has not been able to express himself to himself; the shoddiest form is found when poet is trying to persuade himself that he has something to say when he hasn't.*<sup>2</sup>

And a little later:

*But if the poem were exclusively for the author, it would be a poem in a private and unknown language; and a poem which was a poem only for the author, would not be a poem at all.*<sup>3</sup>

Eliot's poetry is considered «difficult» because it makes certain claims upon

1. G. SEFERIS: *Collected Poems 1924-1955*, Translated and Introduced by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, Jonathan Cape, London, 1969, p. 31.

2. T. S. ELIOT: *ON POETRY AND POETS*, Faber and Faber, London, 1957. Essay, «The Three Voices of Poetry» (1953), p. 99.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 100.



Another parallel is between Santorini of Seferis and Eliot's *The Hollow Men*. In *Santorini* we have:

*When the dice struck the flagstone  
when the lance struck the breast-plate  
when the eye recognized the stranger  
and love went dry  
in punctured souls ;<sup>1</sup>*

In *The Hollow Men* a similar sort of repetition is used:

*Between the desire  
And the spasm  
Between the potency  
And the existence  
Between the essence  
And the descent  
Falls the shadow.<sup>2</sup>*

It is true that after 1931, the poetry of Seferis developed certain novel characteristics. The change may be attributed to Seferis reading of Eliot's poems. The *Waste Land* panorama common to both poets may be explained by the fact that they were contemporaries and looked at the same picture of desolation and despair presented by the modern world. Each one of them caught sight of his own *Waste Land*: for Seferis contemporary Greece; for Eliot, contemporary Europe. Seferis' sensitive nature was affected by the atmosphere of desolation in Greece, and using the technique suggested by Eliot, expressed his despair. Thus one can say that Eliot has influenced Seferis only in the way the Greek poet chose to express his own conception of the world. The world described by Seferis is inseparably linked with his own vision of Greece.

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1. G. SEFERIS: *Collected Poems*, p. 65.

2. T. S. ELIOT: *Collected Poems*, p. 92.