

# READING CAVELL

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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

## THE RECOVERY OF GREECE AND THE DISCOVERY OF AMERICA

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"Greek Hellenism" . . . has not yet been created.

(George Seferis)<sup>1</sup>

America exists only in its discovery.

(Stanley Cavell)<sup>2</sup>

The first of these two epigraphs is from a *Greek poet* – where that combination of words will need to mean something more here than just "a poet who happens to be Greek"; the second is from an *American philosopher* – where that combination of words will need to mean something more here than just "a philosopher who happens to be American". The topic of each of the quotations is what more each of these combinations of words can mean.

Each of these remarks flirts with a paradox. More familiar – hence less overtly paradoxical – labels for the respective clusters of problems at issue in each of these remarks would be: "modern Greek culture" and "American culture". Do either of these latter two locutions involve a contradiction in terms? There is a temptation, in each case, to think so. To what extent do the two clusters of problems thus named – problems about what it means to be a modern Greek poet or writer or philosopher or intellectual and what it means to be an American poet or writer or philosopher or intellectual – resemble one another and to what extent do they differ? In order to answer this question, we will need to explore the concept of Greece that underlies the founding myth of the modern Greek state and the concept of America that underlies the founding myth of the United States of America.<sup>3</sup>

Let's begin with Seferis's remark: "Greek Hellenism' has not yet been created." The most superficial layer of looming paradox here comes from the temptation to hear the expression "Greek Hellenism" as a tautology – as if what it says could be reformulated without loss of meaning as "Hellenic Hellenism" or "Greek Greekness" – and thus to hear the remark as a whole as making no sense; for if "Greek Hellenism" has not yet been created, then neither has Hellenism. Or, conversely, if such a thing as Hellenism has already been achieved, as it famously has – as the founding and guiding paradigm of Western cultural achievement – then whatever else it is, surely it is Greek. So what can

Seferis's remark mean? I have lifted the remark from a sentence in an essay devoted to the question of the *hellenicity* of works of art – a topic that, Seferis says, "has never ceased to attract attention and inquiry, and one which is still very much alive, since it involves two or three basic problems in our Greek intellectual life".<sup>4</sup> Seferis, of course, has no wish to deny the trivial historical truth that Hellenism was originally a Greek creation. But he avoids speaking of the origin of Hellenism as itself constituting a Greek variety of Hellenism, reserving the expression "Greek Hellenism" to designate a moment of subsequent return to that moment of origin.

Seferis's remark affirms four things: first, the relatively uncontroversial historical claim that the cultural, literary and philosophical achievement of classical Greece represents a founding moment of Western civilization; second, the trivial historical claim that subsequent epochs have sought to inherit and appropriate that cultural, literary and philosophical legacy; third, the equally trivial claim that over the course of history there has been a wide variety of such efforts of inheritance and appropriation – such Hellenisms – increasingly less ancient and less Greek than their forerunners;<sup>5</sup> fourth, the not at all trivial thought, that what still remains a problem (especially for those who today wish to take pride in thinking of themselves as Greek<sup>6</sup>) – what has not yet been created – is a constellation of cultural achievement worthy of the appellation "modern Greek Hellenism".

Now Cavell's remark: "America exists only in its discovery." The most superficial layer of looming paradox here comes from the temptation to think that what the locution "the discovery of America" must name is some documented matter of historical fact concerning a first moment of human contact with a certain portion of the earth's landmass – as if what the remark says could be reformulated without much loss of meaning as "A certain portion of the earth's landmass would not exist but for its discovery." It will be urged by some – let's call them moderate social constructionists – that a second, more fruitful paradox looms here as well. They will urge the importance of a thought they, too, will want to formulate by saying something like the following: "America could not exist until it was discovered." But, in so far as they have a point, it can be expressed in less paradoxical fashion.<sup>7</sup> Now there are yet others – let's call them raving social constructionists – who will feel this still misses something yet deeper. They will tell us that because geographical concepts are socially constructed so must be the entities to which they refer. But we have now lost all control of our paradox: it no longer has anything in particular to do with America.<sup>8</sup> Cavell's remark aims to illuminate something not about practically all our concepts, but rather about one concept in particular: the concept of America.<sup>9</sup>

The discovery of America that concerns Cavell is an event that must occur subsequent – not prior – to the settling of the New World. The first ship whose arrival in America Cavell cares about is the *Mayflower*. I take his remark to affirm at least the following four things: first, the relatively trivial historical truth that the passengers of the *Mayflower*, and those that followed them,

sought a new life in a new world that they sought to settle, under the protection of a new social order that they sought to found; second, the slightly less trivial truth that what they therefore sought, in seeking "America", were possibilities of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness that remained not only to be realized, but also still to be discovered; third, the far less trivial claim that a faithfulness to that project of foundation and discovery are constitutive of what, on a certain use of the word, the "America" in "the United States of America" stands for; and fourth, the far from trivial thought, that it still remains an open question (especially for those who wish to take pride in thinking of themselves as American) to what extent such a discovery has taken place, hence to what extent America, thus understood, can be said to exist.

To better understand our two remarks – from Seferis and Cavell – it will help to have some further context. Here, first, in preparation for the context of Seferis's remark, is some information from the *Michelin Green Guide to Greece* about three famous buildings in (what is today) downtown Athens:

The University, Academy, and National Library – three 19th-century buildings in white Pentelic Marble – compose an architectural group in the elegant but slightly arid neo-Classical style. The university in the center is the oldest of the three buildings; it was designed by Christian von Hansen, the Danish architect, and built between 1837 and 1864; the pure design of the façade is outstanding. . . . The Academy (to the right) was paid for by Baron Sina, a Greek banker in Vienna, and designed by Theophilus von Hansen, Christian's brother, in the style of an Ionic temple; it is flanked by two tall columns surmounted by statues of Apollo and Athena.<sup>10</sup>

*The Blue Guide to Athens* adds that the university's outstanding façade features an Ionic portico whose inner walls "have frescoes depicting a variety of characters from ancient art, learning, and mythology".<sup>11</sup> Now let us ask: Are these buildings *Hellenic* in style? Well, as these guidebooks attest, the buildings in question certainly bear the earmarks of a classical revival in their manner of architectural design as well as in their manner of decoration – one of them, after all, displays paintings of the sages and deities of ancient learning and lore, while the other is dominated by statues of Apollo and Athena. So, in one sense, each of these buildings is as Hellenic as a building could hope to be. But their Hellenism is not of a sort that Seferis will categorize as Greek. Why not?

It would be a misunderstanding to think that it could count as a mitigating circumstance here that one of these buildings was paid for by a Greek banker; and it would be positively desperate to take comfort in the fact that one of the architects is named Theophilus. But it would be no less desperate a misunderstanding to think that for Seferis the disqualification of their Hellenism as Greek is to be traced solely to facts about these buildings such as their architects hailing from Denmark. Let us suppose that new historical research were to bring

to light that the putatively Danish brothers had all along really been Greeks pretending to be Danes – or suppose, even mere fancifully, that these buildings were designed, constructed and adorned by prodigiously talented Athenian veterans of the Greek War of Independence who, without ever stepping off of Greek soil, managed to teach themselves architecture between skirmishes with the Turks – all this would make no difference. As long as these buildings retain any semblance of their present appearance, in architectural conception or style, then their Hellenism would be, by Seferis's lights, no more Greek than it presently is. If buildings like these were products of entirely Greek labor, they would merely be Greek contributions to a relatively modern and not at all Greek variety of Hellenism.

These buildings provide the point of departure for Seferis's remark. Here is the full context:

We all know the buildings of the modern academy in Athens, an example of pseudo-classical architecture. But we do not realize that very often when we are speaking of the "Hellenism" of some work of art, we are really speaking about [something like] the buildings of the Academy. "And what shall be done?", I shall be asked. I said that Hellenism is something difficult. And this comes about because if, in the realm of the intellect, European Hellenism was created (and who knows, perhaps in our days is dying), our own "Greek Hellenism", if I may be permitted so to call it, has not yet been created and not yet recovered its tradition.<sup>12</sup>

Hellenism long ago went into cultural diaspora and became a European affair. That self-avowed "good European", Friedrich Nietzsche, speaks for many other Europeans of the nineteenth century when he confesses a longing for the "only place one would want to be at home: the Greek world". Nietzsche here declares not a desire to visit contemporary Greece, but a nostalgia for an earlier Hellenic civilization whose achievements haunt our own.<sup>13</sup> (Though for many others in the nineteenth century, such as Lord Byron, a longing for the Greece of the past was tied to an interest in visiting contemporary Greece and to hopes for a renewed Greece of today and tomorrow.)<sup>14</sup> If today's Greeks are to find a way to their own "Greek Hellenism", they must first, Seferis thinks, find a way to recover that lost world – where such a recovery is not a matter simply of reversing the direction of history (to be accomplished, say, by ridding oneself of subsequent "foreign" impurities), it is also a matter of forging something new. It must be both a re-creation and a new creation.<sup>15</sup> It requires finding a way neither simply to incorporate nor simply to repudiate European Hellenism.<sup>16</sup> It requires finding a way to re-inherit what was once Greek so that it may once again be Greek.<sup>17</sup>

Now let us turn to the context of Cavell's remark. I have lifted the remark from the middle of a sentence from his book about *Walden*. But, before we look

at its context, it might help to have before us a sample of the way in which the topic of America haunts Thoreau's prose. Here is a representative passage from *Walden*:

Let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion, and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through church and state, through poetry and philosophy and religion, till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place . . . a place where you might found a wall or a state.<sup>18</sup>

This passage is about, among other things, what it is to settle a land and to found a state. Its author wishes his fellow citizens to re-open questions that he imagines they wish to regard as settled – questions about whether America, the land, has been discovered and successfully settled and whether the United States of America, the state, has been founded and stands fully constituted. The author, as the rest of the book makes clear, wishes to suggest that the task of settling still remains ahead of his readers – indeed, that the task of settling America stands hardly more accomplished in New York and Boston and Concord than in Paris or London – and that, for it to be accomplished, America's present, essentially European, understanding of what a church is and what a state is (and hence what the relations between church and state can be) must undergo radical transformation, as must America's present, equally European, understanding of what poetry and philosophy and religion are (and hence what the relations between poetry and philosophy and religion can be), and that, only once such transformations are underway, will a foundation have been dug secure enough to sustain the founding of a state able to fulfill the promise of America.

Here is the full context of Cavell's remark – it is a commentary on the (inseparability of the) literary and religious and philosophical and political ambitions of a work such as *Walden*.<sup>19</sup>

We know the specific day in the specific year on which all the ancestors of New England took their abode in the woods. The moment of origin is a national event reenacted in the events of *Walden*, in order this time to do it right, or to prove that it is impossible; to discover and settle this land, or the question of this land, once and for all. . . . Any American writer, any American, is apt to respond to that event in one way or another; to the knowledge that America exists only in its discovery and its discovery was always an accident; and to the obsession with freedom, and with building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them; and to the presentiment that this unparalleled opportunity has been lost forever.<sup>20</sup>

The discovery of America is here represented as something that has yet to take place. Cavell takes Thoreau to take "America" to name something that those who wish to think of themselves as American must work to make happen: America exists only to the extent that the work of making America happen – the work of building new structures and forming new human beings with new minds to inhabit them – is actively undertaken, in anticipation of there being something thereby to discover. The implication is that, in so far as the fruits of such labor are (as Thoreau thinks they everywhere are) taken for granted, as having already been brought to completion, America is fading out of existence. Its discovery remains yet to be accomplished.

If, for Seferis, the task of those who wish to take pride in Greece is to forge a re-inheritance of what was once Greek so that it may once again be Greek, for Cavell, following Thoreau, the task of those who wish to take pride in America is to discover what is alleged already to have been discovered so that America can one day be what it now too often pretends already to be. The arresting initial parallel here – in the cases of Greece and America – is the possibility of a pseudo-cultural variant of the pseudo-religious phenomenon that Kierkegaard called the monstrous illusion. For Kierkegaard, the monstrous illusion was Christendom – a state of affairs in which everyone imagines he or she already is a Christian, simply in virtue of his living in a Christian country, having been baptized in a Christian ceremony, going every Sunday to hear a Christian sermon, etc., so that the struggle for faith and against sin once constitutive of the task of living a Christian life come to seem inessential to a person's claim to be a Christian. A Christian is taken to be something one already is, rather than someone one must become. Since everyone already knows himself or herself to be a Christian, no one undertakes the arduous task of becoming a Christian. It is a state of affairs in which there are no longer any Christians just because everyone thinks he or she already is one. The illusion is sustained by the apparent presence of evidence everywhere – in the form of well-maintained churches, Sunday services, baptismal ceremonies, theological publications, etc. – that Christianity continues to thrive in nineteenth-century Denmark.

For Seferis, the monstrous illusion that threatens the culture of modern Greece is the illusion of an already accomplished Greek Hellenism – a state of affairs in which a Greek writer or artist imagines himself or herself able to participate in a living Hellenic tradition, simply in virtue of his or her speaking Greek, living in Greece, remaining committed to the heritage of Greece, and purifying his or her style or thought of elements deemed not to be Greek, so that the struggle to create a new tradition (one that can lay rightful claim to having reclaimed some part of the glory that was Greece) which ought to be the task of a properly Greek Hellenism comes to seem inessential to a writer's or artist's claim to represent a living continuation of Hellenic tradition. The resources for a Greek Hellenism are taken already to lie ready to hand, within an easy arm's reach, rather than to be ones first needing to be fashioned through a laborious piecemeal process of literary and intellectual experimentation.<sup>21</sup> The

illusion here consists in a state of affairs in which there are no genuine examples of Greek Hellenism, yet everyone thinks they are to be found in any contemporary Greek bookstore or art gallery.<sup>22</sup> The illusion is sustained by the apparent presence of evidence everywhere – in the form of modern demotic verse laced with classical illusions, municipal architecture incorporating Ionic temple elements, interior spaces adorned with allusions to Minoan wall-painting, mantelpieces decorated with reproductions of Cycladic sculpture, etc. – that Greece has recovered its classical traditions.<sup>23</sup>

For Cavell, following Thoreau, the monstrous illusion that threatens America is the illusion of an already discovered America – a state of affairs in which every American citizen imagines that the sole obstacles to reaping the benefits of the American dream are of a local and logistical variety. Each citizen takes the existence of America to be confirmed by facts such as that he or she lives on a continent called America, in a nation known as the United States of America, in a place where the words used to formulate the promise of America (words about freedom and democracy, about each citizen's counting equally, about a new beginning and a new hope, about being open to all people, regardless of creed, race or nation of origin, about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, equally guaranteed for all) are words repeated by every politician and pundit – and as fervently by the shameless as the sincere – so that the task of ensuring that these words retain a meaning (so that America can rightfully lay claim to having lived up to its promise), which ought to be the abiding concern of every American citizen, comes to seem inessential to one's claim to be a citizen. The discovery and constitution of America are taken to be accomplished facts, rather than ongoing projects whose vitality measures the pulse of America's heartbeat. The illusion consists in a state of affairs in which America no longer exists, just because every American takes the existence of America to be self-evident. The illusion is sustained by the apparent presence of evidence everywhere – in the form of up-to-date passports, shiny public buildings, closely contested elections, boisterous Fourth of July celebrations, etc. – that America exists.

Seferis not only says that Hellenism is something difficult for the contemporary Greek intellectual, but also that it is something dangerous:

"Hellenism" as applied to a work of art is a big word to use. A big word and a fine word. But if we want to pin down exactly what is meant by it, we shall find it a difficult and a dangerous word to use. . . . Those who agitated for the artificially "purist" language aimed just at this; they sought for just this kind of "Hellenism". With touching obstinacy, with sweat and toil they tried to purify the national language from the stains of "barbarism" and hoped that slowly but surely we should attain once more the language and the art of Sophocles and Plato. And their reward was what might have been expected – a destruction and a drying up of Hellenism's fairest and truest streams. . . . This is why I used the word "dangerous", because we run the risk, as was the case of

the purists, of destroying in the name of "Hellenism" those values which are most purely Hellenic.<sup>24</sup>

On this analysis of the problem, nothing is more potentially destructive of a fruitful Greek Hellenism than the misguided attempt to secure it at too cheap a cost.<sup>25</sup> The misguided solution that Seferis particularly singles out is a quest to purify Greek writing and art of all supposedly "foreign" influences, in the hope of restoring a lost past. Such a project of reinstating the language and the art of a Sophocles or a Plato by purging today's language and art of the traces of twenty-five centuries of history – thereby supposedly placing Greece in a position where it will be ready simply to repeat the accomplishments of Sophocles and Plato – can strike one as almost comically chimerical.<sup>26</sup> Plato was as revolutionary a thinker as has ever lived. One cannot recapture either the style or the spirit of his philosophy or his art without also inheriting Plato's utopian ambition to transform the souls and the lives of his fellow citizens. (And what sort of conception of language is it that imagines that it can appropriate Plato's language while utterly divorcing it from the substance of his thought?) A project of turning the clock of Greek language and culture back two and a half millennia has no chance of bearing the imprint of Plato's style or spirit – for nothing could be further from these than such a project of cultural nostalgia. Such a project will only contribute, Seferis says, to a destruction and a drying up of Hellenism's streams – to a destruction in the name of "Hellenism" of those values that are most properly termed Hellenic. The first step to recovering the language of the dialogues of a Plato or a Sophocles must be to breathe life into their respective conceptions of what kinds of goods philosophy and tragedy were supposed to be. And the task of finding fruitful ways to bring such goods to bear on the souls and lives of the citizens of a modern (or postmodern) Greece constitutes a formidable challenge. The possibilities of thinking and living able to lend substance to such forms must be tested against contemporary needs and hopes to see what in them can withstand the pressures and demands of the present.<sup>27</sup> The unfruitful conception of a recovery of Greek culture, for Seferis, lies in a merely retrospective attachment to the bare forms of past ways of speaking, emptied of their substance – thus in a misplaced understanding of the ground of the present deficit of genuinely Hellenic forms and in an incoherent conception of how such a deficit is to be remedied.

An obstacle to the discovery of America, for Emerson and Thoreau, is also to be traced to an attachment to mere forms of speech emptied of their substance. Emerson writes: "[S]ometimes the life seems to be dying out of all literature and this enormous paper currency of Words is accepted instead."<sup>28</sup> Cavell elaborates why for Emerson's student, the author of *Walden*, the reader and the word can only be awakened together:

Everyone is saying, and anyone can hear, that this is the new world; that we are the new men; that the earth is to be born again; that the

past is to be cast off like a skin; that we must learn from children to see again; that everyday is the first day of the world, that America is Eden. So how can a word get through whose burden is that we do not understand a word of all this? Or rather, that the way we understand it is insane, and we are trying again to buy and bully our way into heaven, that we have failed, that the present is a task and a discovery, not a period of America's privileged history; that we are not free, not whole, and not new, and we know this and are on a downward path of despair because of it.<sup>29</sup>

The form of self-deception at issue here attaches not to a conception of how one might go about recovering the former grandeur of past forms of discourse, but to a conception of these forms as requiring no recovery. These forms of speech seem not to require recovery because they have always been with us and are everywhere still with us. We still hear people, in America, echoing the currently fashionable – often secularized – equivalents of thoughts such as these: "This is the new world"; "We are the new men"; "The earth is to be born again"; "The past is to be cast off like a skin"; "America is Eden". The rhetoric has been modernized but the sentiment remains much the same and threatens to degenerate into a form of chauvinistic sentimentality. Sentiments such as these, after several centuries of repetition, are asked not to lose any of their original expressive capacity. Yet those who make confident use of them persist in living in ways that must deprive them of meaning: as the call for us to be new men gives way to a fantasy of freezing time – to a call to disregard any needs or hopes deemed not to accord with the supposed "intentions of the founders"; as America, having proclaimed the earth's rebirth and itself a new Eden, now appears to its neighbors to be bent on perfecting the means to forever spoil the garden; and as the new world, having pledged to cast off its past like an old skin, seems now, much like the old world, weighed down by layers of history. In the face of such failures on America's part to be able to mean its descriptions of itself, the task of a properly American philosophical and literary and political discourse became, already over a century and a half ago, for authors such as Emerson and Thoreau, that of finding a way, first, to tell us, such that we are able to hear it, that we no longer understand the forms of words we call upon to articulate the promise of America, and, second, to demonstrate that these very words, their present apparent expressive impotence notwithstanding, can still be called upon, in speaking of America, to say something we are still able to understand and believe.

The essential parallel between Seferis and Cavell lies in their wanting the linguistic compounds *Greek poet* and *American philosopher* respectively to signify something more than an individual who happens to fall under two independently intelligible predicates – *Greek* and *poet*, *American* and *philosopher*. They want these complexes to denote a unity, such that the meaning of each of the terms occurring in the complex is decisively altered through its participation

with the other in such a unity. Seferis's conception of the calling of the Greek poet is one according to which what it is for a poet to be a *Greek* poet is to be gauged not merely by the passport he or she holds or where he or she lives or which language he or she speaks, but by the manner in which he or she crafts and inhabits the linguistic and other expressive resources through which he or she seeks to establish a relation to a broader Hellenic artistic, literary and intellectual tradition,<sup>30</sup> and according to which what it is for a Greek to be a *Greek poet* is to be measured not merely by his or her producing work that is recognizably poetry, but by his or her poetry itself serving as a vehicle for the expression and further articulation of what it now means to be Greek. Cavell's conception of the calling of the American philosopher is one according to which what it is for a philosopher to be an *American* philosopher is to be gauged not merely by the passport he or she holds or where he or she lives or which flag he or she salutes, but by the manner in which he or she seeks to further (what Cavell calls) the discovery of America; and according to which what it is for an American to be an *American philosopher* is to be measured not merely by his or her producing work that is recognizably philosophy, but by his or her philosophy itself serving as vehicle for the expression and critical articulation of what it now means to be an American.

It might appear to one, at first blush, as if Seferis's conception of the sort of unity that is available to be denoted by the complex expression "Greek poetry" is far more coherent than Cavell's conception of the sort of unity that is available to be denoted by the complex expression "American philosophy" – especially if one is attracted to an argument along the following lines:

Poetry by its very nature partakes of the particularity of a language, a culture, a people and a place; indeed, only to the extent that it partakes of these can it succeed as poetry; and thus any poetry that is not deeply marked by such particularities is bound to be shallow and bloodless. Philosophy, on the other hand, is an entirely different matter. It must rise above such particularities. In its quest for reason and universality, a philosophical effort partakes of such particularities only to the extent that it fails as philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

The soundness of such an argument depends upon the soundness of the respective conceptions of poetry and philosophy (and the corresponding conceptions of "language", "culture", "reason", etc.) upon which it relies.

It is just such conceptions that Seferis and Cavell, each in his own way, seek to challenge.

First, there is the question of what *poetry* and *philosophy* each are – of the supposedly ineluctably provincial nature of poetry (so that it pertains to its essence that a poetic production have a recognizably modern French or ancient Greek or early American provenance) and the supposedly equally ineluctably cosmopolitan nature of philosophy (so that it pertains merely to its accidents

that a philosophical production have a recognizably modern French or ancient Greek or early American provenance). Seferis and Cavell seek to contest such pictures of poetry and philosophy and the correlative picture of the separability of their essences from their accidents. Their respective conceptions of poetry and philosophy each assume an intertwining of moments of particularity and universality. Poetry for Seferis (rooted in particularities though it must be) always seeks to give voice to something universally human.<sup>32</sup> And philosophy for Cavell (its claim to be philosophy depending on its capacity to speak in the universal voice notwithstanding) must not shrink from the recognition that whoever seeks to speak for everyone must first speak as the particular person he or she is – rooted in the particularities of his or her time and place.

Second, Seferis's and Cavell's respective conceptions of the *Greek* and *American* moments in Greek poetry and American philosophy can also be seen, upon closer examination, themselves each to involve a further intertwining of particularity and universality – an internal complexity that makes a difference to the sort of thing Greek poetry and American philosophy can each aspire to be. Seferis's conception of Hellenism rests on the possibility of the universal appeal of the Hellenic ideal, while seeing such an appeal as constitutively tied to the emergence of a very particular sort of tradition – one that sought to articulate universal demands of reason – a synthesis of tradition and criticism in which the possibility of an aspiration to universality depended upon the development of very particular sorts of practices and institutions. A set of practices and institutions – not merely a new way of thinking, but a new way of *living*, of relating to tradition and language and other people – came into being and enabled the cultivation of a heightened sensitivity to the requirements of an ongoing enterprise of rational self-criticism and self-correction. "Hellenism" therefore is the name both of a very particular tradition with a very particular history and an aspiration to a perspective on the world and one's place in it that transcends the parochialism of the merely traditional. Cavell's conception of America is not of an ideal of community that can be of concern only to a certain group of people who happen already to live in a certain place. It is constitutive of America as originally conceived that it be open to everyone and that it can claim to exist only to the extent that a nation exists in which each American's claim to be American does not depend upon his or her rootedness in the particularities that constitute most other national communities – particularities of language, or creed, or race, or place of birth or ethnic heritage. "America" therefore is both the name of a very particular people with a very particular history and the name of a certain ideal of national community – one that is to be an example to the rest of the world – that not only is able to transcend the parochial ties that previously bound together other peoples, but that, through the degree and manner in which such transcendence is achieved, is able to transform the world's understanding of what a nation should be.<sup>33</sup>

The depth of the parallel notwithstanding, the unities that Seferis and Cavell respectively seek to designate with the terms "Greek poetry" and

"American philosophy" are of very different sorts. After remarking upon the risks of "destroying in the name of 'Hellenism' those values which are most purely Hellenic", Seferis goes on to warn of a second danger:

But the opposite may happen, too; and this is why I used the adjective "difficult". We may also, in the confidence that we are "hellenizing", come under the sway of values which are not Hellenic at all or only remotely so.<sup>34</sup>

He explains:

Since the time of Alexander the Great we have scattered our Hellenism far and wide. We have sown it throughout the world. . . . And this vast diaspora was to have a significant result. Hellenism was worked upon, reformed and revived, right down to the time of the Renaissance, by personalities who were sometimes Greek and sometimes not. And after that time, which marks the enslavement of the Greek race, it was shaped by personalities who were not Greek at all and who worked outside the Greek area. And we should remember that it was in this period that were created those great works which crystalized the form of the civilization which we know today as European. . . . No Greek had any decisive or immediate influence at that time on the trends which were taking shape in the West as a result of the contact with Greek values. . . . This was how things stood until the time of the awakening of the race. Then, just as is done today, the best among us studied in or went to the West and tried to bring back to liberated Greece the heritage that had left our country in order to be preserved. But this heritage was not a matter of lifeless gold; it was a living thing that had fertilized its surroundings and taken root and borne fruit. And through these functions it gradually came to be a general and abstract framework inside which many powerful intelligences came to find their places, each completely different from the others and more consonant with their own selves than with anything else. Dante's Ulysses, Shakespeare's Venus and Adonis, Racine's Phèdre and Hölderlin's Hyperion, apart from their worldwide significance and value, belong basically to the times and the races of their creators; their Hellenic subject matter is, as motivation, something external and superficial. We, however, with most legitimate and commendable motives, burning, as we were, with the desire to bring back to Greece everything that was Hellenic and seeing signs of Hellenism everywhere, brought back, without looking more deeply into the matter, countless foreign values which in fact had nothing to do with our own land at all.<sup>35</sup>

Thus it comes to pass that there are such things as the buildings of the modern academy in Athens – examples of an architecture that is as unquestionably



Hellenic as it is questionably Greek. The call to hellenize Greek arts and letters faces, in Seferis's view, a dilemma. The first horn of the dilemma is a suffocating nostalgia and the accompanying appetite for lifeless anachronisms (which Seferis thinks is the inevitable consequence of a fixation on the ideals of "cultural purity" and a merely backward retreat to "traditional" Hellenic values). The second horn of the dilemma is a pseudo-classical hodgepodge that is neither Greek nor Hellenic (which Seferis thinks is the inevitable consequence of an undirected cultivation of neo-classical forms as mere ends in themselves).

What is the way out of this dilemma? Why has a genuinely Greek Hellenism yet to emerge? And, when it does, what will it look like? Seferis, wisely, has only this to say in answer:

Sometimes there is a foreknowledge of this "Greek Hellenism" among some of the best of us, "for wise men perceive what is approaching". But before we can say that we can see its face clearly, many great works will have to be created and many men, great and small alike, will have to work and to struggle. For this particular Hellenism will only show its face when the Greece of today has acquired its own real intellectual character and features.<sup>36</sup>

Whereas the American is haunted by the fear that what was once possible can no longer become actual, the modern Greek is haunted by the fear that what was once actual will never again be possible. Whereas, according to Cavell, the American intellectual disguises the cultural accomplishments of America from himself and remains haunted by a "presentiment that the unparalleled opportunity [named America] has been lost forever". According to Seferis, what the Greek intellectual is tempted to hide from himself or herself is that there are no accomplished instances of a currently Greek Hellenism and hence that knowledge of such a possibility can exist *only* in the form of a presentiment. A more definite knowledge of its possibility is not to be had in advance of its actuality – that is, until its face can clearly be seen. This can happen only once modern Greece has expressed itself philosophically, poetically and artistically – when sufficiently many distinctively modern Greek works have been created of sufficient intellectual and aesthetic scope and consistency to establish and inspire a new tradition of Hellenic values. One reason this day is slow in coming is the illusion that Greece can only create something of permanent value by specifically creating again what can no longer be recreated. If Greece adheres to such a backward-looking formula for progress, Seferis suggests, it will be doomed to underpraise its innovators and overvalue its imitators.

This comes close to being the reverse of an American malady Cavell seeks to diagnose:

Study of *Walden* would perhaps not have become such an obsession with me had it not presented itself as a response to the questions with

which I was already obsessed: Why has America never expressed itself philosophically? . . . In re-reading *Walden*, twenty years after first reading it, I seemed to find a book of sufficient intellectual scope and consistency to have established or inspired a tradition of thinking. One reason it did not is that American culture has never really believed in its capacity to produce anything of permanent value – except itself. So it forever overpraises and undervalues its achievements.<sup>37</sup>

Cavell's opening question here ("Why has America never expressed itself philosophically?") can sound a bit like a worry Seferis has about modern Greece. But Cavell rejects the underlying premise of his opening question. The problem, according to him, is not why a distinctively modern American cultural voice has yet to emerge, but why, each time it emerges, America fails to acknowledge it as such. In *Walden*, Cavell claims to be able to identify the American counterpart of that to which Seferis claims he can only look forward: a book of sufficient intellectual scope and consistency to establish or inspire a tradition of thinking. So, in each case, an indigenous intellectual tradition has yet to catch fire and clear a new space, but for almost opposite reasons: in the case of Greece, according to Seferis, it is because there is at present no flame and little point in lighting one as long as the cultural landscape remains too dry and barren to sustain a blaze; in the case of America, according to Cavell, it is because, though a flame intermittently burns bright in the densely wooded landscape, no one believes sufficiently in its capacity to sustain itself to want to contribute a handful of kindling. If the curse of modern Greek culture lies in its conviction that Greece has already proved its capacity to produce something of permanent value, the curse of American culture, according to Cavell, lies in its inability to believe in its capacity to produce anything of permanent value. On this analysis, Cavell's diagnosis would appear to be the opposite of Seferis's: the problem is not how to reduce the paralyzing glare of an unavoidably visible cultural achievement, but rather how to render finally visible cultural events that remain almost inexplicably invisible. Cavell finds this only almost – and not utterly – inexplicable, because he sees America's obliviousness to such achievements as itself characteristic of a chronic American tendency to be able to praise in American culture only as much as a European sensibility will ratify.

Seferis and Cavell are each concerned with something that remains to be discovered. But Seferis's name for what remains to be discovered – "Greek Hellenism" – requires realigning two nearly synonymous terms: together they come to signify something neither term previously was able to stand for by itself, their combination simultaneously marking a relation (through the second term) to a glorious but dangerous past and (through its qualification by the first term) to a difficult but possible future, with the ensuing complex failing to refer to anything in the present. Cavell's name for what remains to be discovered – "America" – requires only one term: it either refers simultaneously to a past of



promise and a future faithful to that promise or it fails to refer to anything at all, depending upon whether it stands for something happening in the present.

We can disguise the depth of the difference here by saying that for Seferis the modern Greek must discover for himself or herself what is Hellenic and for Cavell the American must discover for himself or herself what is American. But Seferis's and Cavell's own formulations are more nuanced, exploding this surface appearance of a parallelism. Seferis writes: "If I am right, the whole question is this: how profoundly and how truly can a Greek confront his own self and that nature of his which must inevitably be part of the greater nature which is Hellenic?"<sup>38</sup> To say that the confrontation of the Greek with himself must also involve a confrontation with "that nature of his which must inevitably be part of the greater nature which is Hellenic" is to say that the confrontation in question here is of necessity also a confrontation with a no longer living Greek past as well as with an only partially living (and thus partially dying) European inheritance of that same past.

The confrontation of the American soul with itself, for Cavell, also involves a question about how to inherit a European past; but it takes a rather different form. The following remarks are from a lecture Cavell delivered to an assembly of Austrian philosophers:

The interests among philosophers here in the richness of specifically Austrian thought has helped my own preoccupation with the richness, and the poverty, of specifically American thought, above all with the extraordinary fact that those I regard as the founders of American thinking – Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau – are philosophically repressed in the culture they founded. My efforts to realize this repression are not interested, perhaps I should say explicitly, any more than I understand the attention to Austrian thought here to be interested, in ridding itself of foreign influence and participation. On the contrary, my wish to inherit Emerson and Thoreau as philosophers, my claim for them as founding American thinking, is a claim both that America contains an unacknowledged current of thinking, and that this thinking accomplishes itself by teaching the inheritance of European philosophy – an inheritance that should make me not the master of this European philosophy, but also not its slave.<sup>39</sup>

Thus for Cavell, as for Seferis, an effort to purify oneself of foreign influences represents a misunderstanding of what the desired process of discovery requires. And for Cavell, as for Seferis, this process can accomplish itself only by acknowledging and reanimating a European legacy. And, for Cavell, as for Seferis, this inheritance of a European legacy should make me neither its master nor its slave. But for Cavell's America, now unlike Seferis's Greece, the confrontation of the American soul with itself does not of necessity also involve a confrontation with a subsequent European transmogrification of American

values. This is the great difference between the heir of the ancient world's and the heir of the new world's respective relations to the old world. Whereas the recovery of a distinctively Greek Hellenism remains beholden to Europe's intervening discovery of Greece, America's discovery of itself ought not to remain beholden to Europe's intervening discoveries of America.

This might seem wrong. One might object along the following lines: "Even though America has perhaps never exactly enjoyed anything quite as triumphant as an Alexander the Great of its own, has it not enjoyed its own version of cultural imperialism, scattering vestiges of Americanism far and wide? Elaborations on American music, film, television, clothes, advertising, etc., are now to be found the world over. So doesn't an American's confrontation with the nature of America today necessarily involve a confrontation with the presently global phenomenon of American culture?" This rejoinder fails to register the critical difference between Seferis's and Cavell's respective problematics (and this is not just because American culture has never yet gone into cultural diaspora, but rather continues to absorb the diasporas of the world). The claim of Cavell's here missed is that America's continuing discovery of itself does not have to wait upon a reabsorption of the old world's crystallizations of her achievements. If her culture is to be a living thing able to fertilize its own native surroundings, take root and bear fruit, it must be something that can be homegrown. The point is not that European Americanism is unable to rival the achievement of European Hellenism – that Sergio Leone's Westerns, Jean-Luc Godard's film noir and Lars Gulin's jazz saxophone are not the equal of Dante's *Ulysses*, Racine's *Phèdre* or Hölderlin's *Hyperion*. It is that – however much pride or joy or affection these tasteful European adaptations of American culture may excite in an American soul – their distinctively European accents preclude them from furnishing decisive articulation for an American of what America is. However much such pockets of Italian or French or Swedish Americanism may enrich world culture, such European discoveries of America are not contributions to what Cavell means when he speaks of "the discovery of America".

Here Seferis's and Cavell's concerns appear to run in opposite directions. Seferis wishes to teach the Greek intellectual to be suspicious of any call for a Greek culture that abjures the achievement of subsequent European Hellenism on the ground that "the only possible genuine [Greek] life" must spring exclusively "from the selfsame source of Hellenic life".<sup>40</sup> Whereas Cavell wishes to teach the American culture-vulture to be suspicious of his or her tendency to single out as significant products of American life only what a European sensibility will immediately be inclined to single out as such – hence to be suspicious of his or her own chronically American tendency to underestimate the powers of renewal inherent in the self-same source of American life.

Seferis, as we have seen, charges those most eager to champion Greek cultural forms with forgetting what lent those forms substance. This makes for the possibility of a kind of Greek intellectual who (like Seferis) deplors the

stultifying effects of a backward-looking cultural chauvinism but who (unlike Seferis) does not think that all modern Greek philosophy derives (as Nietzsche thought all German philosophy derived) "its real dignity from being a gradual reclamation of the soil of antiquity".<sup>41</sup> This kind of modern Greek intellectual recoils from a shallow enthusiasm for ancient philosophy – one that makes much of its being Greek and little of its being philosophy – by refusing the classics altogether. Just as there are American intellectuals who (to Cavell's disappointment) refuse to interest themselves in the possibility of a distinctively American philosophy, so there are also Greek intellectuals who (to Seferis's disappointment) refuse to interest themselves in ancient Greek philosophy.

There is both a symmetry and an asymmetry here. The superficial symmetry lies in the fact that the typical modern Greek philosopher (who has no time for Seferis's enthusiasm for ancient Greek philosophy) and the typical American philosopher (who has no time for Cavell's preoccupation with America expressing herself philosophically) each aspires, in the first instance, to be a *philosopher* and each, in his or her own way, fears that a preoccupation with what it is to be a Greek or an American will constitute at best a distraction from (and at worst a corruption of) that aspiration. The asymmetry lies in the fact that, quite unlike his or her American counterpart, the Greek intellectual, who refuses the classics of Greek thought, is refusing something he or she had forced upon him or her from an early age in a fashion that deprived it of its possible significance. Many a modern Greek intellectual has been taught to believe, from an early age, that for something to be a genuine cultural achievement it must speak in a discernibly Greek accent; thus he or she often comes to distrust the cultivation of such an accent as much as he or she has come to disdain the varieties of sterile nationalism that he or she associates with it.<sup>42</sup> Many an American intellectual has been led to believe that for something to be a genuine cultural achievement it must bear the earmarks of a European provenance; and, if he or she has never come to distrust this equation of culture with Europe, then the cultivation of a distinctively American variety of high culture is bound to seem to him or her an inherently paradoxical undertaking: a chauvinistic affirmation of provincialism in the name of cosmopolitanism.

The deeper symmetry here lies in the ensuing possibility of someone who is compelled, in the name of a higher patriotism, to stand alone and to speak in ways that are bound to appear (at least to many of his or her countrymen) decidedly unpatriotic. Cavell says of America: "Those who voice politically radical wishes for this country may forget the radical hopes it holds for itself, and not know that the hatred of America by its intellectuals is only their own version of patriotism."<sup>43</sup> And something similar sometimes holds of modern Greek intellectuals. For, often despite a professed impatience with the excessive celebration of the ancient Greeks, they remain moved by the radical hopes that philosophy in its beginnings, among the Greeks, held for itself – moved by the memory of Socrates, allowing his fellow citizens to put him to death, out of a loyalty to Athens. So even those contemporary Greek philosophers who now refuse to study

the classics of Greek philosophy (on the grounds that they are interested in *doing* philosophy, not merely studying what it once was), they, too, in their own way, are maintaining a faithfulness to Greek thought – helping to keep alive the possibility of its inheritance as philosophy. For philosophy in Greece to become worthy of the title "Greek philosophy" again it must first become philosophy, which means overcoming the apparently dead weight of a distinctively Hellenic philosophical legacy. For philosophy in America ever to become worthy of the title "American philosophy" it must first discover America, which means overcoming the apparent weightlessness of a distinctively American philosophical legacy.

Seferis and Cavell are each attuned to the way in which the predicates "Greek" and "American" respectively denote, at one and the same time, a belonging to a people and a place as well as to an ideal that holds that people together and binds them to their place. For Seferis, as for Cavell, *Greece*, like *America*, is neither merely an objective concept nor merely a subjective one. The difficulty in each case lies in achieving a proper alignment between the objective and subjective dimensions of the concepts in question. The quest to attain such alignment invites opposition from opposite quarters. Those who pride themselves on being "patriots" tend to collapse the concept of "Greece" or "America" into a merely objective one, draining it of its moral force, while imagining they thereby increase its moral weight, representing their causes as if they were the inexorable obligations of all who fall under the (merely objective) concept in question. Those who pride themselves on being "intellectuals" conclude that the only obligations that could accrue from a person's happening to fall under such a (merely objective) concept are bogus ones. But in rejecting such obligations, they take themselves to have uncovered the bankruptcy in the very idea that the word that named that (merely objective) concept could ever denote a legitimate source of obligation. Both sides thereby overlook the concepts *Greece* and *America* that concern the likes of Seferis (and the Greek poets he admires – Sikelianos, Antoniou, Cavafy) and Cavell (and the American authors he admires – Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman). Thus the hopes these authors entertain for Greece and for America are overlooked by those on both ends of the political spectrum. The "patriots" are repelled by the radicalism in their form of patriotism. They are unable to see it for what it is: a form of patriotism. The "intellectuals" notice just that – that it is a form of patriotism – and are repelled by just that, thereby missing just what the "patriots" notice: its radicalism. Unable to hold together the subjective and objective poles of the concepts in question, the "intellectuals" threaten to turn intellectual criticism into an ineffectual oppositionalism without any critical bite, while the "patriots" threaten to turn patriotism into an all too effectual jingoism, ready to take a bite out of just about anything. This leaves their countrymen with a forced choice between a politics of bloodless abstraction and critical detachment or one of bloody reaction and unreflective entrenchment. Given such a forced choice, there is reason to prefer the former over the latter. But must the choice be forced?

The asymmetry between Seferis's and Cavell's respective concerns comes sharply into focus in Seferis's essay comparing the poetry of Constantine Cavafy with that of T.S. Eliot. The comparison provides him with an occasion to reflect on the difference in the mode of relation to tradition that an American and a modern Greek intellectual must each inhabit:

Eliot is very different from Cavafy. . . . Sprung from a line of puritans, Eliot sets out from America. . . . For him tradition is not a matter of inheritance; if you want it, you must work hard to acquire it. An Englishman would not feel like this. But Eliot comes from a rootless place, a place without a past. He feels strongly how paper-thin, how groundless, how unreal and anarchic is, in fact, the order offered by the mechanical civilization of today, his inheritance of material good. He is aware of the drying up of the sources of inspiration. . . .

Cavafy is something different. He comes from one of the intellectual capitals of the world which, though almost submerged, is still great and can boast of being "Greek from ages past" . . . from the capital of an intellectual fatherland which is marked by innumerable graves, but is still immense . . . of this immensity he is the last inhabitant. . . . The "common language of the Greeks" which he inherited and came to develop "like an eavesdropper" is the language of the great masters of Hellenism. He is their last heir.

Cavafy is not burdened by the absence of a tradition. On the contrary, what he feels is the dead weight of a tradition which is thousands of years old and which he has done nothing to acquire, since he "carries in him" this "glorious" literate tradition of the Greeks. He is the solitary of an extreme period of Hellenism, the period of the twentieth century. . . . And the whole question is whether the graves will suck him down or whether he will be able to bring to life with his own blood even so much as a single dry twig in this dead garden – a thing that, for a thousand years before him, no one has yet done in this tradition.<sup>44</sup>

Seferis begins here by touching on an aspect of the problem of America that preoccupies Cavell: "Sprung from a line of puritans, Eliot sets out from America. . . . For him tradition is not a matter of inheritance; if you want it, you must work hard to acquire it." But, by Cavell's lights, Seferis retains here a very European picture of what sort of hard work it is the American must do in order to acquire a culturally resonant poetic voice. Cavell is bound to be suspicious of the choice of Eliot as the prototype of the accomplished American poet. This choice leaves unquestioned the assumption that in order for an American poet to attain accomplishment he must emigrate at least spiritually, if not literally, to Europe.

Seferis's discussion is structured around the following opposition: the American poet is burdened by the absence of a tradition while the Greek poet is not thus burdened. Now there is certainly something right about this formula.

But it stands in need of further qualification if it is to avoid being doubly off the mark. As it stands, it is off the mark about poets such as Walt Whitman or William Carlos Williams or Robert Frost (that is, poets who strove to be *American* poets) for the very reason that it is on target about Eliot (whose ambition was to become not an American, but rather a European, poet). Those who sought to write an American poetry *were* burdened by the presence of a tradition: they labored not in the absence of a tradition, but in the absence of a tradition they were prepared to claim as *theirs*. And, as it stands, the formula is not quite right about the modern Greek poet for reasons Seferis understands only too well: the Greek poet's burden would not be what it is, if the tradition in question were already alive and kicking, rather than in need of resurrection. Seferis is certainly right about the problem of the Greek poet not being that of the American – burdened by the absence of a body of tradition that he or she can claim as his or her own. The modern Greek's problem is that the body that remains his or hers to claim is a corpse. The Greek poet is burdened by the absence of a *living* tradition. Indeed, what Seferis here says about Cavafy's relation to tradition illuminates why the task of forging a contemporary Greek Hellenism is bound to be fraught with difficulty. On the one hand, a poet such as Cavafy carries within him a glorious literary tradition that he has done (and needed to do) nothing to acquire; on the other hand, he fights almost alone to revivify this tradition, to convert it into something more than a dead weight – a thing that no one has done for a thousand years. The question that haunts his entire poetic enterprise is whether he can succeed or whether the graves of his literary forebears will suck him down into the soil of a no longer living tradition.

This resonates with a moment in Emerson's work that Cavell repeatedly underscores: the American scholar will come into existence only when America herself comes into existence by learning to think for herself, where this requires first throwing off all that is no longer living in the ossified edifice of European scholarship. This partial symmetry notwithstanding, it is important to notice how significantly Seferis's account of the loneliness of the modern Greek intellectual differs from Cavell's account of his American counterpart:

[C]ontemporary Greece, attempting, as she is, to find the right attitude towards her ancient tradition, which is known to her exclusively through foreign sources; beginning only now to become conscious even of her recent history, and forced to import the greater part of her intellectual requirements, presents a kind of intellectual landscape in which there are scarcely any discernible landmarks and all around lie tracts of barren and largely unknown country. As for the artist who wishes to live in this land, he is sometimes, if I may say so, very cruelly isolated among these barren tracts, parched up, and withered away. And this is why we see so many at the starting point and so few reaching the end of the course.<sup>45</sup>

Cavell would also be willing to say of America that it presents the appearance of "a kind of intellectual landscape in which there are scarcely any discernible landmarks and all around lie tracts of barren and largely unknown country". But he would want to qualify this in various ways. First, such a remark would be, for Cavell, a remark about how the intellectual landscape of America is apt to appear to an American intellectual – that is, someone who is apt to undervalue America's achievements. (Seferis's remark is not about how the intellectual landscape of Greece is apt to appear to a Greek intellectual, but about how it ought to appear, if seen in proper perspective.) Second, the solution to this problem of apparent barrenness, for Cavell, lies (not in deciding, as most American intellectuals are apt to, that America is "forced to import the greater part of her intellectual requirements", but rather) in dissipating the appearance of barrenness by bringing the actual contours of the landscape properly into view. Third, for Cavell, some of the most significant resources available for accomplishing this task (of dissipating the appearance of cultural barrenness) are to be located in just those products of the culture most passionately consumed, while least valued as expressions of America, not only by its self-professed intelligentsia, but also by its average citizens – for example, American movies.

But why should the American case differ from that of other cultures in this way? Why does the once seemingly serviceable distinction between high and low culture come to the particular sort of grief that it does when one attempts to apply it to the American scene? Is it because, for the most part (that is, with the occasional exception), the highest America has to offer in the way of a distinctively American culture is something that is not all that high? Or is because America was from the beginning founded on an ambition to realign the relation between high and low – between the aristocratic and the popular – so that her high culture cannot remain utterly divorced from (what a certain aristocratic model of culture dictates must be) the "low" and still remain a part of a genuinely American culture?<sup>6</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 George Seferis, "Dialogue on poetry: what is meant by Hellenism?", in *On the Greek Style: Selected Essays on Poetry and Hellenism* [Henceforth OGS], trans. Rex Warner and Th.D. Frangopoulos (Denise Harvey Publisher: Limni, Evia, Greece, 1982), p. 94.
- 2 *The Senses of Walden*, expanded edn (San Francisco, CA: North Point Press, 1981) [henceforth SW], pp. 8–9.
- 3 The attempt to single out such concepts and elucidate their logic apart from any broader empirical inquiry is apt to strike many a serious practicing historian as a peculiar activity – one that is apt to arouse a certain discomfort. Such concepts and the founding myths that presuppose them can breed mythical histories and dangerously distorted forms of national self-understandings (e.g. "Prior to its liberation the Greek race suffered five centuries of uninterrupted enslavement at the hands of the Turk", or "The Vietnam War was a struggle between the guardians of the free world and the forces of totalitarianism"). But a proper acknowledgement of the manifold ways in which myth is repeatedly mistaken for history does not itself constitute a showing either that such concepts are merely pernicious or even that an under-

standing of them is irrelevant to an understanding of history. To understand what one is *qua* modern Greek or American requires, among other things, coming to terms with how one's identity is profoundly shaped by certain national myths.

- 4 Seferis, OGS, p. 86. In his translator's introduction, Rex Warner notes:

The problem of style, of finding the precise expression appropriate to the writer's own insight, to his tradition and to the air which he breathes, is, of course, a problem which must be faced by every writer in every country; but in Greece, which is not only very old but also very new, the problem has been and has been seen to be one of very special urgency and complexity (OGS, p. vi).

- 5 The adjective "Hellenistic" in English is used in scholarly circles to refer exclusively to the first – the most ancient and Greek – of these subsequent Hellenisms. According to this scholarly usage, the so-called "Hellenistic Period" marks the first flowering of that broader cultural phenomenon which Seferis seeks to designate through his more inclusive use of the term 'Hellenism'. Seferis uses (the term here translated as) 'Hellenism' to refer not only to this first extended dissemination of classical Greek culture in the so-called "Hellenistic period", but to subsequent inheritances as well – in, e.g., the Italian Renaissance, the French Academy, the German Enlightenment, etc. To avoid confusion with the (aforementioned scholarly use of the) term "Hellenistic", I will employ "Hellenic" as the adjectival form of Seferis's "Hellenism". Seferis's employment of this latter term – due to the grandiosity of his conception of Hellenism – is hardly uncontroversial. But it has a distinguished pedigree. Jakob Burkhardt writes:

The meaning of Hellenism is that the whole world made use of and laid claim to the [ancient] Greek world; it was to be the medium of spiritual continuity between antiquity, the Roman world and the Middle Ages. . . . Hellenistic Rome was the indispensable basis for the spread of Christianity, and Christianity, apart from its role as a religion, was to be the single bridge destined to unite the old world with its Germanic conquerors. In this whole chain of cause and effect, Hellenism is the most important link (*The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. Sheila Stern (London: Fontana Press, 1998), pp. 282–3).

- 6 "In English the expression 'ancient Greece' includes the meaning 'finished', whereas for us Greece goes on living for better or for worse; it is *in* life, has not expired yet" ("Conversation with Seferis", in Edmund Keeley, *Modern Greek Poetry: Voice and Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 183).
- 7 An insistence on this sort of (social constructionist) paradoxical formulation mostly just leads to confusion. It threatens to leave no room for sense to be made of what is asserted by those who wish to claim that "Erik the Red discovered America". Iceland is full of such people – we do not deny what they claim on behalf of their Viking ancestor, if we hold to the paradoxical formulation (and insist that Erik could not have got there first because America came into existence only with the arrival of Columbus's vessel). More importantly, for my purposes, as we shall see, it obscures what Cavell is after in his own rather different and (in my view, more fruitful, but) equally paradoxical formulations.
- 8 If what the latter sort of social constructionist wants to claim about America were something of which sense could be made, it would apply equally to France or Greece (or, for that matter, to the North Pole and the rings of Saturn).
- 9 I mean to leave it open whether there are other concepts like it (and, if so, how many). Concepts such as *German* or *Japanese* – i.e. concepts that have historically, in the first instance, denoted a *Volk* individuated by lines of racial and ethnic descent –

cannot work the way the concept *American* does. But it is an open question to what extent concepts such as *Australia* – the inception of which also marks the settling of a new world – obey something resembling the logic of America. And, of course, there will be all sorts of intermediate cases of concepts that intertwine in different ways objective geographical or national references with subjective ethical, political or religious dimensions of significance – concepts such as *Iceland* (the name of an ancient land and the world's oldest continuously existing democracy), *Greece* (the name of a young nation and the cradle of Western civilization), *Israel* (the name of an even younger nation and a covenant between God and His people), and so forth.

10 *Michelin Green Guide to Greece*, 4th edn (New York: Michelin Travel Publications, 2001), p. 97.

11 *The Blue Guide to Athens*, 4th edn (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), p. 128.

12 Seferis, OGS, p. 95.

13 The full context of the quotation from Nietzsche runs as follows: "One is no longer at home anywhere; at last one longs for that only place in which one can be at home, because it is the only place one would want to be at home: the Greek world" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 3, eds G. Colli and M. Montinari, *Nachgelassene Fragmente Herbst 1884 bis Herbst 1885* (Berlin: Gruyter), p. 412).

Though Nietzsche himself may not have had the least interest in modern Greece – that is, in a geographically and culturally Greek community that sought to constitute itself as a modern state and take its place as one among the other European nations – it would be a mistake to conclude that the sort of nostalgia he evinces for a lost "Greek world" is irrelevant to an understanding of the dilemma of the modern Greek intellectual that Seferis seeks to explore. The broader classicist enthusiasm in which Nietzsche participated contributed substantially to the formation and subsequent self-understanding of modern Greece – thanks, in particular, to the English incarnation of that enthusiasm, typified in the work of figures such as Byron and Shelley who laid a far greater emphasis than their German counterparts (with the notable exception of Hölderlin) on the notion that (as Terence Spencer nicely puts it): "there existed an urgent moral obligation for Europe to restore liberty to Greece as a kind of payment for the civilization which Hellas had once given to the world" (*Fair Greece Sad Relic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1954), p. vii). Aristides Baltas writes:

The Romantic and more general philhellenic movements played a very important role in gathering support worldwide for the cause of Greek independence and the idea that modern Greeks are direct descendents of Plato and Aristotle was thereby enhanced, forming a very important part of modern Greek identity. By considering himself the direct descendent of such glorious ancestors, a modern Greek could find some kind of ideological support with respect to many problems, both internal and external, that the small and undeveloped Greek society and Greek state were facing (unpublished manuscript).

This philhellenic legacy forms an important background to Seferis's quest for a genuinely "Greek Hellenism". Without it, Seferis's quest would be unable quite as easily to achieve its particular blend of nationality and universality. This moment of universality is nicely highlighted in E.M. Forster's remark "Greece is a spirit which can appear, not only at any time, but also in any land" (*Abinger Harvest* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1964), p. 187).

14 In nineteenth-century Europe, Byron's case – partly due to the extraordinary influence of Byron himself – was at least as typical as Nietzsche's. For Byron, admiration for ancient Hellenic civilization went hand in hand with a felt imperative to visit contem-

porary Greece and experience the site of Hellenism first-hand. And Byron went on to claim that such experience not only enhanced but also transformed one's appreciation of the classical texts themselves: "It is one thing to read *Iliad* at Sigaeum and on the tumuli . . . and another to trim your taper over it in a library – *this* I know" (*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, canto iii, note 19). Those who accepted this claim (i.e. that a full appreciation of the classics depends upon a first-hand experience of Greece) were easily brought around to the view that support for the cause of Greek independence remained an outstanding obligation of the entire civilized world. Shelley expressed the sentiment succinctly in his preface to *Hellas*: "We are all Greeks. . . . [T]he final triumph of the Greek cause is . . . a portion of the cause of civilization and social improvement" (*Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 1977), pp. 408–9). Here we discern a crucial element of the philhellenic background of modern Greek identity – one that finds a counterpart in the Puritan background of modern American identity and allows for the possibility of the parallelism between Seferis's call for a Greek Hellenism and Cavell's call for a discovery of America. In each of these cases, the universal and the national become intertwined to a degree that allows Shelley and Emerson, with equally unabashed metaphysical emphases, respectively to assert "We are all Greeks" and "Anyone can become an American". And here we can also already discern the crucial moment at which the parallelism breaks down: For Shelley, we all *already* are Greeks, whereas, for Emerson, an American is something we must first *become* in order for there to be anything which is America.

15 The shape of this difficulty was already anticipated by Byron:

Fair Greece! Sad relic of departed worth!  
Immortal, though no more; though fallen, great!  
Who now shall lead thy scatter'd children forth,  
And long accustom'd bondage uncreate? . . .  
Oh,! Who that gallant spirit shall resume,  
. . . and call thee from the tomb?

(*Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, II, lxxiii)

In this stanza, we can discern the outlines of Seferis's problematic: Greece is to be re-created by having her present condition uncreated through a new creation. The immortality of Greece is to be recovered only through a prior acknowledgement of her mortality. As things stand, Greece is the name of a sad relic of merely departed worth and of an ideal to which we are obliged to contribute our assistance so that Greece may attain worth once again. Hellas can be resumed and called from the tomb only by our thus enabling Greece to embark upon such a second infancy.

16 Seferis's conception of the task of fashioning a genuinely Greek Hellenism thus requires a delicate balancing of the claims of the past against those of the future. The modern Greek artist and intellectual must learn to live with one eye on the future and one on the past – to retain a fidelity to the past without ceasing to make the future his task. Henry Miller speaks in this connection of Seferis's peculiar "way of looking forwards and backwards" at once (in *The Colossus of Maroussi* (New York: New Directions, 1941), p. 47). In Seferis's own work, this struggle to negotiate between past and future often arises in a manner that recalls the second of Nietzsche's *Untimely Meditations*, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* – as a problem of memory and forgetting: of how best and how much to remember. Thus, for example, in Seferis's poem "Mr Stratis Thalassinos Describes a Man", we find this:

We found ashes. What remains is to discover our life, now that we've nothing left. . . . What can a flame remember? If it remembers a little less than is necessary, it goes out; if it remembers a little more than is necessary, it goes out. If

only it could teach us, while it burns, to remember correctly (*Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (London: Anvil Press, 1995), pp. 74–5).

- 17 One might argue that this is equally true of all of the Balkan states and merely shows that Greece is part of the Balkans. Mark Mazower writes:

[The] states in the Balkans look back to the medieval or classical past for their national roots, and encourage their historians to pass over the period of Ottoman rule as quickly as possible, as though nothing good could have come out of those years" (*The Balkans*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000).

The extent of the Serbian national obsession with the battle of Kosovo in 1389 has recently helped to bring this phenomenon (and the attendant desire to wipe the slate of history clean) to the attention of the rest of the world. It is certainly true that modern Greece suffers from a characteristically Balkan form of amnesia in its relation to her Ottoman legacy. Does this mean that the problematic that Seferis views as peculiar to modern Greece is characteristic of the Balkans as such? Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's communist leader, echoed an oft-repeated view (still echoed by Bulgaria's leaders today) when he proclaimed in 1981: "When at the end of the fourteenth century Bulgaria fell under Ottoman domination, the natural course of her historical development was stopped and reversed" (quoted by Mazower, p. 14). The call here is for a return to and preservation of a moment of continuity with a European past. The accent falls on what Bulgaria has in common with Europe. The guiding myth here is voiced (and endorsed) by Sir John Marriot at the outset of his history of the Eastern Question: "[T]he primary and most essential factor in the problem is the presence, embedded in the living flesh of Europe, of an alien substance. That substance is the Ottoman Turk" (*The Eastern Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1917), p. 3). Operative though this particular (Balkan) myth no doubt continues to be in contemporary Greek consciousness, the founding myth of modern Greece is a different one and has quite a different logic – one that seeks to turn the tables on the condescension of a Sir John Marriot – and, in the process, threatens to designate all cultural contents imported from without (thus not merely from the Orient but also from the Occident) as alien substance. This myth rests on a proclamation far more hubristic than Zhivkov's. For it requires the recovery of a moment of past cultural fertility that radically differentiates Greece from the rest of Europe – one that is the supposed prior condition of the subsequent possibility of Europe. Hence the occurrence of the following sort of phrases in modern Greece's descriptions of itself: "the fountainhead of European culture", "the birthplace of enlightenment", "the cradle of Western civilization", etc. The differences between the two cases notwithstanding, the hubris of such rhetoric matches the hubris of America's rhetoric regarding its unparalleled uniqueness. Without these parallel claims to unparalleledness on the part of modern Greece and America, Seferis's and Cavell's respective problematics would not parallel one another in the various ways that they do.

- 18 *Walden*, Chapter II, paragraph 22; *Walden and Other Writings*, p. 88.

19 Cavell says about Thoreau: "His problem – at once philosophical, religious, literary, and I will argue, political – is to get us to ask the questions, and then to show us that we do not know what we are asking, and then to show us that we have the answer" (SW, p. 47).

20 SW, pp. 8–9.

21 Seferis speaks of the remaining vestiges of a once genuine form of Hellenism in ways that are reminiscent of some of Kierkegaard's characterizations of how someone in Christendom might experience the remaining vestiges of a Christian way of life – for

example of their being "fragments of a life which was once complete, disturbing fragments, close to us, ours for one moment, and then mysterious and unapproachable" (*Delphi*, trans. Philip Sherrard (Hanover: Munich & Ahrbeck, 1963), p. 8).

- 22 Seferis's poem "In the Manner of G.S." begins: "Wherever I travel Greece wounds me" (*Collected Poems*, p. 52).
- 23 Seferis's poem, "The Return of the Exile", contains the following rebuke: "Your nostalgia has created a non-existent country, with laws alien to earth and man" (*Collected Poems*, p. 52).
- 24 OGS, pp. 91–2. The mention here of "those who agitated for the artificially 'purist' language" is a reference to one side in a fractious ongoing debate in modern Greek history – simultaneously conducted in the political, religious and literary arenas – concerning which form of the Greek language is to be used by whom and on what occasions. After the liberation of Greece in 1832, the debate began as to which language to adopt as the official language of the new nation. It was clear that Attic Greek – in its "pure" classical form – was no longer viable but many advocated the use of a form of the language "cleansed" of all foreign elements that was close to Attic and that had been employed in the Greek Orthodox Church; and from this sprang a movement that continues until this day. A supporter of this movement, a *katharevussianos* or "purist" (often a politically right-wing or a religiously conservative Greek – these are not always the same), favors a return to formality in the language and the use of (what has become known as) *katharevousa* – the purifying language. The opposing side in the debate support as the official language of the state (what has become known as) *Dhimotiki* – Demotic Greek, the people's language – the language most people use most of the time. *Dhimotiki* is often held by the purists to be not only replete with "impure words" (i.e. words of foreign origin – most notably from Latin, Italian and especially Turkish, and more recently from English and French) but also to be intellectually and/or spiritually lacking in clarity. (The verb *katherizo* means to cleanse, clear, peel, pare or purify, but also to explain, clarify, settle or clear up.) Since Seferis's time, the populists have won out over the purists in this debate (though *katharevousa* was briefly re-introduced as the official language of the state under the military dictatorship in 1967, until the fall of the dictatorship, in 1974, when *Dhimotiki* was re-established as the official language.) Though essentially a foreign language to vast portions of the Greek population, *katharevousa* remained until very recently (basically until the rise to power of the political party PASOK in the early 1980s) the official language of the law and most spheres of education and the Church. It is still employed today by many doctors, lawyers, professors and even a handful of journalists. In Seferis's time, the debate was a charged one and one in which a poet had no choice but – in every line he or she penned – to take part. Seferis's own position was one of seeking to explode the terms of the debate by insisting on the importance of a modern Greek poetic practice that both sought to cultivate the poetic potentiality of the vernacular and sought to establish forms of continuity with ancient Greek literary traditions.

25

[I]f we consider how much bad art – I mean to say how much academic art – has been produced in the name of the classics, we should be all the more severe in our judgment on those very mediocre people who try to cling tight to the "eternal values" and who deform them like parasites that settle like a blight on the perennial trees (OGS, p. 83).

- 26 But is it less comic than some of the complementary forms of American cultural chauvinism? It is surely less tragic. I will probably never lose a boyhood memory I have, from the time of the Vietnam War, of traveling on an international flight filled



with the sound of a voice with an unmistakably American accent, loudly explaining, to a Cambodian passenger sitting nearby, just why it was that America had to drop bombs on his country in order to make that corner of the world safe for democracy.

- 27 Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard write in the introduction to their edition of Seferis's *Collected Poems*:

[E]ven as one does catch the sound of a richly traditional voice, a voice learned in the best poetry of previous ages, one is also aware that the voice is very much of the present age and that the poet's sensibility couldn't be farther from that of an antiquarian delving nostalgically back into the past in order to escape the bewilderments and afflictions of modern life: the past is always there to shape and illuminate an image of the present (p. xv).

It should be (and Seferis would have been the first to have) acknowledged that not all anti-antiquarian, forward-looking forms of attachment to a Hellenic ideal – ones for which “the past is always there to shape and illuminate an image of the present” – are equally attractive. The point can be made succinctly by citing the following sentence from a letter of 6 August 1942 (shortly after the occupation of Greece by the Axis Powers) in which, after saying how much he envies him his recent visit to the Acropolis, Hitler tells Mussolini: “I perhaps better than anyone else can share your feelings with regard to a place where all we today call human culture found its beginning” (quoted by Mark Mazower in *Inside Hitler's Greece* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 67).

- 28 Emerson, *Journals* (in *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 125. The full context of this remark runs as follows:

We all lean on England, scarce a verse, a page, a newspaper but is writ in imitation of English forms, our very manners and conversation are traditional and sometimes the life seems to be dying out of all literature and this enormous paper currency of Words is accepted instead (ibid., p. 125).

Emerson immediately goes on to indicate a possible source of remedy:

I suppose the evil may be cured by this rank rabble party, the Jacksonism of the country, heedless of English and of all literature – a stone cut out of the ground without hands – they may root out the hollow dilettantism of our cultivation in the coarsest way and the new-born may begin again to frame their own world with greater advantage (ibid., p. 125).

To gauge just how desperate a remedy Emerson thought this – and thus as how great an evil he viewed the hollow dilettantism of America and how eager he was to see the new-born nation begin again to frame its own world – one needs to appreciate just how rank he considered Jackson and his rabble party:

It is said public opinion will not bear it. Really? Public opinion, I am sorry to say, will bear a great deal of nonsense. There is scarce any absurdity so gross whether in religion, politics, science, or manners, which it will not bear. . . . It will bear Andrew Jackson for President (ibid., p. 65).

I know how he feels.

- 29 *SW*, pp. 59–60.

- 30 Thus, though someone can be a Greek citizen and a poet, and yet not be (someone Seferis is prepared to call) a Greek poet, so also someone (e.g. Constantine Cavafy)

can be neither a citizen nor a resident of Greece and yet be (one of the few whom Seferis is prepared to regard as) an exemplary Greek poet.

- 31 Someone attracted to this argument might imagine he or she can find passages in Seferis that support his or her case. Seferis, for example, quotes with admiration the following words from T.S. Eliot's *Tradition and the Individual Talent*:

[T]he historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence. . . . [It] compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. . . . [It is] what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity (quoted by Seferis in “Cavafy and Eliot – a comparison”, *OGS*, p. 150).

A first question here is whether Seferis (or Eliot, for that matter) imagines the writer of philosophy to constitute an exceptional case – the case of someone who, unlike the poet, ought to attempt to exempt himself or herself from the requirement to cultivate such an acute consciousness of his or her own contemporaneity. A second question is whether the cultivation of such a consciousness is in tension with philosophy's aspiration to reason.

- 32 Henry Miller says of Seferis that he was able “to ripen into a universal poet – by passionately rooting himself into the soil of his people” (*The Colossus of Maroussi*, p. 47). Seferis would have been pleased by this compliment. Nonetheless, Miller himself, though no doubt meaning what he says here, and wishing thereby to pay homage to Seferis's achievement, is also evidently unable to overcome his own sense that there is something inherently paradoxical in Seferis's poetic ideal. Miller's various remarks about Seferis in *The Colossus of Maroussi* bear testimony to his inability to comprehend how the aspiration to be a universal poet can be made to harmonize with the aspiration to cultivate a distinctively Greek poetic voice.

- 33 Here we encounter some of the moments of hubris in the founding myth of America that are able to match those in the founding myth of modern Greece (“the fountainhead of European culture”, “the birthplace of enlightenment”, “the cradle of Western civilization”, etc.).

- 34 *OGS*, pp. 91–2.

- 35 *OGS*, pp. 92–4.

- 36 *OGS*, p. 95.

- 37 *SW*, pp. 32–3.

- 38 *OGS*, pp. 95–6.

- 39 *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 181–2.

- 40 Such a recommendation purports to offer a criterion of value – a criterion for condemning or approving intellectual or artistic work. But, Seferis notes, its method of application altogether bypasses the task of serious criticism – of attending to the detail of a work, and thus to its actual intellectual or aesthetic merits or defects (cf. *OGS*, p. 91).

- 41

Maybe a few centuries from now one will judge that all German philosophy derives its real dignity from being a gradual reclamation of the soil of antiquity, and that all claims to “originality” must sound petty and absurd in relation to that higher claim of the Germans to have renewed the bond with the Greeks – the hitherto highest type of man. . . . [W]e are growing more Greek by the day. . . . Herein lies (and has always lain) my hope for the German character! (Nietzsche, *Werke*, op. cit.).



- 42 Aristides Baltas sums up the situation of philosophy in modern Greece from the formation of an independent state (1821) up through the rule of the Junta (1973) as follows:

[A]fter the national revolution of 1821 . . . in the institutions of higher learning created within the tiny Greek state of the time, lip service was . . . paid to philosophy. However . . . there was no native philosophical or theoretical tradition to speak of – that is, a tradition comparable to what had in the meantime been achieved in the West. This gap was filled by an appeal to the glory of Ancient Greece, an appeal blown beyond all proportions, and which, in a sense, continues even today. . . . [A]ll of the humanities were stiflingly dominated by the uncritical glorification which formed the core element of official ideology. . . . Philosophy thus acquired a bad name among students. . . . [S]ick of the uncritical discourse that was taken to be philosophy, students whose interests and talents might have naturally directed them towards philosophy in a more balanced academic environment, chose science and engineering instead (unpublished manuscript).

- 43 *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 345.  
 44 OGS, pp. 154–6. This passage is from Seferis's essay "Cavafy and Eliot – a comparison". The remarks in the passage that occur in quotation marks are quotations drawn from Cavafy's work.  
 45 OGS, pp. 96–7.  
 46 The text is drawn from a larger manuscript titled "The concept of America." Explanations of some of the distinctions and terminology employed here (e.g., the distinction between subjective and objective concepts) can be found in my "Cavell and the Concept of America" – a further excerpt from the same manuscript – collected in *Contending with Stanley Cavell*, edited by Russell Goodman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 55–81.

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