

Preliminary remarks on George Seferis' visual poetics¹

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This article makes some preliminary remarks on Seferis' photography, focusing mainly on its poetics as an act of seeing. The main intention is to highlight the direct relationship between Seferis' visual sensibility and his poetry. The article primarily discusses some technical features of Seferis' photography. It then examines his photography as a visual diary and draws attention to those cases where it is obvious that photographs hide behind specific poems. Finally, the article discusses the differences between photography and poetry regarding their relation to time. In this context, the poem 'Με τον τρόπο του Γ.Σ.', which makes explicit reference to photography, is examined.

Publicly known as a poet, essayist, diarist and diplomat, George Seferis was also a passionate photographer. His photographic output amounts to about 2,500 photographs, all black and white, taken between 1924 and the early 1970s. As a result of donations made by his wife Maro in 1984 and her daughter Anna Londou in 1999, these photographs are now preserved in the George Seferis photographic archive of the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank of Greece (MIET) in Athens, many in the form of contact prints. As well as photographs taken by Seferis, the archive also houses a substantial number of photographs of Seferis himself, posing alone or in the company of friends and family.² Several of the photographs taken by Seferis were exhibited in 2000 in the Gazi district in Athens,

1 All pictures appearing here are copyright MIET. I would like to express my gratitude to the director of MIET Dionysis Kapsalis for giving me permission to visit the archive and reproduce unpublished material and to the archivist Voula Livani for her kind assistance with my research. I would also like to thank Professor Roderick Beaton for putting me in touch with MIET, as well as Professor Peter Mackridge, Dr Sarah Ekdawi, Professor Dimitris Tziouvas and Dr Katerina Krikos-Davis for their comments on various drafts of this paper. Last but not least, I would like to thank Roderick Saxey for helping me translate passages from the diaries.

2 Like members of the Cavafy family, the Seferiadises were frequently photographed; there are many surviving portraits of the parents, Stelios and Despo. As far as their children, George, Ioanna and Angelos, are concerned, there are various portraits documenting their lives from infancy to adulthood. These photographs were probably taken in local studios in Smyrna, where the family lived until 1914. It is possible that Seferis' interest in photography was triggered by these regular visits to the photographer, who would make records of family members in black and white.

in the Cultural Centre of Patra and subsequently in other Greek cities, as part of the celebrations marking the centenary of the poet's birth. In the same context, the Cultural Foundation of the National Bank published, in 2000, an album entitled *Οι φωτογραφίες του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*, containing a representative selection of Seferis' photographs.³

Secondary bibliography on Seferis' photography is sparse. Apart from the useful introductions to albums,⁴ there are two articles, one by John Stathatos in the journal *Χάρτης*⁵ and another by Emmanouil Kasdaglis in *Η λέξη*.⁶ Stathatos focuses on technical aspects of Seferis' photography, such as the type of cameras and the system he used to classify his negatives. Kasdaglis, on the other hand, discusses Seferis' photography as a kind of visual autobiography related to his travelling. An intriguing use made of photographs taken by Seferis as well as photographs depicting him and his family is that of his biographer Roderick Beaton, who includes several descriptions of them in the biography as evidence of a person's character or mood at a certain age or as a means of illustrating Seferis' poetic endeavours.⁷

Thus, Seferis' photographs constitute a promising area of research, as there has been no attempt to study them systematically. Such research would entail a comprehensive analysis of the themes, technical features and visual aims of the photographs and would provide the basis for an interdisciplinary comparison of Seferis' photography with his aesthetic ideas as expounded in his diaries, his essays and, most importantly, his poetry. His photography and his poetry are interrelated through similar perceptions of space and the human body; it becomes evident that the conceptualization of space — particularly landscape — and representations of people are shaped through technical aspects of photography such as point of view, framing, awareness of light conditions, zoom and crop, but also temporal aspects of capturing a scene in snapshots or time exposure. It is a known fact that on a number of occasions, specific photographs provided Seferis with concrete primary material for poetic use, and an investigation of the ways in which this material is transcribed into a different medium would be extremely valuable.

Seferis started photographing in the mid-1920s, and the beginning of this activity coincided with photography becoming a popular household medium. Photography may be

3 Other publications include the albums *Κύπρος: μνήμη και αγάπη: με το φακό του Γιώργου Σεφέρη* (Nicosia 1990), which contains Seferis' photographs made during his visits to Cyprus between 1953 and 1955; *George Seferis, Photographer* (New York 1999); and *Τρεις μέρες στα μοναστήρια της Καππαδοκίας* (Athens 2005). Photographs are also published in the last two volumes of Seferis' diaries as well as in two recent publications: G. Georgis, *Η Κωνσταντινούπολη του Γιώργου Σεφέρη* (Athens 2004) and A. Papageorgiou-Venetas, *Η Αθήνα του Μεσοπολέμου μέσα από τις Μέρες του Γιώργου Σεφέρη* (Athens 2006).

4 See D. Kapsalis in *Οι φωτογραφίες του Γιώργου Σεφέρη* (Athens 2000) and *George Seferis, Photographer*, and E. Kasdaglis in *Κύπρος: μνήμη και αγάπη*.

5 J. Stathatos, 'Ο φωτογράφος Γιώργος Σεφέρης', *Χάρτης* 4 (January 1983) 475–86.

6 E. Kasdaglis, 'Ένα παιχνίδι από φως και σκιά: ο Σεφέρης και η φωτογραφία', *Η λέξη* 53 (March–April 1986) 262–5. Both are reproduced in *Οι φωτογραφίες του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*.

7 R. Beaton, *Waiting for the Angel* (New Haven, CT and London 2003) including a good selection of photographs.

said to have become a commodity at the beginning of the twentieth century, heralding the emergence of a visual culture; not only does it document what people see and how they see it, it also replaces and exchanges external reality with art. For the first time, it was possible to satisfy people's curiosity with a printed image much as looking at the real thing would do. Photographic images have an ideological significance, as they measure the importance of the real world in the eyes of the beholder. Amateur photography, being less sophisticated than its professional counterpart, gives a clearer idea of what catches people's attention on an everyday basis. In the case of Seferis, photographic themes are ideological indicators, particularly his choice of architectural and archaeological subjects. Thus, Seferis' photography should be examined in the wider context of visual culture in the 1930s and the emergence of what we might call 'national imagery'.

Seferis' images keenly cover classical and Hellenistic antiquity, Byzantine and twentieth-century monuments; excavation sites, ruined temples and church iconography feature alongside urban landscapes and images of the natural world. This visual syncretism corresponds to Seferis' theoretical ideas about redefining Greekness on the basis of (primarily literary and linguistic) inclusion. Seferis acknowledges poetic sources in areas rejected by the previous generations: his interest in Makriyannis and *Erotokritos*, as well as in medieval texts, folk poetry and ancient Greek literature, amplifies the scope of the linguistic, aesthetic and ideological quests of the 1930s. Seferis' generation proposed a national poetry that aspired to create a Modern Greek mythology, which would encompass past and present in a single strand. Thus, the diversity of these sources is treated synchronically, as they are not differentiated in terms of stylistic importance. Similarly, Seferis' photography creates a kind of national imagery that comprises both historical and contemporary material as equally valid sources.

The breadth of the subject as I have attempted to outline it falls outside the scope of this introductory article. Here I will confine myself to some preliminary remarks on Seferis' photography, focusing mainly on its poetics as an act of seeing. Seferis' wife claimed that he photographed subjects he wished to remember accurately, for use in his poetry and other texts.⁸ My intention here is to highlight the direct relationship between Seferis' visual sensibility and his poetry. First I will discuss some technical features of Seferis' photography. I will then examine Seferis' photographic archive as a visual diary and I will draw attention to those cases where it is obvious that photographs are used as material for specific poems. Particular emphasis will be laid on Seferis' theoretical insight into the similarities and differences between poetry and photography. Finally, in the last section I will discuss some temporal aspects of photography and poetry. In this context I will examine the complicated temporal issues raised in the poem 'Με τον τρόπο του Γ.Σ.', the only poem that makes explicit reference to photography.

8 Interview given to A. Fostieris and T. Niarchos, *H λέξη* 53 (March–April 1986) 202.

Technical aspects

Seferis' photography covers three main subject-areas; landscapes, architecture and people. Among his earliest photographs are views of Dover, taken in the summer of 1924 as the ship bringing him to England approaches the coast. Despite their poor quality, these photographs create a distinct effect of depth, which will become a permanent feature of Seferis' landscape photography. All of them display a broad horizon against a misty background. It seems that the gradually diminishing distance from the unknown place, coming into full view from on board ship, stirs a sense of wonder at this unexplored northern country surrounded by sea. The sensation of the first photographs of England is reflected in *Μυθιστόρημα, Α'*: 'Όταν ξυπνήσαμε ταξιδέψαμε κατά το βοριά, ξένοι / βυθισμένοι μέσα σε καταχνιές από τ' άσπιλα φτερά των κύκνων που μας πληγώναν.'⁹ As I will show in due course, in later years Seferis often shoots subjects from a distance, in order to explore their positioning within a wider scheme of perspective.

As mentioned above, Seferis shows a particularly keen interest in architecture, both contemporary and historic. Photographing ruins provides him with the opportunity to explore space and relate the works of men to those of nature. Seferis' historical photography reflects his complicated relationship with the past, broadly addressing issues of continuity. Seferis often photographs people in front of buildings or archaeological sites. Despite the monumental aim of this type of photograph, the position of the human body often displays a sort of uneasiness. More often than not, there is a disproportion in scale, as the angle from which the frame is shot accentuates the size of the ruins at the expense of the human figure.

In the photograph in Figure 1, the man depicted embraces one of the fallen Corinthian column drums at the temple of Olympian Zeus in Athens. Zooming right into the column drum enhances its size; the primary theme of this photograph is the tension created by the size of the fallen column next to the human body, but one can also detect a humorous touch regarding the man in dark clothes who is embracing the fallen giant as though to comfort him. Seferis' outdoor photography often plays with the contrast between light and shadow; in this photo, he is obviously attracted by the contrast between the man's dark suit and the white marble. On other occasions, as we shall see, Seferis often exploits the interplay between light and shadow by focusing on multiple pools or shafts of light emerging through a narrow passage like the opening of a cave or thick foliage.

Seferis' photography evolved in the years 1924–40, as he acquired a better understanding of some technical aspects: this was partly due to the fact that in the course of these years he experimented with different cameras, some more sophisticated than others. His development was also connected to a better understanding of space and light, as I will try to show by comparing portraits of three different women, all of them Seferis' lovers at different stages of his life. The first shot, around 1924 in Paris, shows Jacqueline

9 All quotations from Seferis' poems are taken from G. Seferis, *Ποιήματα*, 21st edn (Athens 2004).



Figure 1 Man embracing fallen column at the temple of Olympian Zeus.
©MIET.

Pouyollon, Seferis' French girlfriend at the time (Figure 2). The photograph was most probably taken in mid or late afternoon, as shadows fall to the left. Avoiding the sun at its highest produces shadows that emphasize specific facial features, such as the shape of Jacqueline's face and the texture of her skin. The subject is placed in the middle of the frame, smiling straight into the camera; the fact that there is almost no background underlines her expression. The photograph creates a light and insouciant sensation, but cropped rather crudely, it fails to take full advantage of the scene's potential.

The second photograph depicts Loukia Fotopoulou, and was taken around 1930. It shows the subject posing on the balcony of an old house during an excursion (Figure 3).¹⁰ In this photograph there is greater sophistication regarding the subject's placement in space. Loukia's body forms a vertical line, intersecting the parallel lines of roof tiles on the left and the balustrade below. There is a green hill in the distant background, which creates a sense of depth. In addition, there is a synthesis of different textures and tones

10 Regarding the unknown location of this photograph, I would like to thank Roderick Beaton for suggesting that the excursion might have taken place in the Sanatorium on Pelion. There is no certain evidence in the archives to shed more light into this matter.



Figure 2 Jacqueline Pouyollon. ©MIET.

of black and white; Loukia's white blouse and dark skirt, her dark beret, the paint peeling off the walls of the old house and the old wooden shutters create multiple points of focalization that add to the subject's complexity without distracting the eye too much.

However, Seferis reached the peak of his craft in his portrait of Maro, made in Poros in 1938 (Figure 4¹¹). The subject is seated on a carpet of fallen leaves. There are multiple pools of light, as the sun is filtered through foliage falling strategically on the nape of Maro's neck, her back, left hand and left knee. Depth is shown here more effectively as foliage fades away in the background. The position of the body creates lines that intersect at right angles, creating an effect that elsewhere constitutes an important part of Seferis' photography of architecture. What mainly differentiates this photograph from the previous two is the way it is cropped, striking the right balance between subject and surroundings. Arguably, the photograph is the outcome of Seferis' growing confidence with the photographic lens and reflects a better understanding of space, human body and light, which is not only reflected on the subject but also seems to transform the subject itself into a source of light.

11 Figures 4, 5, 7 and 9 are published in *Οι φωτογραφίες του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*.

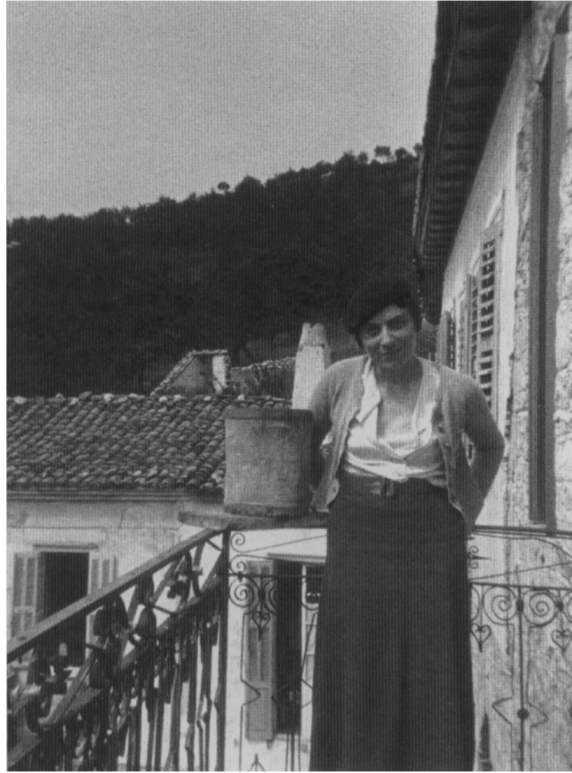


Figure 3 Loukia Fotopoulou. ©MIET.

Visual diary

Seferis' life is marked by travelling, either enforced or voluntary. As a law student, he lived in Paris from 1918 to 1924. In 1926, he embarked on a diplomatic career that would take him first to London and then to Albania. With the outbreak of the Second World War, he followed the Greek government-in-exile to Cairo, Jerusalem and South Africa. From 1948 and 1950 he was Counsellor at the Greek Embassy in Ankara, from where he visited Skala Vourlon and Cappadocia. Between 1953 and 1956 he served as Greek ambassador in the Middle East, from where he visited Cyprus, and from 1957 to 1962 he held the same post in London. Seferis attempted to remedy the sense of uneasiness caused by this constant movement by meticulously recording his life. His diaries reflect his need to hang on to the moment and to counterbalance the unpredictability of the future with a fierce attachment to the present.

Three poetic collections entitled *Ημερολόγιο καταστροφώματος* point to similar objectives. *Ημερολόγιο καταστροφώματος Α', Β' and Γ'* represent three different sets of locations, Albania and Greece, North and South Africa, Cyprus. It is often the mundane practicalities of the journey or the adjustment to a foreign place that provide material for these collections. Apart from his diaries and poetry, Seferis compiles a systematic photographic



Figure 4 Maro Seferi. ©MIET.

archive that follows the same itinerary. Seferis becomes more interested in landscape photography as his moving around from place to place increases. Preserving a photographic archive of his travels indicates a need to hold on to the visual details of the journey, which would otherwise be lost with the passage of time. However, Seferis' use of photography as a supplementary means of recording this physical and mental itinerary goes beyond a physical attachment to space. Photography protracts the present; by virtue of constantly referring to the present, the onlooker conflates past and future into one. Compiling an archive of travel photographs, which record and in a sense annotate the journey, makes the travelling worthwhile, as it eradicates the sensation of time past and lost, which movement inherently suggests. In this sense, archives of travel photography are gratifying in that they eternally preserve space against time.¹² It seems that in photography time is annulled, as it is directly connected to an attachment to space, the details of which gradually erode as memory fades.

12 'Photography alludes to the past and the future only in so far as they exist in the present, the past through its surviving relics, the future through prophecy visible in the present' (J. Szarkowski, 'Introduction to *The Photographer's Eye*', in L. Wells (ed.), *The Photography Reader* (London and New York 2003) 101).

Seferis' first diary entries that mention photography date from the mid-1920s and, not surprisingly, mostly concern family photographs, which are either framed and exhibited on the wall or kept in a drawer to be occasionally taken out and viewed in solitude. Seferis is rather cautious about mentioning the affective impact of these photographs, but regards their function as a sort of *aide-mémoire*. 'Το βράδυ σπíti μου κοιτάξα παλιές φωτογραφίες,'¹³ he writes rather casually in October 1931.¹⁴ While in London in August 1932, he discovers photographs that remind him of his mother's death. Again, the diary entry is short and rather cryptic: 'Έπεσα κατά τύχη σε χαρτιά και φωτογραφίες του μου θύμισαν το θάνατο της μητέρας μου.'¹⁵ Curiously, in his diaries Seferis omits the emotions evoked by these photographs as well as details of people's physical appearance. There is no indulgence in the feeling of loss that is obviously triggered by them. The photographic image carries no significance as a referent of external reality; equally, it carries no significance as a referent of emotions. Images seem to function as stimuli of thoughts, and to an even greater extent, words. There is a linguistic interference when the onlooker describes a photograph; photographs of people are obviously not the people they depict, but are conventionally recognized as such. Arguably, it is the discourse around the image that establishes this recognition, rather than an intuitive working of the mind itself. In other words, in order to make the image meaningful, the onlooker envelops the content of the photograph with language.¹⁶ Seferis seems to stretch this process to the full; it is the language that is developed around the photograph that has priority over the image. Although the image serves as primary material, it is still a means to an end; the poetic discourse *around* and *about* that image is clearly privileged. Photographs seem to function as cryptic conveyors of emotion, in the same way as Seferis' poems. There is no direct

13 'At home in the evening I looked at old photographs.'

14 Photographs entail a linguistic paradox, in that they conflate past and present tenses into one; even if they are dead, people in photographs always exist in the present tense. When someone describes a photograph of a dead person they usually say, 'This *is* X' rather than 'This *was* X'. However, there is a strong sense of pastness, of time passing, created by the observer's realization that there is a distance separating him/her from the present of the photograph. In March 1926 Seferis writes in his diary: 'Συναίσθηση πως γερνώ· καταθλιπτικό αίσθημα κοιτάζοντας την προσπάθεια των προσώπων να ξαναβγούν στην επιφάνεια μέσα από τις μπερδεμένες γραμμές των φωτογραφιών. Περασμένα χρόνια, ρυτίδες· χαώδης λογαριασμός' ('Sense of ageing; a heavy feeling while looking upon peoples' attempts to re-emerge to the surface through the muddled lines of photographs. Years gone by, wrinkles; a chaotic reckoning.') (*Μέρες Α'* (Athens 1975) 46).

15 'I accidentally bumped into papers and photographs that reminded me of my mother's death' (*Μέρες Β'* (Athens 1975) 87). Seferis' mother, Despo Tenekidou, died on 9 September 1926.

16 'Further, importantly, it was shown that the putatively autonomous "language of photography" is never free from the determinations of language itself. We rarely see a photograph in use which does not have a caption or a title, it is more usual to encounter photographs attached to long texts, or with a copy superimposed over them. Even a photograph which has no actual writing on or around it is traversed by language when it is "read" by a viewer (for example, an image which is predominantly dark in tone carries all the weight of signification that darkness has been given in social use; many of its interpretants will therefore be linguistic, as when we speak metaphorically of an unhappy person being "gloomy")' (V. Burgin, 'Looking at photographs', in Wells, *The Photography Reader*, 131).

reference to it, but the visual idiom, on the one hand, and the sequence of words, on the other, are so loosely connected that they leave gaps that beg to be filled with affective meaning.

An investigation into the extent to which these photographs provide Seferis with primary material for poetic development would be of seminal importance. A case in point is a series of photographs that Seferis took in Hydra in November 1939, on a visit to the island with the American author Henry Miller and their friend George Katsimbalis. These photographs show Miller and Katsimbalis walking down the stairs of whitewashed courtyards and in the harbour. In one of the photos Miller poses alone against a background of masts and rigging, seated on the bottom of an overturned boat, his eyes hidden behind dark shades, with a bright ambiguous smile that seems to be knowingly mocking the world (Figure 5). Miller's torso is carefully positioned in the middle of the frame, leaning slightly to the right; he holds his hands together on his lap. The photograph shows a contrast between the texture of different materials and shapes: folds in Miller's slack clothes, the rough surface of the boat with the keel protruding on the far right and the rough canvas of the sails — all of these details emerge more effectively through the use of black-and-white film. One mast runs diagonally through the picture, just behind Miller's

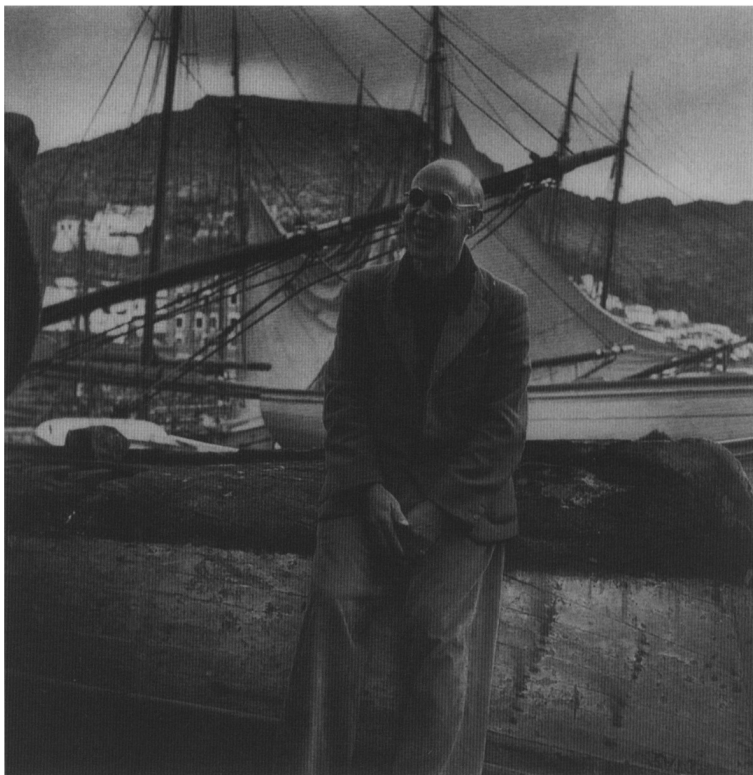


Figure 5 Henry Miller in Hydra. ©MIET.

head, like an arrow, intersecting vertical masts hoisted in the background. The setting becomes more dramatic under the cloudy sky, with the whitewashed houses of Hydra spread sparsely across barren hills, and the straight lines of rigging crossing each other. The photograph is rather dark, with only one spot of light falling directly on Miller's head and left shoulder.

This photograph is evidently reflected in the poem 'Les anges sont blancs', which Seferis dedicates to the American author.¹⁷ The poem, published in the collection *Ημερολόγιο καταστρώματος Α'*, begins:

Tout à coup Louis cessa de frotter ses jambes l'une contre l'autre et dit d'une voix lente: 'Les anges sont blancs'.

BALZAC

Όπως ο ναύτης στα ξάρτια γλίστρησε πάνω στον τροπικό του Καρκίνου και
στον τροπικό του Αιγόκερω
κι ήταν πολύ φυσικό που δεν μπορούσε να σταματήσει μπροστά μας στο ύψος
ανθρώπου
αλλά μας κοίταζε όλους από το ύψος της πυγολαμπίδας ή από το ύψος του
πέυκου
παίρνοντας βαθιά την ανάσα του στη δροσιά των άστρων ή στη σκόνη της γης.

The setting of the poem is autumnal Hydra, evoked through a strong impression of whiteness: 'και τα σκαλιά του ασβέστη κατέβαιναν ως το κατώφλι των περασμένων και βρίσκανε τη σιγή'.

Another photograph, taken on the same day, shows Miller posing with a child at the top of a flight of steps (Figure 6). Here, there is an obvious sense of confinement, as the subjects emerge behind the parallel lines of a staircase, and the whole frame is filled with the adjacent walls of buildings, one of which is obviously a church. The daunting effect of this photograph is enhanced by the skull engraved on the church's external wall, behind Miller's back. The period is November 1939, marked by the recent outbreak of war; the poem reflects an awareness of changes already taking place, or about to take place in Europe. Poland's shape is shrinking 'σαν μελανιά που την πίνει το στουπόχαρτο'. In the poem Miller is compared to a sailor sliding down the rigging. Standing at a different level from the rest, he observes them from the height of a firefly or the height of a pine-tree, which could be connected to the slightly twisted angle from which these photographs are taken. Miller in the poem is regarded as a man of miracle, whose soul remains pure amidst the despair that seems to be taking over. At the end of the poem, the man 'with the bites of tropics on his skin putting on his black spectacles as though to work with an

17 The connection was first made by E. Kasdaglis ('Ένα παιχνίδι από φως και σκιά', 264). Beaton also makes the connection between the photograph and the poem by using the line 'putting on his black spectacles as though to work with oxy-acetylene flame' as its legend.

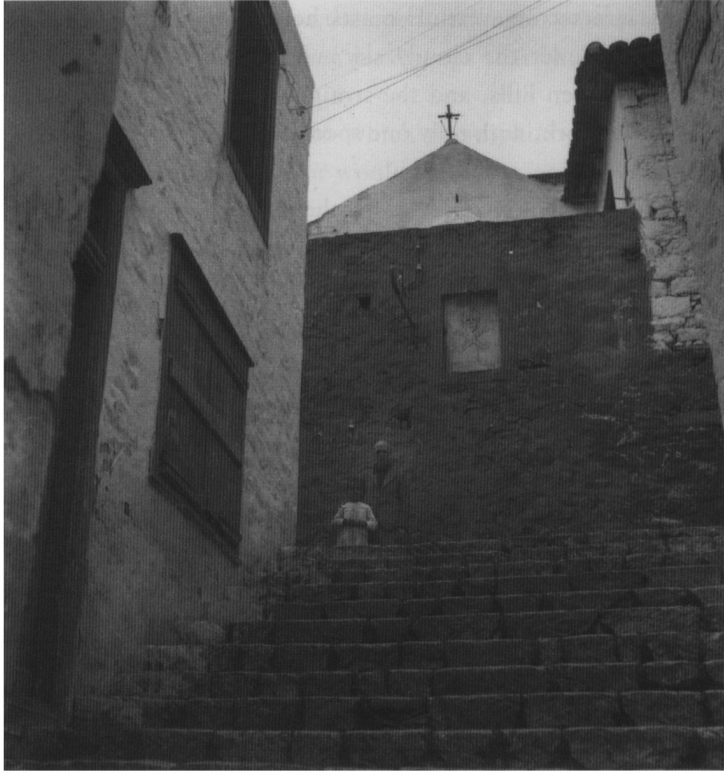


Figure 6 Henry Miller with child in Hydra. ©MIET.

oxy-acetylene flame'¹⁸ improvises on Balzac's phrase 'Les anges sont blancs', used as the poem's epigraph:

Οι άγγελοι είναι λευκοί πυρωμένοι λευκοί και το μάτι μαραίνεται του θα
τους αντικρίσει
και δεν υπάρχει άλλος τρόπος πρέπει να γίνεις σαν την πέτρα όταν γυρεύεις τη
συναναστροφή τους
κι όταν γυρεύεις το θαύμα πρέπει να σπείρεις το αίμα σου στις οχτώ γωνιές
των ανέμων
γιατί το θαύμα δεν είναι πουθενά παρά κυκλοφορεί μέσα στις φλέβες του
ανθρώπου.

Like many other poems by Seferis, this one is marked by an antithesis between darkness and light; Miller is shielded behind dark spectacles; the angels are white and the setting features the typical whiteness of Greek islands. However, both the whiteness of the setting and that of angels is ambiguous, as it does not suggest purity; rather, it is a blinding

18 Translated by E. Keeley and P. Sherrard, in G. Seferis, *Collected Poems*, rev. edn (Princeton, NJ 1995) 129–31.

kind of dazzle, and only the man in dark spectacles is equipped to face the blaze. The poem is faintly reminiscent of ancient myths that revolve around the power of the human gaze. Myths such as that of Orpheus,¹⁹ and even more so that of Perseus, deal with the issue of seeing what one is not supposed to see. As is well known, Perseus was ordered to fetch the head of Medusa, a monster who could turn anyone who looked at her into stone. With the help of Athena, Hermes and nymphs, who supplied him with winged sandals, Hades' cap of invisibility, and a sickle, Perseus manages to behead Medusa in her sleep. There is a cryptic reference to Perseus in the parallel between the angels and Gorgo in the verse 'και δεν υπάρχει άλλος τρόπος πρέπει να γίνεις σαν την πέτρα όταν γυρεύεις τη συναναστροφή τους'. It seems that the man behind dark spectacles is endowed with a power of vision that places him in a higher rank than ordinary people, as it enables him to see what others cannot. This ability comes at a high price; one needs 'to scatter one's blood to the eight points of the wind'. In the end, the miracle of seeing comes from the inside rather than the outside, as a kind of internal epiphany. Still, one needs an external technical aid, which will work as a kind of filter. As we shall see, this almost demonic ability to see into the dazzle is also sought by Seferis himself; he uses the camera lens as a seeing aid that enables him to look into the heart of things; the lens is only a means to train the eye to work effectively.

A few years later, during the Second World War, in South Africa, Seferis recalls these Hydra photographs and asks Miller for a copy in a letter.²⁰ This request reflects a desire to see a familiar Greek landscape again, a desire which seems to be natural in the unfamiliarity of the African setting. In a similar spirit of homesickness, he writes in his diary on 25 September 1941:

Σήμερα κρέμασα πάνω από το γραφείο μου τη μοναδική φωτογραφία ενός ελληνικού τοπίου που βρέθηκε, ολωσδιόλου τυχαία, μέσα σε κάτι χαρτιά. Τη φωτογραφία της μεγάλης άγκυρας του Πόρου. Την είχα κάνει ένα πρωί της άνοιξης του '40. Καθώς την κοιτάζω τώρα, αισθάνομαι την ψυχή μου πλημμυρισμένη. Αλλά δεν είναι αυτά που μου χρειάζονται: πελεκώντας τον εαυτό μας, έτσι γράφουμε.²¹

The photograph of the anchor evokes the familiar Greek landscape of Poros, which has a soothing effect on the exiled poet (Figure 7). However, despite his initial enthusiasm,

19 According to Virgil, Orpheus descended to Hades to retrieve Eurydice, who had died of a snakebite. Having enchanted Hades with his song, he was allowed to bring her back provided he did not look back while leading her up, which he failed to do. His mistake resulted in his losing Eurydice forever.

20 'And a service, if I may ask for it. I had sent you before the Italian war photographs of Greek landscapes made by me; some of them were made during our stay in Hydra (you sitting on a boat) etc. Can you make a copy and send it to me?' (*Μέρες Δ'* (Athens 1977) 171).

21 'Today I hung above my desk the only photograph of a Greek landscape that was found, entirely by accident, among some papers of mine. The photograph of the big anchor of Poros. I had taken it one spring morning in 1940. Looking at it now, it floods my soul. But this isn't what I need: by hacking away at ourselves, this is how we write' (*Μέρες Δ'*, 132-3).



Figure 7 Anchor in Poros. ©MIET.

Seferis is sceptical as to the poetic value of this visual stimulus. It seems that the instantaneousness of this sensation is somehow too simple, or maybe even too coarse; it is rather the process of hacking away at himself, of carving simple feelings, that gives birth to significant art. Why is a simple image justified in a photograph but not in poetry? A distinction between photography and poetry is implied here. Photography is regarded by Seferis as a realistic means of depiction: this realism entails correspondence between the real object and the object depicted in the photograph. Consequently, the viewer's emotional reaction to the photographed object is similar to the reaction he would have to the real object, which does not justify the use of the artistic means at all. On the other hand, poetry should abstain from this sort of transparency and achieve its impact through a higher degree of sophistication.

In a conversation with the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas recorded in a diary entry for 17 November 1951, Seferis notes how a strong visual stimulus can obstruct the writing of poetry:

Ο Thomas κουβέντιαζε κάμποσο. Δε θυμάμαι πώς, τον ρώτησα αν του έτυχε ποτέ να περιγράψει άμεσα κάτι που βλέπει, να μιμηθεί τη δουλειά του ζωγράφου που ζωγραφίζει εκ του φυσικού — όπως το δοκίμασα κάποτε στα νιάτα μου.

— Όχι, είπε, δεν μπορώ· μου χρειάζεται η συνεργασία της μνήμης. Συμφωνήσαμε ακόμη πως είναι κακό να έχει κανείς μπροστά του, όταν γράφει, *θέα*.²²

What Thomas and Seferis agree on here is that an impressive view obscures the sort of internal vision that is essential for achieving something of considerable poetic status. In general, the issue of clarity in vision is paramount for Seferis; it is a matter of fine tuning, of training the eye as one would adjust the settings of a camera. In a much quoted diary entry for 18 December 1954 he notes: 'Σταματήσαμε λίγο πιο κάτω από το Amshit και κοιτάξαμε τον ήλιο να βουλιάζει στην ήσυχη θάλασσα της Φοινίκης. Μα γιατί κάποτε βλέπει κανείς τα πράγματα καθαρά — θέλω να πω όπως όταν η φωτογραφική μηχανή είναι σωστά κανονισμένη.'²³ Like the poem 'Les anges sont blancs', this extract conveys the desire to look directly at a source of intense light and the difficulty of adjusting the eye to capture its intensity.

Similarly, in 1946, Seferis spent some time on the island of Poros, where he wrote: 'Χαράζει. Το χτεσινό φεγγάρι πολύ λαμπερό ακόμα, αψηλά προς τη δύση. ... Ανάγκη να στενέψεις το διάφραγμα, ακόμη, αλλιώς χάνεσαι.'²⁴ Seferis seems to be seeking a kind of 'squinting', which is necessary for being able to endure direct light. This squinting can also apply to writing poetry, where it means getting to the heart of matters and disposing of any superficial ornaments. In a letter to Maro, Seferis writes: 'Πάνω σ' αυτό θα σου θυμίσω τη φωτογραφική τέχνη, αφού έκανες φωτογραφίες. Όσο το διάφραγμα είναι μικρότερο, τόσο η φωτογραφία βγαίνει με περισσότερες λεπτομέρειες. Όταν λες όλη την ώρα "θαύμα", "όνειρο", "εξάισιο", κάνεις φωτογραφίες με μεγάλο διάφραγμα, φωτογραφίες "flou".'²⁵ The aperture — controlled by the diaphragm — defines the amount of light reaching the film. A wider aperture would allow for greater exposure, which is needed when one takes photographs in darker environments, whereas a narrower aperture should be used in conditions of more intense light. The photographic metaphor Seferis uses here implies the need to economize on

22 'Thomas was chatting quite a bit. I don't recall how, I asked him if he ever chanced to describe with an immediacy something that he saw, to imitate the craft of the painter who paints directly from what he sees — as I once tried in my youth. "No," he said, "I can't; I need the cooperation of memory." We also agreed it's bad to have a *view* in front of you when you write' (*Μέρες ΣΤ'* (Athens 1986), 36). An example of Seferis' early attempts to describe his surroundings faithfully is to be found in the diary entry of 8 June 1926: 'Γράφω σ' ένα μικρό τραπέζι γυρισμένο κατά το ορθάνοιχτο παράθυρο. Προσπαθώ να σημειώσω τι βλέπω: ...' (*Μέρες Α'*, 63–4).

23 'We stopped a bit down from Amshit and watched the sun sink into the serene sea of Phoenicia. Why is it sometimes that one sees things clearly — I mean as when a camera's settings are just right' (*Μέρες ΣΤ'*, 174).

24 'Dawn is breaking. Yesterday's moon still bright high up towards the west. ... Have to close the aperture a bit more otherwise you're sunk' (*Μέρες Ε'*, Athens 1977, 63).

25 'As far as that goes, let me bring photography to mind, since you have done some yourself. The smaller the aperture the more detailed the photographs come out. But when you keep saying "wonderful", "amazing", "marvellous" you are making photographs with a wide aperture, photographs slightly blurry' (quoted by D. Kapsalis in the Introduction to *Οι φωτογραφίες του Γιώργου Σεφέρη*, 12).

expression; sweeping exclamations such as those mentioned above obscure the details of the subject; one needs to speak simply if one wants to say more, as Seferis had requested in the poem ‘Ένας γέροντας στην ακροποταμιά’.

In Seferis’ poetry, vision is the most privileged of the senses. Touching is the archetypal way of relating to the world, but it is only through vision that individuals can fully grasp the world. The poem ‘Αγιάνναπα Α’ from the collection *Ημερολόγιο καταστροφώματος Γ’* makes this point quite explicitly:²⁶ the subject realizes that before he can see the sunlight, he needs to have a tactile experience of the world: ‘ό,τι μου λέγαν έπρεπε να το ψηλαφήσω’. The state of temporary blindness is an essential stage in the acquisition of vision. It is only at the end of the poem, and after the ordeal has been endured, that vision is finally gained and the subject can face up to direct sunlight, which can be seen as a metaphor for truth.²⁷

In the summer of 1938 George and Maro spent time at the seaside village Tolo, near Nafplion, in the north-east Peloponnese. On a day trip they visited the Bronze Age archaeological site of Asine, a place mentioned in the catalogue of ships in the second book of the *Iliad*; the visit resulted in one of Seferis’ most celebrated poems, ‘Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης’. Although drafted soon after the visit, the poem was eventually completed almost overnight in January 1940 to fill the last pages of *Ημερολόγιο καταστροφώματος Α’*. It begins with a factual description of the visit to the citadel:

Κοιτάξαμε όλο το πρωί γύρω-γύρω το κάστρο
 αρχίζοντας από το μέρος του ίσκιου εκεί που η θάλασσα
 πράσινη και χωρίς αναλαμπή, το στήθος σκοτωμένου παγονιού
 μας δέχτηκε όπως ο καιρός χωρίς κανένα χάσμα.
 Οι φλέβες του βράχου κατέβαιναν από ψηλά
 στριμμένα κλήματα γυμνά πολύκλινα ζωντανεύοντας
 στ’ άγγιγμα του νερού, καθώς το μάτι ακολουθώντας τις
 πάλευε να ξεφύγει το κουραστικό λίκνισμα
 χάνοντας δύναμη ολοένα.

The poem closely follows the process of visually discovering a new place. The description is structured according to the order in which elements of a landscape enter one’s field of vision; the citadel, the sea and the rocks. In the end the eye becomes exhausted by the astounding novelty of the landscape. In common with many other poems by Seferis, ‘Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης’ eventually exchanges the details of landscape for a set of questions

26 See K. Krikos-Davis, *Kolokes: A Study of George Seferis’ Logbook III (1953–1955)* (Amsterdam 1994) 105–16.

27 In his discussion of this poem, D.N. Maronitis associates sunlight with poetic language, suggesting that the latter can be essentially conquered through moderating the intensity of the former: ‘ο λόγος φέγγει, το φως του δεν τυφλώνει, αφήνει τα μάτια να το δουν όπως το έβλεπαν οι παλαιοί στον τόπο και στον χρόνο τους — απλά και σοφά’ (‘Η γλώσσα του Σεφέρη και η γλώσσα της ποίησης’, in M. Pieris (ed.), *Γιώργος Σεφέρης: φιλολογικές και ερμηνευτικές προσεγγίσεις* (Athens 1997) 35).

that lead from an abstract realization of space to the essence of man's existence in past and present:

Κι ο ποιητής αργοπορεί κοιτάζοντας τις πέτρες κι αναρωτιέται
 υπάρχουν άραγε
 ανάμεσα στις χαλασμένες τούτες γραμμές τις ακμές τις αιχμές τα κοίλα και τις
 καμπύλες
 υπάρχουν άραγε
 εδώ που συναντιέται το πέρασμα της βροχής του αγέρα και της φθοράς
 υπάρχουν, η κίνηση του προσώπου το σχήμα της στοργής
 εκείνων που λιγότεψαν τόσο παράξενα μες στη ζωή μας
 αυτών που απόμειναν σκιές κυμάτων και στοχασμοί με την απεραντοσύνη του
 πελάγου
 ή μήπως όχι δεν απομένει τίποτε παρά μόνο το βάρος
 η νοσταλγία του βάρους μιας ύπαρξης ζωντανής
 εκεί που μένουμε τώρα ανυπόστατοι λυγίζοντας
 σαν τα κλωνάρια της φριχτής ιτιάς σωριασμένα μέσα στη διάρκεια της
 απελπισίας
 ενώ το ρέμα κίτρινο κατεβάζει αργά βούρλα ξεριζωμένα μες στο βούρκο
 εικόνα μορφής που μαρμάρωσε με την απόφαση μιας πίκρας παντοτινής.
 Ο ποιητής ένα κενό.

Seferis documented the visit to Tolo and Asine in a set of photographs. In one of them we can see the citadel at Asine, taken from an angle on the beach (Figure 8). The subject is shot from a considerable distance; more than half the frame is taken up by pebbles and the citadel seems small, rather insignificant, in the vast scale of landscape where it belongs. The photograph displays a typical feature of Seferis' photography: the placing of the subject at the meeting point of two converging lines. A photograph taken in Tolo a few days earlier shows a dramatic cliff; parallel lines of rocks fill the whole frame as if descending to the foot of the precipice (Figure 9). These lines are barely interrupted by the minuscule figure of Maro in a swimsuit, climbing up in search of seagulls' eggs. The angle from which this photograph is taken accentuates the size of the rocks in relation to the human figure, which blends indiscernibly into the background. The poem 'Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης' muses on the precariousness of human existence in an eternal setting; while the cliff remains in the same place for centuries, humans pass by it momentarily, in what seems to be a fragment of eternity. As has been suggested by David Ricks, Seferis makes a distinction between 'spirit and letter'; one infers the king's existence behind the solitary reference to the city to be found in the *Iliad*. The signified of the word — the material existence of the king — is an inference, as is his face behind the (imagined) golden mask.²⁸ But musings on the king are subsequently transferred to the poet's mortality; just as it is

28 D. Ricks, 'Spirit and letter in "The King of Asine"', in *The Shade of Homer* (Cambridge 1989) 158–71.



Figure 8 The citadel at Asine. ©MIET.

doubtful whether the former really existed, the latter will become a ‘void’ whose existence will be merely hinted at by the words he leaves behind. In the end, the poem is a soliloquy on anticipating one’s own death and the death of the people one loves. The question left hovering in the air is whether someone or something that could once be witnessed by the human eye leaves some kind of mark, a permanent imprint on space and whether history can, or perhaps should, be perceived in its spatial rather than its temporal dimension.

The poem ‘Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης’ encapsulates the problem of documenting human existence and in that respect it can be seen as a metaphor for the use of the photographic medium. Photography entails, by its nature, precisely the same distinction between spirit and letter or spirit and image; the documentation of the human body outlives the body itself. Photos of dead people present the onlooker with recorded evidence of human existence whose material traces seem to have evaporated. When looking today at the photograph of Maro climbing up the cliff, one cannot help thinking that there would be no way one could detect its presence in those surroundings now; behind Maro’s image there is a ‘void’. Still, that image triggers memory, doing justice to the person’s previous existence. Just as in ‘Ο βασιλιάς της Ασίνης’, the core of the problem regarding the photographic image revolves around preserving memory as a means of outliving the physical as well as the visual boundaries of human life.

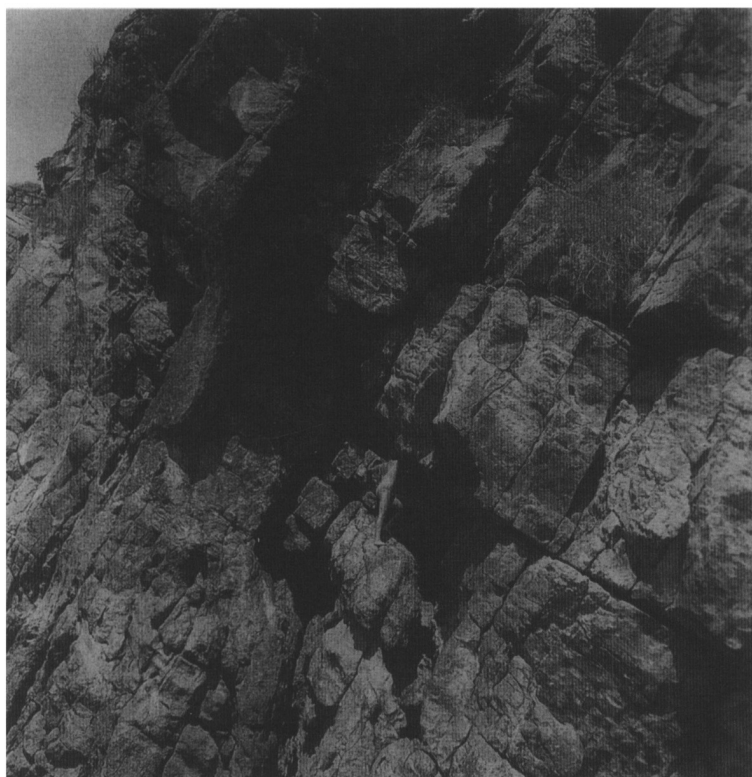


Figure 9 Maro climbing up cliff at Tolo. ©MIET.

Poetics of contingency

Snapshots entail contingency, in the sense that they capture an accidental moment, which is part of a sequential, uninterrupted flow of moments.²⁹ When the shutter button is pressed, the image viewed by the photographer through the lens is immediately crystalized. This entails a paradox: since one moment is singled out of an infinite number of others, the sequence ceases to exist. On the other hand, there is an unspoken consensus that the moment singled out in the photograph implies, and in a sense recovers, the sequence, rather than being self-contained. Thierry de Duve remarks:

The snapshot is a theft; it steals life. Intended to signify natural movement, it only produces a petrified analogon of it. It shows an unperformed movement that refers to an impossible posture. The paradox is that in reality the movement has indeed been performed, while in the image the posture is frozen.³⁰

29 Despite appearances, the snapshot, which freezes time, does not negate the concept of photography functioning as a visual diary. The diary captures the moment, but acknowledges that life and, in turn, time, is a concatenation of moments.

30 T. de Duve, 'Time exposure and snapshot: photography as paradox', *October 5* (1978) 114.

Why does a camera single out one particular moment and not another? More importantly, what is the particular significance of that moment in the creative process? Seferis compares the eye pausing over a scene to the shutter of a camera closing suddenly and wonders why this works as a visual stimulus giving birth to a poem:

Επιμένω: γιατί μια ορισμένη εντύπωση λειτουργεί ποιητικά περισσότερο από τις χίλιες άλλες καθημερινές εντυπώσεις; Πρόσεξε πως δεν είναι η πιο έντονη που είναι η πιο αποτελεσματική· πολύ συχνά είναι η πιο αλαφριά. Νομίζω κανείς δεν το ξέρει. Την άλλη φορά, κατεβαίνοντας από το γραφείο, είδα τους μαραγκούς να χαλνούν σ' ένα δωμάτιο μια μικρή σκηνή, κληρονομημένη από τους προηγούμενους νοικιάτορες. Ένωσα όπως όταν κλείνει το διάφραγμα μιας φωτογραφικής μηχανής: η εντύπωση λειτούργησε: γιατί αυτή και όχι μια άλλη; Χτες έγραψα τους «Θεατρίνους», άσχετο καλό ή όχι, αλλά γιατί αυτό βγήκε από εκεί.³¹

The poem, written in August 1943, is 'Θεατρίνοι, Μ.Α.', in which the stage that Seferis saw being taken away has been transformed in the following way:

Στήνουμε θέατρα και τα χαλνούμε
 όπου σταθούμε κι όπου βρεθούμε
 στήνουμε θέατρα και σκηνικά,
 όμως η μοίρα μας πάντα νικά
 και τα σαρώνει και μας σαρώνει
 και τους θεατρίνους και το θεατρώνη
 υποβολέα και μουσικούς
 στους πέντε ανέμους τους βιαστικούς.

Seferis points out that the impression that inspired this poem was not the most intense; rather, it is the fleeting image — namely the image that the eye does not have time to register in full — that becomes the most permanent. Andrew Dudley observes: 'The photographic plate is etched with experience, like the unconscious; and like the unconscious, it invites a symptomatic reading of the images that escape from it to reach the surface.'³² In this case, it was the small interior stage, a modest piece of apparatus, that caught Seferis' attention, becoming an unconscious piece of inspiration. When it was developed into a poem, this scene was imbued with universal significance: Seferis imagined it in the context of wider political transformations and failed attempts to control the situation.

31 'But again, why is it that a certain impression functions poetically more than a thousand other day-to-day impressions? Note that it is not the most intense one that's necessarily the most effective; quite often it is the gentlest. I think no one knows. Not long ago, coming down from my office I saw the carpenters taking apart a small stage, which had been inherited from the previous tenants. I felt as when a camera's shutter closes: why this impression and not another? Yesterday I wrote "The players"; it doesn't matter if it's good or bad, the question is why did it come from *there*?' (*Μέρες Δ'*, 302).

32 A. Dudley, *The Image in Dispute*, quoted by Wells in the introduction to *The Photography Reader*, 6.

The stage is that of political machinations, which so often prove to be ineffective against the mighty will of destiny.

In 'Θεατρίνοι, Μ.Α' the visual stimulus of carpenters dismantling and packing away the stage is developed by Seferis into poetic material. The snapshot contains merely the primary image used in the poem, but the poem itself is sophisticated enough not to be considered as accidental as the snapshot. There is, however, a type of poetry that reflects in its form the instantaneousness of the snapshot: the haiku, the 17-syllable Japanese epigram that captures a moment as the shutter of a camera does. Seferis published 16 such poems under the epigraph 'τούτο το ακαριαίον' from Marcus Aurelius. The form of the haiku encapsulates contingency, the moment as it is caught by the eye, which defies any further development. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes makes the same connection: 'This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku. For the notation of a haiku, too, is undevelopable: everything is given, without the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion.'³³ Seferis' series of haikus, published in the collection *Τετράδιο γυμνασμάτων*, suggests a fine agreement between moment and space, compactness and form, which is the essence of the accidental.

The diary also resembles snapshots, as it implies the same notion of contingency: the pen records unguarded moments of life during the course of the day. These are not necessarily the most telling or the most characteristic of one's existence. On the concept of diary-keeping, Seferis notes George Theotokas' and his own conflicting views. Whereas Theotokas tears up most pages of his diary, claiming they do not represent him, Seferis preserves his own traces, believing that 'ημερολόγιο δεν είναι διόλου όλες οι στιγμές μας μήτε η πεμπτουσία της ζωής μας αλλά το σημάδι, σχεδόν τυχαίο, μιας οποιασδήποτε στιγμής, κάθε τόσο, και όχι πάντα της σπουδαιότερης'.³⁴

The style and language used by Seferis in the diaries reflect the notion of contingency. Some entries are no more than short descriptions of landscapes jotted down hastily in a pocket-book: 'Χτες Βύβλο — άνοιξη, όμορφο απόγευμα, πολλά λουλουδια του αγρού. Ανεμώνες του Άδωνη. Χρώματα και σχήματα σπιτιών. Τριγύρω: καλό φως'.³⁵ One way to read Seferis' obsession with recording landscape is as a parallel to a photographer's obsession with documenting the particular conditions that make up space.³⁶ The above entry can be read as a linguistic setting for a photograph. This is made obvious by its

33 R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 49: *Reflections on Photography*, tr. Richard Howard (New York 1982).

34 'A journal is not at all the sum of all our moments neither the quintessence of our lives, but a trace left almost by chance of a random moment here and there and not always of the grandest one' (*Μέρες Γ'*, 178).

35 'Yesterday Byblos — spring, beautiful afternoon, lots of wildflowers. Adonis' anemones. Colours and shapes of houses. All around: good light' (*Μέρες ΣΤ'*, 198).

36 See also the following extract where Seferis comments on the instantaneousness of his landscape descriptions in his diaries: 'Προκαταρκτικά, μια γενική παρατήρηση: Επειδή ταξιδεύω, συμβαίνει να ιδώ πράγματα που δεν είδε ο αναγνώστης μου, που αντιγράφω, φωτογραφώ ίσως να έλεγα: νομίζω πως είναι ευκολονόητα: δεν τα αναπτύσσω, από αντιπάθεια της πολυλογίας, κι έτσι "αμαρτάνω"' (*'Κυπριακές' Επιστολές του Σεφέρη (1954–1962): Από την αλληλογραφία του με τον Γ.Π. Σαββίδη*, ed. K. Kostiou (Nicosia 1991) 40–1).

elliptical syntax, completely devoid of verbs. Verbs imply movement; their absence causes a kind of standstill that compels the eye to rest on individual details. As if operating through a lens, the eye fixes detail by extracting it from the moving sequence in which it would otherwise be lost. Thus, a travel diary records and recalls the present in the same way as photography does: it comprises sequences of snapshots, and this instantaneousness in description freezes time, preserving actuality.

‘Με τον τρόπο του Γ.Σ.’

Despite Seferis’ keen interest in photography, there is a surprising lack of reference to it in his poetry: the single reference is to be found in the poem ‘Με τον τρόπο του Γ.Σ.’, written in the summer of 1936. The poem revolves around the familiar theme of travelling. The speaker describes himself moving around in Greece, only to find a sense of dissatisfaction. All places appear the same, in the light of convention. Greece is travelling like a vessel heading towards an uncertain future; its passengers, unaware of the journey, pursue trivial lives. Space is a superficial landmark traded by people like an old, inflated currency: ‘Ο ένας έρχεται από τη Σαλαμίνα και ρωτάει τον άλλο μήπως «έρχεται εξ Ομονοίας»/ «Όχι έρχομαι εκ Συντάγματος» απαντά κι είν’ ευχαριστημένος.’ Although travelling is the poem’s predominant theme, actual motion seems to be constantly deferred. There is a substantial lack of progress: Pelion, Santorini, Mycenae, Poros, Spetses and Mykonos are presented as temporary stops, as short-term vignettes of the journey projected statically. As has been shown in Eadweard Muybridge’s snapshots of a galloping horse,³⁷ the process of singling out individual phases of movement that rightfully belong to a single sequence has the effect of annulling movement. Slow motion in film has a similar effect, as it forces the onlooker to dissect motion into its individual components.

‘Με τον τρόπο του Γ.Σ.’ presents a scene of street photography; the man’s portrait seems to be shot against a painted background of pigeons and flowers:

Παράξενος κόσμος που λέει πως βρίσκεται στην Αττική και δε βρίσκεται
 πουθενά·
 αγοράζουν κουφέτα για να παντρευτούνε
 κρατούν «σωσιτρίχα» φωτογραφίζουνται
 ο άνθρωπος που είδα σήμερα καθισμένος σ’ ένα φόντο με πιτσούνια και με
 λουλούδια
 δέχουνταν το χέρι του γερο-φωτογράφου να του στρώνει τις ρυτίδες
 που είχαν αφήσει στο πρόσωπό του
 όλα τα πετεινά τ’ ουρανού.

37 ‘When in the late 1870s, Eadweard Muybridge’s snapshots of animal locomotion, especially of the horse’s different gaits, came to be known in France and the United States, they occasioned a considerable furor among painters and photographers’ (de Duve, ‘Time exposure and snapshot’, 114).

Strategically placed at the centre of the poem, the passage on photography freezes time, enhancing the slowing down effect produced by the separate vignettes of travelling. When one poses for a portrait, the superficial record to be made by the camera consists of one's physical features at a certain age, the posture of bodies, the clothing worn on that occasion. However, the question is whether the camera actually records what someone *is* or what someone *becomes* for the sake of the photograph.³⁸ In his analysis of the photographic code, Barthes distinguishes between *denoted* and *connoted* message; the *denoted* message is the image as a perfect analogon of reality, whereas the *connoted* message is the way in which 'society represents, to a certain extent, what it thinks of the analogon'.³⁹ A portrait emphasizes the connoted message; in contrast to a spontaneous snapshot that captures the moment unprepared, a portrait involves — at least some — preparation.

In the poem, people are photographed as part of a ritual, similar to wedding, as a ceremony that will confirm their existence against the passage of time. Portrait photos are taken in an idyllic setting; pigeons and flowers form a background that frames the human face with timelessness. The pose itself seeks to suspend time; the man who is being photographed has his face retouched by the old (!) photographer, the latter perhaps knowing better than his customers that nothing can be done to halt the ravages of ageing. There is a morbid hint here: used to preserve people's memory of a person's face, the portrait will eventually become a funerary depiction.⁴⁰ Seferis implies that his contemporaries deny the real essence of life confirmed in the acceptance of death; he also implies that, unless they accept their fate in time, people cannot exist anywhere in space: 'Παράξενος κόσμος που λέει πως βρίσκεται στην Αττική / και δε βρίσκεται πουθενά.' The poem is a game of absences: there is no space that can actually contain humans, even less the confined space of a photographic frame.

Conclusion

To bring this article to a conclusion, I will try to answer the inevitable question that springs to mind: if Seferis had such a keen interest in photography, why doesn't he refer to it more often in his poetry, as he does to other art forms, such as painting, sculpture, music

38 'I have been photographed and knew it. Now, once I feel myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. This transformation is an active one: I feel that the photograph creates my body or mortifies it, according to its caprice' (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 10).

39 Roland Barthes, 'The photographic message', in *The Responsibility of Forms*, tr. Richard Howard (Oxford 1986) 5.

40 'It protracts onstage a life that has stopped offstage', maintains de Duve ('Time exposure and snapshot', 113–25).

and dance? It is significant that although he was quite a keen movie-goer, he only sparingly mentions cinema; for example, there is an indirect reference in *Μυθιστόρημα*, KB': 'η μνήμη σαν το άσπρο πανί μια νύχτα σε μια μάντρα / που είδαμε πράγματα παράξενα ... / να περνούν και να χάνονται μέσα στο ακίνητο φύλλωμα μιας πιπεριάς'. Perhaps it is the technological side of both photography and cinema that might provide the answer to our question. As I have said, Seferis was writing at a time when technology was starting to become an essential cultural element; the human voice could be recorded on gramophone records, human movement could be recorded on film. Seferis seems ambivalent towards the sweeping progress of technology. The phonograph, which steals people's authentic voices, is a recurring theme in his poetry.⁴¹

Dependent on technology, photography creates images of reality that are very close to what we perceive with our eyes; this closeness is caused by the ability of the lens to provide precise factual information about the natural world — at least under normal circumstances. Poetry, on the other hand, is elliptical by nature; thus, the language of poetry creates only a fragmented analogon of reality, which the mind of the reader is invited to fill. The realistic nature of photography, that is, the literal adherence to reality as we see it, is at odds with Seferis' concept of poetry as a means of shaping the world rather than reflecting it. In addition, the mechanical side of photography defies Seferis' definition of art as the result of the labours of craftsmanship. Seferis' approving references to painting and sculpture, but also to dance and music, point to the fact that he thought of art as essentially involving the working of the human body, the hand that moves the brush or the chisel. Photography, which takes place by means of the mere pressing of a button, obviously does not comply with this notion of labour.

Seferis sees photography as a mediator between the world and his poetry. Photographs are reflections of the world, which enable the poet to look at the heart of matters. In this sense, photographs can be compared with Platonic demons that unite the two ends of the continuum between gods and mortals. As reflections of the world, photographs are devoid of meaning. This means, and this is where their value as poetic tools lie, that they need to be enveloped in language in order to acquire significance. Like a pupating caterpillar awaiting transformation, the image, meaningless in itself, is waiting to be invested with words, to become a poem.

41 As Peter Mackridge notes: 'Στον τεχνολογημένο μας κόσμο, η επικοινωνία με τη ζωντανή φωνή γίνεται όλο και πιο σπάνιο φαινόμενο, όπως διαπιστώνει ο Σεφέρης σχετικά με την ηχογράφηση της φωνής σε φωνογραφικό δίσκο: «Να 'ναι η φωνή / πεθαμένων φίλων μας / ή φωνογράφος;», ρωτάει σε ένα από τα χαϊκού του. Ο Σεφέρης επανέρχεται στο γραμμόφωνο στο ποίημα «Τρίτη» από τις «Σημειώσεις για μια Εβδομάδα», όπου «σε κάθε δίσκο / ένας ζωντανός παίζει μ' έναν πεθαμένο», και στη συνέχεια ο ποιητής αντιδιαστέλλει τις γραμμές (τα αυλάκια) του δίσκου με «τις ραφές τ' ανθρώπινου κρανίου». Όπως γράφει στο αμέσως επόμενο ποίημα της ίδιας σειράς, την «Τετάρτη», «η ζωή είναι πλούσια γιατί βρήκαμε τελειοποιημένα μηχανήματα / όταν οι αισθήσεις παρακμάζουν» ('Ο Σεφέρης και η προφητική φωνή', in M. Pieris (ed.), *Το ζύγισμα της καλοσύνης* (Athens 2004) 94).