

a book that changed me

When did you first read it? In my first year at university, when I was 16. A postgraduate student whom I met in a book shop recommended it to me. I was always keen to have tips from people on what was good to read, and after I had looked at the first few pages I was hooked, or, more accurately, spellbound.

Why did it strike you so much? Because of the grandeur of its conceptions, its sweeping vision, its combination of boundless horizons with a startling sudden intimacy. I encountered in it a magnificence of language such as I never knew existed, but had always secretly hoped might exist. It was like journeying to Mount

Olympus and coming into contact with the Greek gods, and listening to their melodious and incomparable speech. There is not a word out of place in this vast poem, not a phrase which errs, not an image which falls short of the superb, of the miraculous.

Have you re-read it? If so, how many times? Many times. It is too rich to read in its entirety. Like an endless row of delicious *crème brûlées*, one must consume it slowly. One might as well try and swallow the entire Milky Way in one gulp as read the whole of *Seamarks* at a sitting. I continually re-read



ROBERT TEMPLE
on St-John Perse's
'Seamarks'

Perse's other works, particularly *Chronique*, *Éloges*, and *Vents*. The early long poem, *Anabasis*, translated three times by T S Eliot, is less interesting; all the manuscripts of Perse's middle period were seized and burnt by the Nazis so no trace of them remains. Perse received the Nobel Prize for Literature, but he is little-known in England.

Does it feel the same as when you first read it? Better. It gets better every time. When you listen to Bach, you hear more every year. When you read Perse, you encounter a growing entity, like sprawling phosphorescent vegetation which cannot be cut back, a perpetually expanding and luxuriat-

ing imagination, which is alive. It is not a poem, it is a *being*. **Do you recommend it or is it a private passion?** It could not be less private. It is a majestic fanfare, it roars with joy and life like ten orchestras (all with extra brass, extra strings, expanded brass sections).

Robert Temple's latest books are 'The Sirius Mystery' published by Century at £16.99 and 'Aesop: The Complete Fables' which he and Olivia Temple have translated, published by Penguin at £5.99.