

attacks as a form of thuggery, though the remedy on which he settled—assuming an alias to join the exchange in his own defense—was as bad as the disease. Eventually, he was found out. He lost his blog but gained a book contract, and *Against the Machine* is the result.

Siegel's thesis is that blogs, YouTube, Wikipedia, and other recent upsurges of so-called user-generated content are culturally harmful. Those who think otherwise he dismisses as "Internet boosters" who respond to skepticism about this new smorgasbord by "crying 'free speech' and 'democracy' and 'don't fight the future.'" Many advocates of the Internet are, of course, more thoughtful than Siegel's straw men—and in neglecting to engage them, he shows that the uncharitable style of online argument he decries is no more appealing in print.

Nonetheless, Siegel has acute questions about the role that commerce plays in Internet culture. Others have cited the emergence of free resources such as the volunteer-written Wikipedia and open-source software as evidence that the Internet shrinks the domain of commerce, but Siegel says that's only half the story. These new projects encourage people to see economic value in their leisure pursuits. Those who post videos of themselves on YouTube, for example, regard attention itself as a valuable commodity; to them, "doing their thing and doing business in the marketplace are the very same activity."

In Siegel's eyes, this phenomenon owes something to books such as Malcolm Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2000), which argue that life "is wholly driven by commercial concerns." He blames Gladwell's book for creating the trend that it merely describes, namely, "populariz[ing] the idea of popularity as the sole criterion of success. Once the 'tipping point' became an established concept, the easy hijacking of the Internet by commercial interests was almost a foregone conclusion."

It's debatable how far this trend has extended—do online popularity hounds really think they are "doing business" in a "marketplace"?—but Siegel is right that we have traveled some distance down the road of conflating usefulness with intrinsic value.

The mindset that makes the most sense online, in other words, may threaten "our freedom to live apart from other people's uses for us, and from ours for other people."

But if economics has been stretched to cover notions such as popularity and pleasure, and love, then economic terms are no longer purely pecuniary. Siegel fears that we may come to view love as an act of commerce, but when the two are blended, perhaps we will recognize commerce itself as more humane. The social goods that can be found in markets—the nobility of self-reliance, the creativity and freedom inherent in launching a new venture, the solid fairness of an even exchange—seem to strike Siegel as bastardized virtues, because commerce itself is morally suspect. Then again, perhaps the isolation of commerce as a neatly separate sphere of human activity—an isolation whose end this book laments—will turn out to be something we are just as well off without.

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## Art and Statecraft

Reviewed by Christopher Merrill

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN literature and politics is necessarily fraught. This is especially true for writers engaged in matters of state. If writers try to articulate questions central to the human condition, diplomats must provide answers. The responsibilities of these vocations almost inevitably conflict, for the writer's commitment to truth may test the diplomat's instructions. But a precious few have managed to excel in both spheres. The tradition of literary diplomats reached its zenith in the early 1960s, when three Nobel Prizes for Literature were awarded to writers who had also served as diplomats—Saint-John Perse of France, Ivo Andric of Yugoslavia, and George Seferis of Greece.

War is the ultimate test of diplomatic skills and literary vision. And World War II, which for politi-

### A LEVANT JOURNAL.

By George Seferis.  
Translated and edited  
by Roderick Beaton. Ibis  
Editions. 173 pp. \$16.95

cal reasons marked the end of the diplomatic careers of Perse and Andric, is the starting point for *A Levant Journal*, Seferis's account of his days and nights in Egypt with the Greek government in exile and then as ambassador to Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Britain. Translated by Roderick Beaton, who published an acclaimed biography of Seferis, these selections from Seferis's notebooks, from 1941–44 and 1953–56, offer a portrait not only of critical moments in places that continue to make headlines, but also of a singularly talented writer whose grasp of contemporary issues—the fallout from the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, for example, or the consequences of Cypriot independence—was informed by his historical sensibility. *A Levant Journal* is that rare book that will appeal to aesthetes and politicians alike.

Writing was how Seferis maintained a difficult balance in diplomatic circles. In one entry Seferis bitterly notes, “Whether the entire population of my country is wiped out, or only half of it, will now depend upon the idiocies of the British generals.” Elsewhere he confides that “seriousness and politics are two perfectly separate things.” Yet in the poems that emerge in these pages, often from observations of simple things like water lilies, Seferis yokes his artistic insight and long experience in the drawing rooms of power. “Whatever the hands of man take up with love is holy,” he notes. His writings, for example.

What counters his despair at the progress of the Second World War is his determination to record without sentimentality his impressions and encounters. Here is a delightful sketch of Churchill on a visit to Cairo in 1942:

In the ballroom, . . . hunched up like Rodin's *Thinker*, except for his head that was watching and following everything, sat Churchill. He wore mauve dungarees; held in his hand, like a stubby pencil, was a long cigar. With all this crowd around him, he looked somehow smaller, as though at the far end of an enormous lecture-theater. Then he spoke and came closer. At the end, when it was time for questions, some reporter wearing a fez asked him what he thought of Rommel.

“That is the way of generals,” he replied, “sometimes to advance, sometimes to retreat. Why, no one knows . . .”

*A Levant Journal* is also lined with departures, sometimes hastily arranged, and in the pages devoted to the poet's ambassadorial duties, which required that he be constantly on the move, he exhibits a keen understanding of history's changing course. As befits a man whose life was marked by exile—from his native Smyrna, when Greece and Turkey exchanged populations in 1923; from Athens during the German occupation, and again during the military junta that began in 1967—he had a better grasp than most of the consequences of the dislocations that would shape the region in which he served.

“Impossible to imagine the human capacity for making a mess of things,” he laments. But in these intimate writings, Seferis bears witness to our folly with such care and precision that we may begin to understand some of our own mad impulses. And if this is a liberating truth, it is of a piece with his life and work, which is why his funeral, in 1971, brought throngs of people into the streets of Athens, in defiance of the junta. They sang a forbidden song based on one of his poems, with the policemen looking on.

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#### CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

## Back on Track?

Reviewed by Mark Reutter

IN 1983, JOHN STILGOE published *Metropolitan Corridor*, an important book with fresh insights on the spatial and social impact of railroads on 19th-century America. *Train Time* is billed as a sequel to that work. According to Stilgoe, railroads

#### TRAIN TIME:

Railroads and the Imminent Reshaping of the United States Landscape.

By John R. Stilgoe.  
Univ. of Virginia Press.  
281 pp. \$29.95