

Nobel Prize in Literature 1963



Giorgos Seferis

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1963 was awarded to Giorgos Seferis "*for his eminent lyrical writing, inspired by a deep feeling for the Hellenic world of culture*".

This year's Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to the Greek poet Giorgos Seferis, who was born in 1900 at Smyrna, which he left at an early age to accompany his family to Athens. After the Greeks were driven out of Asia Minor, and Seferis's home town had gone up in flames, homelessness - ever the fate of an oppressed and scattered people - was to play a decisive role during his adult years in more ways than one. Seferis studied in Paris, then entered the diplomatic service, went into exile with the Free Greek Government when Greece was occupied in 1941, and was moved about from country to country during the Second World War, when he served his country in Crete, in Cairo, in South Africa, in Turkey, and in the Middle East. After six years as ambassador in London, he retired last year and returned to Athens to devote himself entirely to his literary work.

Seferis's poetic production is not large, but because of the uniqueness of its thought and style and the beauty of its language, it has become a lasting symbol of all that is indestructible in the Hellenic affirmation of life. Now that Palamas and Sikelianos are dead,

Seferis is today the representative Hellenic poet, carrying on the classical heritage; a leading national figure, he is also acclaimed abroad in so far as his poetry has been made available in translation. Here in Sweden his work was presented thirteen years ago by Hjalmar Gullberg, whose translations included the famous *The King of Asine*, the theme of which has a connection with Sweden because of our archaeologists' successful excavations on this site. Using imagination as a tool, Seferis tries in this poem to penetrate the secret behind a name that is merely mentioned in a verse of the Iliad.

When reading Seferis we are forcibly reminded of a fact that is sometimes forgotten: geographically, Greece is not only a peninsula but also a world of water and foam, strewn with myriad islands, an ancient sea kingdom, the perilous and stormy home of the mariner. This Greece is the constant background of his poetry, in which it is conjured up as the vision of a grandeur both harsh and tender. Seferis does this with a language of rare subtlety, both rhythmical and metaphorical. It has rightly been said that he, better than anyone else, has interpreted the mystery of the stones, of the dead fragments of marble, and of the silent, smiling statues. In his evocative poems, figures from ancient Greek mythology appear together with recent events in the Mediterranean's bloody theatre of war. His poetry sometimes seems difficult to interpret, particularly because Seferis is reluctant to expose his inner self, preferring to hide behind a mask of anonymity. He often expresses his grief and bitterness through the medium of a central narrative figure, a kind of Odysseus with features borrowed from the old seamen in the lost Smyrna of the poet's youth. But in his hollow voice is dramatized much of Greece's historical fatality, its shipwrecks and its rescues, its disasters and its valour. Technically, Seferis has received vital impulses from [T. S. Eliot](#), but underneath the tone is unmistakably his own, often carrying a broken echo of the music from an ancient Greek chorus.

Seferis once described himself, "I am a monotonous and obstinate man who, for twenty years, has not ceased to say the same things over and over again." There is perhaps some truth in this description, but one must remember that the message he feels bound to convey is inseparable from the intellectual life of his generation as it finds itself confronted

with ancient Greek civilization, a heritage that presents a formidable challenge to the impoverished heir. In one of his most significant poems Seferis describes a dream in which a marble head - too heavy for his arms, yet impossible to push aside - fell upon him at the moment of awakening. It is in this state of mind that he sings the praise of the dead, for only communication with the dead conversing on their asphodel meadows can bring to the living a hope of peace, confidence, and justice. In Seferis's interpretation the story of the Argonauts becomes a parable halfway between myth and history, a parable of oarsmen who must fail before they reach their goal.

But Seferis animates this background of melancholy resignation with the eloquent joy inspired in him by his country's mountainous islands with their whitewashed houses rising in terraces above an azure sea, a harmony of colours that we find again in the Greek flag. In concluding this brief presentation, I should like to add that the prize has been awarded to Seferis "for his eminent lyrical writing, inspired by a deep feeling for the Hellenic world of culture."

Dear Sir - In honouring you, it has been a great privilege for the Swedish Academy to pay its tribute to the Greece of today, whose rich literature has had to wait, perhaps too long, for the Nobel laurels. Extending to you the congratulations of the Swedish Academy, I ask you to receive from the hands of His Majesty, the King, this year's Prize in Literature.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1963/press.html