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From *Mythos* to *Logos*: The Poetics of George Seferis

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

From Mythos to Logos: the Poetics of George Seferis Roderick Beaton "It was its two component parts that made me choose the title of this piece of work; MYTHOS1 (myth), because I have used quite plainly a certain mythology; ISTORIA (history/story), because I have tried to express, with some coherence, a situation as independent of myself as the characters in a novel" (Seferis 1972: 314). With this note to the sequence of 24 poems published in 1935 under the title *Mithist Æ³ rima* or *Novel*, Seferis drew attention to the references to ancient Greek mythology which abound in the poems and also to the strategy which some of the texts, at least, pursue of juxtaposing this mythology with the world of real experience (history or story). This strategy owes an acknowledged debt to that of T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, but rather more to Eliot's now famous review of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, which had been published in the same year (1922). There Eliot credits Joyce with the achievement of a new "method," which he contrasts with the "narrative method" of the

obsolescent genre of the novel. This method uses a myth (here the paradigmatic story of the *Odyssey*) as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (Eliot 1970: 270). The relevance of Eliot's conception of myth, distilled from Joyce's novel, to a reading of Seferis' sequence of poems goes beyond the disputed question of how far this "mythical method" is actually used in individual sections of *Mithistorima*.² The link between the mythical and the real that Seferis proposes in his note, if it is to be effected, as he put it, "with some coherence," demands a literary form able to encompass a range of objectively presented events and capable of imposing a coherent structure upon them. Lyric poetry, particularly in the almost telegraphic form in which both Eliot and Seferis had inherited it from the French Symbolists, is not well equipped for this task. For Seferis, who unlike Eliot had been trying for ten years to write a novel, the example of Joyce becomes only the final, clinching, reason for invoking that genre: only the larger literary structure of the novel can encompass the avowed program of Seferis' note on *Mithistorima*, of effectively linking myth and history "with some coherence."³ The title of *Mithistorima* alludes to a literary space in which mythos and istoria (myth and history/story) are capable of being reconciled within a coherent structure. This space however remains imaginary, or at best vestigial: *Mithistorima*, in defiance of its title, is not a novel, although its 24 sections might be read either as the fragments of a lost novel or as the inchoate material for a novel yet to be written. In any case the poems, through their title and the note on it, delineate at the level of discourse a literary space which they do not fill, or not fully. At the level of "story,"⁴ that is, within each of the 24 poems, this delineation of a space that can only inadequately be filled, if at all, is reduplicated. The multiple personae whose disembodied voices are heard in the poems are repeatedly and explicitly aware of a lack, of the lack of something which is never named in the poems but which can plausibly be identified with the term mythos, which appears only in the note attributable not to any of the poems' narrators but to the poet in his "own" persona as "implied author." To see how this lack is defined within the poems, I propose to look in detail at Poem 1 of the sequence before turning outside of the text for evidence of the significance that Seferis' contemporaries attached to the term "myth." The angel messenger three years we waited intently for him peering very closely at the pines the shore and the stars. Mingling with the plough's furrow or the keel of the ship seeking to rediscover the primal seed once more to set in train the immemorial drama...

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