

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

are on the cusp of ending the tyranny of highways in the United States and will reclaim their birthright as the premier mover of people, freight, and mail.

“When the railroad returns, not *if*,” Stilgoe declares, America will be transformed. “Return [of train travel] will alter everyday life more dramatically than the arrival of personal computers, Internet connections, or cell phones.” His certainty about a rail renaissance is surprising. Passenger trains are few and far between today; in 2005, Americans traveled 900 miles by private vehicle for every mile by intercity rail. The disconnect between Stilgoe’s

Are we witnessing “the final, sickly sweet blossoming of the automobile”?

vision and reality is just evidence of “the final, sickly sweet blossoming of the automobile,” he argues, which only “masks the desperation

of real estate developers terrified that people will not buy the last of the structures built according to automobile thinking.”

Some books are of interest because they reveal a mindset that is part of the problem that the author is trying to correct. So far, train advocates have been unsuccessful in wresting America’s heart from SUVs and three-car garages. Despite \$3-a-gallon gasoline and worry about global warming, debate over transportation priorities hasn’t figured in this year’s presidential campaigns. Convincing taxpayers that trains could save them money and improve the environment is a subtle educational task.

Stilgoe, a historian of landscape at Harvard, swings a sledgehammer against anyone who does not share his opinions. And some of his opinions are idiosyncratic. In 1962, he writes, the wise men of the Kennedy administration recognized the “futility” of building more highways, but they were thwarted by Lyndon B. Johnson and his Great Society program. (For the record, today’s Northeast Corridor got its start with the 1965 High Speed Ground Transportation Act, signed by Johnson, who also spurred the development of Washington, D.C.’s Metro subway.) More often, the arguments are simplistic. Amtrak, Stilgoe declares, was organized as an “elegant means of keeping railroad innovation under the control of a Congress controlled

by road and airline industries—and by the military.”

After exhausting his prophecies and conspiracy theories, Stilgoe addresses various aspects of train service with more success. There are interesting chapters about the poor state of mail delivery after the Post Office Department abandoned railway transportation in the 1960s and the revival of freight traffic in the past 20 years with the growth of global trade. But the book sidesteps the crucial issue of how we get from here to there—from Amtrak’s threadbare service (outside the Boston-Washington Northeast Corridor) and freight railroads’ clogged infrastructure to 200-mile-per-hour passenger trains and just-in-time product shipments. Or, more realistically, how we can build strategic rail links, ranging from 50 to 200 miles, that complement highways and relieve the worst of traffic congestion and pollution.

Stilgoe forsakes footnotes and offers instead a laundry list of sources at the end of each chapter. Inexplicably, he fails to cite the work of a number of recognized experts, including Maury Klein, Albro Martin, Joseph Vranich, and a forebear, John W. Barriger III. Back in 1956, Barriger published *Super-Railroads for a Dynamic American Economy*, in which he asked why “super-highways and super-markets and super-everything-else [are] part of modern America’s burgeoning economic life, while there are no super-railroads.” That question has yet to be adequately answered.

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## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

### Turn That Smile Upside Down

Reviewed by Sarah L. Courteau

ADD TO OIL GUZZLING, OUT-size coffee drinks, and celebrity malfunctions another American addiction. Happiness, if we’re to believe Eric G. Wilson, is “an obsession that could well lead to a sudden extinction of the

**AGAINST HAPPINESS:**  
In Praise of Melancholy.

By Eric G. Wilson.  
Sarah Crichton  
Books/FSG. 166 pp. \$20