How does Seferis' mythical method interact with Greece's lasting socio-political issues?

Seferis uses the mythical method in his poetry to allude to and comment upon social and political issues in Greece in his lifetime. Before discussing his poetry, it is important to define what is meant by Seferis' mythical method. This method can be described as allusive, as although Seferis does make direct references to myth he does so in inventive ways, for example by using narrative space, symbols and characters to evoke Greek myths. He also does this by referencing ancient texts through direct quotes (as in *Helen*) or by using the language and narrative techniques of ancient authors.This essay will primarily focus on his earlier works which contain the most frequent references to myth, and tracing how his use of the mythical method changes through the course of his career. It will focus on selected poems from *Mythistorema* for a broad overview of the aims of Seferis' mythical method and how it relates to contemporary Greece. Moving on it will examine *Thrush* and *Helen* and how they develop the ideas from previous poems to criticise the Greek Civil War through the mythical method as well as direct historical references. Throughout the essay will consider the socio-political issues occuring in Greece at the time the poems were published, and the historicization of such issues and events through Seferis' poetry.

Mythistorema, published in 1935, suggests by its very title a blending of myth and history. Throughout the parts of the poem the idea of a journey is a crucial and enduring theme. The first poem evokes this with the idea of looking for the 'first seed'[1]. This may be linked with the search for Greek identity, particularly within the 'Thirties Generation' which Seferis was a part of, seeking 'Hellenic Hellenicity'[2]. This meant a Greek identity which was an assimilation of Classical Greece right up until the present, rather than the Western and Renaissance-based ideal of Greece which essentially discounted anything after the Classical period. This idea of Greek culture as a synthesis can be seen in symbol of the angel in the opening line of the poem[3], which is arguably a cross-cultural symbol as *angelos* in Greek can mean both the

[1] Seferis, *Mythistorema* 1.1-6.
[2] Liapis (2014: 97).
[3] *Mythistorema* 1.1.

messenger of ancient Greek tragedy and the angel within the Christian tradition[4]. In this way, Seferis incorporates elements of Greek culture across time which, combined with the idea of a journey, suggests a trajectory towards finding a true Greek identity. However, there is an underlying pessimistic and foreboding tone at the end of the first section, where the narrator and his companions 'travelled towards the north, strangers plunged into the mist of the immaculate wings of swans that wounded us[5]. It may be suggested here that, in searching for remnants of ancient Greece from Northern Europe (and its rigid, Western perceptions), actual Greeks find themselves isolated from their true identity and made outsiders[6]. In this sense, the opening of *Mythistorema* comments upon contemporary ideas of Greekness, and criticises Western ideals of Greece.

Seferis' mythical method is also apparent in *Mythistorema* through numerous references to Greek myths and literature, perhaps most obviously Homer's *Odyssey.* This is evident in the overall structure of *Mythistorema,* which is comprised of twenty-four sections, thus mirroring the twenty-four books of the *Odyssey*[7]. Consequently, Seferis' awareness of the literary tradition is shown, and more specifically Greek literature. In reusing and revivifying an ancient Greek work Seferis gives his own work a sense of validity and grandeur, as well as establishing archetypes which apply to his own time[8]. The archetype established most clearly is that of the traveller who wanders endlessly in search of something just outside of his grip. This is emphasised in the ninth section, which is narrated by a lone traveller as emphasised by the repetition of the personal pronouns 'I' and 'me'[9]. This tone of solitude is further enforced by a direct reference to Odysseus and his consultation with the dead in book eleven of the Odyssey, as well as a switch to the past tense where the traveller recalls that he and his companions had hoped to follow in his footsteps[10]. The change in tenses

[4] Beaton (1987: 137).
[5] *Mythistorema* 1.11-13.
[6] Beaton (1987: 137).
[7] Padel (1985: 94).
[8] Tziovas (2008: 290).
[9] *Mythistorema* 9.1,5.
[10] *Mythistorema* 9.13-17.

here means ‘the borderline between past and present is completely blurred’[11], and the mythical past and the rest of Greek history are as one. Equally, it may indicate the inability to return to ancient times, for both the contemporary Greek identity and literature. Thus it is crucial that the various travellers shown throughout *Mythistorema* never reach their destination, perhaps suggesting that the Greeks cannot find a true identity (in Seferis’ view) by purely looking to the past. Moreover, this sense of longing for something intangible could be linked to Seferis’ experience of the Asia Minor Crisis in 1922, which left him permanently displaced from his homeland of Smyrna, along with many others[12]. In this way, *Mythistorema* reflects both personal and collective struggles as a result of violence and lack of identity.

In contrast to *Mythistorema*, which uses myth widely to relate to socio-political issues, *Thrush* uses a myth to comment upon a specific historical moment. Published in 1947 several years into the Greek Civil War, it reflects upon the long-term suffering caused by the political divide between the Right and Left following the Second World War[13]. Seferis does not focus on political intricacies however, but rather the mass displacement, deaths and inhumanity of the Civil War. This more objective viewpoint may be linked to Seferis’ political career, which prevented him from commenting too harshly and overtly on politics. The tripartite structure of the poem emphasises this, with the first part focusing on houses. The anthropomorphised depiction of houses which are described as ‘new at first, like babies’[14] suggests that the houses symbolise the Greek people displaced by Civil War, thus showing its devastating effects on human life. This first part is seemingly rooted solely in Seferis’ own historical reality, and possibly also calls back to his experience of losing his homeland through the Asia Minor Disaster, as emphasised by the poetic ‘I’ throughout. As with *Mythistorema* then, Seferis resonates his personal issues with those felt more widely. At the same time though, the end of the first part of *Thrush* inserts myth into historical reality by

[11] Zahareas (1989: 202).
[12] Beaton (2001: 4).
[13] Liapis (2014: 76-77).
[14] Seferis, *Thrush* I 12.

alluding to an anonymous woman using erotic and exotic imagery. She is described as returning from ‘southern ports’ and ‘with perfume of golden fruit and herbs’[15]. Although she is not identified here as Circe, as she is in the second part, her description connotes luxury, temptation and sensuality, the devastating effects of which are shown through the course of the poem.

The second part contains the most obvious use of Seferis’ mythical method, as it depicts a dialogue between two figures now identified with the Elpenor and Circe of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The conversation is overseen by a ‘modern Odysseus’[16], who may be seen as a morally superior figure within the poem as he remains external to the dialogue. As seen in *Mythistorema,* mythical figures are used as ‘patterns and archetypes’[17] that have a universal quality, and can be used to understand current events. This is particularly evident in Seferis’ symbolic use of Elpenor, who in the *Odyssey* was the youngest of Odysseus’ companions who died by drunkenly falling off the roof of Circe’s house[18]. Within *Thrush*, the male speaker is described as having ‘the look of Elpenor’[19], making it clear that though the poem is not set in mythical times, there is a sense of history repeating itself. Thus the Elpenor-like figure of *Thrush* is directly associated with the actions and behaviour of the Odyssean Elpenor, and is a ‘prototype…of the small-time, petty, seeker after comfort’[20]. His speech within the poem supports this argument, as he describes statues, perhaps symbolic of past or imagined lovers, through erotic language: ‘and yet the statues bend sometimes, dividing desire in two, like a peach’[21]. The emphasis here is on bodily desires and their overwhelming, even disabling effects, as the Elpenor figure is wholly preoccupied with them throughout this section. It is through this folly that he is stuck ‘in a state of psychic arrest’[22], unable to move on from the past due to his transgression of excess, haunted by memories of the past.

[15] Seferis, *Thrush* I 36-39.
[16] Capri-Karka (1982: 305).
[17] Tziovas (2017: 358).
[18] Homer, *Odyssey* 10.551-560.
[19] *Thrush* II 4.
[20] Padel (1985: 93).
[21] *Thrush* II 22-23.
[22] Capri-Karka (1982: 306).

Although the narrative space in the first two parts is obscure and seemingly distant from the historical moment, it is brought back to Seferis' time in the final part. It opens with Elpenor's address to Odysseus, where he hands wood to him so that it 'will flower in other hands'[23]. This has been interpreted as him posthumously giving up his past, hedonistic desires[24], thus marking both a shift in character and a shift in narrative time to Seferis' own time. The central image of this part of the poem is the ship the Thrush, whose wreck is seen by Odysseus[25]. The Thrush was a ship which was sunk with the intention of it being taken by the Germans during the Second World War, only to be subsequently raided by black marketeers[26]. This symbolic act of self-sacrifice compared to the self-serving and greedy act of the black marketeers draws parallels with the behaviour of Elpenor in the previous part of the poem, proving him as an archetype for human acts throughout history. Though the sinking of the ship is not directly related to the Civil War, it shows an act of inhumanity that immediately preceded it as almost a foreshadowing of further violence to come. Equally, by investing a seemingly small and insignificant moment in history (the sinking of a ship) in the poem, aligning it with myths of Homer's *Odyssey*, it may be said that Seferis was 'mythologizing contemporary history'[27]. This shows a dialogic interaction between mythical past and the historical present, and also the creation of history itself through literature.

As seen in *Thrush,* Seferis also employs the mythical method to comment upon a political (and historical) moment he felt resonance with in *Helen.* Published in 1955 as part of *Logbook III,* though written in 1953, it shows clear commentary on the Greek-Cypriot struggle for independence. Having fought in the Second World War with the aim of achieving independence from British imperial control, Cyprus was denied political autonomy and

[23] *Thrush* III 1-4.
[24] Capri-Karka (1982: 311).
[25] *Thrush* III 7-9.
[26] Liapis (2014: 86).
[27] Liapid (2014: 95).

stayed under British rule[28]. Since visiting Cyprus himself in the early 1950s, Seferis felt a strong affinity with the Cypriots, and especially their seeming betrayal and the pointlessness of their sacrifices in war. Through the poem *Helen* he expresses this futility and disillusionment felt in this particular struggle through the universalising impact of the mythical method. As seen in the previous poems discussed, he references a particular ancient text, in this case Euripides' tragedy *Helen.* The poem itself is preceded by three quotations from the Euripidean play, with perhaps the third being the most important. Here the servant responds to the revelation that the real Helen was never at Troy by saying 'you mean it was only for a cloud we struggled so much?'[29]. In this way from the outset it is established that Seferis is following an alternative tradition of the Trojan War than that expressed in Homer's *Iliad*, in which Zeus sent the real Helen to Egypt, and a phantom image of her to Troy[30]. This determines the sense of being deceived by those in power and the pointlessness of war which is expressed throughout the poem through the universalising symbol of Helen.

Seferis' *Helen* features other Euripidean references as part of the mythical method. The repeated line 'the nightingales won't let you sleep in Platres'[31] punctuates the main narrative voice, especially as it is presented as speech from an external voice. The symbol of the nightingales and their song is a direct reference to Euripides, as the chorus tells them to lament for those who died at Troy[32]. The nightingales may also symbolise literary and historical memory, as through their song they ensure that the horrors of the Trojan War, and indeed the horrors of any war, are not forgotten. However, the combination of this with the modern holiday destination of Platres creates an anachronism which removes Helen and the poem's narrator, Teucer, from their mythical context and places them in the modern day. It also establishes a poetic persona which is 'a blend of the ancient Teucer and a modern

[28] Capri-Karka (1985: 196).
[29] Euripides, *Helen* 706-707 in Capri-Karka (1985:191).
[30] Euripides, *Helen* 34 in Capri-Karka (1985: 190).
[31] Seferis, *Helen* 1,9,61.
[32] Euripides, *Helen* 1107-1121 in Capri-Karka (1985: 191).

version'[33], and possibly elements from Seferis' own personal and political experiences. The depiction of Teucer here shows him to be searching for a new homeland in Cyprus having been exiled from his home in Salamis[34]. This sense of being uprooted from one's ancestral home links to Seferis' own experiences of the Asia Minor Crisis and exile in Egypt during the Second World War[35], particularly given that in Seferis' poem Helen is found with Proteus in Egypt[36]. Through this method, Seferis demonstrates just one of the many consequences of war, using the Trojan War as programmatic for future conflicts.

The sense of the horrors of war repeating themselves is emphasised by a sense of interminable deception which leads to conflict, as the narrator states that he has gone through his life hearing of 'new countries, new idiocies of men or of the gods'[37]. This suggests that though human civilization progresses, people are led by their own foolish nature, or by the deception and schemes of the gods, into war. Although Seferis presents this at a universal level, given the poem's context and the reference to modern times it is easy to align it with the Second World War, and particularly the redundant sacrifices made by the Greek Cypriots. The phantom of Helen in the Trojan War becomes a symbol of any shallow deception used to encourage war, benefitting only those already in power. The description of the real Helen in Egypt is highly erotic yet elusive, with 'breasts girded high, the sun in her hair, and that statue/shadows and smiles everywhere'[38]. This makes her sensuality all the more powerful as a destructive and deceptive force, as she is not defined in clear terms. This also makes her a valuable symbol, as the figure of Helen 'has never really had an essential identity'[39]. As a result, she can be used by Seferis to demonstrate how selfish human desires, shown here in Helen's sensuousness and the temptation it poses, inevitably lead to human destruction through war. The futility of pursuing these

[33] Capri-Karka (1985: 192).
[34] Seferis, *Helen* 10-17.
[35] Beaton (2001: 4).
[36] Seferis, *Helen* 26.
[37] Seferis, *Helen* 11-12.
[38] Seferis, *Helen* 35-36.
[39] Spentzou (2006: 357).

desires at the cost of human life though is shown not only through the phantom of Helen, but also in presenting the direct suffering it causes. The beauty of Helen is contrasted with 'so many souls/fed to the millstones like grain'[40], a simile which presents mass suffering on such a level that it is likened to food production. This demonstrates how insignificant the lives and deaths of the anonymous masses become in conflict, which especially relates to the sacrifices of the Cypriot Greeks in the Second World War.

The ending of Seferis' *Helen* reinforces the idea of the mythical method being used to illuminate the contemporary Cypriot struggle for independence, and the futility of war. Addressing the nightingale, Teucer reflects on the fable of Helen and the Trojan War, and how it will affect future times. It is clear to see the voice of Seferis merging with the poetic persona of Teucer here, as he speculates about how the actions of the Trojan War and the selfish deceptions that led to it may not be repeated in future. The hopeful statement 'if its true that mortals will not again take up the old deceit of the gods'[41] is of course highly ironic, given that Seferis' contemporary reader would have experienced both the Second World War and the Greek Civil War. Equally, the idea of deceit, or Greek *dolos*, implies not only trickery but a trap[42], suggesting that it is human action and foolishness, not divine intervention that leads to conflict. This again places greater emphasis on the contemporary political context rather than the mythical method. The closing statement of the poem is arguably the most overtly political: 'so much suffering, so much life, went into the abyss all for an empty tunic, all for a Helen'[43]. By attaching the indefinite article to Helen's name, Seferis draws attention away from her fame and reduces her to one of many phantoms or deceptions which are at the core of every conflict, past and future. Thus Seferis brings the myth of Euripides' Helen to the universal level, reminding the reader that the deception of the

[40] Seferis, *Helen* 50-51.
[41] Seferis, *Helen* 66-67.
[42] Capri-Karka (1985: 197).
[43] Seferis, *Helen* 75-77.

Greek Cypriot soldiers who fought in vain for freedom is part of a cycle of human behaviour, showing the gravity of the situation in Greek political history.

In conclusion, Seferis' mythical method interacts with Greece's lasting socio-political issues as it is used to comment upon and situate these events within Greece's history. *Mythistorema* demonstrates a more general use of myth, though relying somewhat on the structure of the *Odyssey* to explore contemporary ideas of Greek identity. In particular, it uses the idea of a symbolic journey to show an assimilation of the present and past as a crucial part of Greekness, but expresses the impossibility of returning to the 'purity' of ancient times. *Thrush* also uses the *Odyssey,* but to comment more specifically on the destruction and suffering caused by both the Second World War and the Greek Civil War. In a similar way, *Helen* relates to the Cypriot struggle for independence to the Euripidean tragedy *Helen.* Through all of these examples, the mythical method is used by Seferis to provide archetypes that explain contemporary socio-political developments. The universalising quality of myth is also used by Seferis to be able to comment on his own time in an indirect and allusive way, which shows not only the importance of the events he comments upon, but also leads to a mythologisation of history.

3087 words.

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