

7. Odysseás Elytis, “Of Ephesus”

Over the course of his long life (1911-1996), Odysseás Elytis published seventeen collections of poetry, wrote numerous essays, created and exhibited works of art, and held senior positions in a number of European cultural organizations. A portion of his “To Áxion Estí” (“Worthy It Is”) was set to music by Mikis Theodorakis and became the popular protest song “Ena to Chalidoni” (“The Solitary Swallow”). In 1979 Elytis won the Nobel Prize for Literature, the second Greek poet to be so honored (following Giorgos Seferis) in the space of sixteen years. In the last year of his life, Elytis wrote “Of Ephesus,” a challenging poem infused with Heraclitean ideas.

It will be useful to begin our discussion of this work by noting some general features of Elytis’ poetry. The first and most striking of these is the presence of countless bizarre juxtapositions—as in “silver wreaths and green fins,” “an earth violet blue with wild manes of tempest,” “luminous gooseberries and dark seaweed spaces,” “the women’s veils and the long procession of the unjustly lost,” “a spindle of flowers in the waves of musical voices,” “with reflections of metal on their tyrannized foreheads,” etc.¹ As Marinos Pourgouris 2011, 25-26 explained in connection with Elytis’ early poems:

They present images in a succession that resists a logical understanding, and aim to stimulate the senses rather than to challenge the mind...Nature interacts with the senses so that the distinction between the body and its surroundings is completely obliterated. What remains is a dreamlike interaction of the senses with the things of the world.

Elytis 1981, 10 offered this explanation:

¹ Selections from Elytis’ poetry are taken primarily from *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis: Revised and Expanded Edition*, trans. Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris. Introduction and notes by Jeffrey Carson (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); hereafter cited as CP. Each of these phrases appears in Elytis’ “The Elegies of Jutting Rock” (CP 509-37), but equally jarring combinations appear in poems from other periods of his career.

The success of a poem's language depends on the way in which it combines certain words. We do not think of this in everyday speech...There is no sense of surprise. In a poem, however, one should have the surprise of expression. Your reaction should be: 'Look, no one has thought before of juxtaposing these two particular words!' Suddenly, we feel as if an electric current had passed through us. In everyday speech this current is absent.²

In this respect Elytis followed the lead of his countryman Andreas Embirikos and the Surrealist writers and artists Elytis came to know during his extended stays in Paris.³ In his first Surrealist Manifesto, for example, André Breton 1924, 26 stated that "Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought."⁴

A second distinguishing feature is the repeated invocation of the waters, terrain, *flora*, *fauna*, religion, and history of the Aegean region. In Section II of "The Little Seafarer", Elytis explains how he came to use the Greece of his personal experience as a basis on which to enter a second realm, a world created through the use of 'gem-like' words:

I resided in a country that came from the other, the real one, as the dream comes from from the facts of my life. It too I named Greece and I drew it on paper so I could look at it. It seemed so little, so elusive. As time went by I kept trying it out: with certain sudden earthquakes, certain old thoroughbred storms. I kept changing the position of things to rid them of all value. I studied the Vigilant and the Solitary⁵ that I might be found worthy of making brown hillcrests, little Monasteries, fountains. I even produced an entire orchard full of citrus trees that smelled of Heraclitus and Archilochus. But the fragrance was so strong I got scared. So I very slowly took to setting words like gems to cover this country I love. Lest someone see its beauty. Or suspect that maybe it does not exist (CP, 424).

A third, related feature is the frequent affirmation of the existence of a "second reality," "higher realm," or "Paradise" accessible through the poet's sensibility. In "The Two Paradises," Elytis contrasts the paradise "in the skies" with "another one, right here" that contains:

² See also Friar, 1975, 703-11.

³ See Elytis' "Report to Andreas Embirikos" in Elytis 1999, 11-40.

⁴ See also Jouanny 1975, 685-9.

⁵ Practices characteristic of the reclusive religious life.

Seas and cliffs and mountains tall
 it's like these and contains them all
 Violets and lilies bloom within
 here Seraphim strum mandolins
 There are girls here sweet and crazy
 with the devil in their eye
 It's like these and contains each one
 plunge in see how your luck will run (CP, 643).

Elytis elsewhere acknowledged that “There is a search for paradise in my poetry. When I say ‘paradise’, I do not conceive of it in the Christian sense. It is another world which is incorporated into our own, and it is our fault that we are unable to grasp it...”⁶

The fourth distinguishing feature of Elytis’ poetry is its echoing of language and ideas found in earlier Greek literature, both secular and religious, which results in a kind of Hellenic conversation across the centuries. As Artemis Leontis 1995, 213 explained with reference to The “Gloria” section of Elytis’ *To Áxion Estí*:

By juxtaposing modern, Byzantine, and ancient, vernacular and classical, small and great, in unlikely linguistic combinations, “The “Gloria” suggests that the Greek language is able to invoke the sky and sea by their real, undiluted names, *uranós* “sky” and *thálassa* “sea,” exactly as Sappho did, exactly as Romanós⁷ did, for thousands of years, and only thus to view in truth the blue of the aether or to hear in truth the roaring of the sea.

Each of these four features is evident in “Of Ephesus”⁸:

Vineyards run free beside me and the sky
 Remains unbridled. Conflagrations exchange pinecones and an
 Ass departed goes high up the hill for a bit of cloud
 Something must be happening on Saint Heraclitus' day
 That not even noses can diagnose
 It is the tricks of the unshod wind who hangs on to the edge
 Of fate's nightgown and is about to leave us exposed in the chamois's open air
 Secretly I leave with all my stolen booty in my mind

⁶ Quoted in Ivar and Astrid Ivask 1975, 641.

⁷ Romanós the Melode, a 6th-century Byzantine hymnist.

⁸ From *West of Sorrow* (1995) in *CP*, 541-42. I have followed the punctuation and capitalization in the translation by Carson and Sarris. References to the Greek text of “Of Ephesus” are to the version printed in Elytis 2012, 56 and 58.

into the sky, to rise toward the heights...” The poet reflects on what the winds of fate¹¹ have fashioned for him, and admits to feeling exposed in a precarious location.¹² He claims to “leave with all my stolen booty in my mind,” celebrating not with candles and chandeliers, but with a flower anemone in place of a wedding ring’s diamond—perhaps all references to a life devoted to the art of poetry.¹³ We are reminded of ancient places and things—of the ancient city of Ephesus, the gravesites of generations of uncles and grandfathers, temples, theaters, streams flowing to the sea, gravestones bearing chiseled names¹⁴, orchards of orange trees¹⁵, and an especially obscure reference to “awnings before they are spread and others afloat suddenly the colt-trotting/ Of lost poles”—perhaps a reference to a procession held on a saint’s day.¹⁶ The poet appears to take some comfort from the continuity of the present with the past¹⁷, and from the fact that “There will be letters. Men shall read and history/ Again shall grasp its own tail,” perhaps an allusion to the capacity of the ancient Greek language to “spell reality.” These connections hold, however, only so long as our experience of the world remains unconstrained—so long as there are “galloping vineyards”¹⁸ and an “unbridled sky.” This last point appears to be

¹¹ In Elytis’ poems, winds represent forces of change, as here: “the unshod wind who hangs on to the edge/ Of fate’s nightgown” (cf. “Of the spellbinding wind with dark blue lips” in *Sun the First VI* (“Dark Blue”) in *CP*, 102).

¹² Cf. “exposed in the chamois’ open air.” The chamois is a species of mountain goat-antelope, as in “chamois of the rocks’ air-draught stretch / Their rough necks” (“Stepchildren” in *CP*, 260).

¹³ Elytis 1994, 137 wrote of the poet Arthur Rimbaud: “You don’t have to be wise to lay flowers on the grave of the wise. Especially when you also feel the need for some anemonies among the profuse gladioli and dahlias.”

¹⁴ Cf. “They carve my stone with a bitter chisel” from Psalm III of *Worthy It Is* (*CP*, 143).

¹⁵ A frequent characterization of his homeland (cf. “...that time when they were full of orange trees and speaking waters of the homeland” in “Diary of an Invisible April” (*CP*, 399).

¹⁶ In *The Little Seafarer* Elytis writes of “Priests and boys, in boats, carrying Seraphim-icons on poles” (*CP*, 495).

¹⁷ Elytis relates how “... an endless row of ancestors, grim, much-suffering, proud, moved my every muscle. Oh yes, it is no little thing to have the centuries on your side, I said continuously, and proceeded” (*CP*, 680).

¹⁸ Cf. “Vineyards descending in rows with a galaxy of green,” from “Elytonesos” (*CP*, 283).

stressed above all others—the importance of a fresh, childlike¹⁹ awareness of the world: “What counts most is/ For the earth's scent of heather maples and onions lost even by hounds/ To be restored to its idiomatic tongue.” Through its multiple topographical references and verbal echoes²⁰, “Of Ephesus” offers a litany of unique features of the Aegean world.²¹

In the midst of the celebration, however, Elytis speaks of “groping,” “seeking,” and unsolved mysteries. In an earlier poem, “The Almond of the World,” he had similarly written: “...*the almond of the world/ is deeply hidden/ and still unbitten/ a myriad possibilities shudder/ around us which we idiots don't/ even approach*” (CP, 379).²² A similar pessimism is sounded in the “Exit” of “The Little Seafarer”:

BUT INCOMPREHENSIBLY

no one hears. The burning bird of Paradise goes ever higher. And all the silver virgins count for nothing. The voice was turned elsewhere and the eyes remained unmiracled.

Helpless are the eyes (CP, 508)²³

Weighed down by this pessimism, Elytis turned to the teachings of Heraclitus to understand how under certain circumstances it might be possible to gain access to a higher reality. So much is evident in the poem's concluding line, “*a child's kingship*”, which Elytis emphasizes through the

¹⁹ In “The Method of Therefore” Elytis speaks of the poet as one who seeks to achieve a child's view of the world: “Let's not forget that [the poet] tramples over piles of dead bodies before he becomes worthy of a living child; that it's for this reason that he strives throughout his life; for the child of his own voice. Lord, how difficult” (1999, 50). Cf. also *The Rhos of Eros* (CP, 598).

²⁰ The onomatopoeic effect of “curly ‘gar’ and ‘ara’ waters” is evident in the Greek *sgourà touì gàr kai touì Èra Rheoumena*, that is to say *gargara*: “gargling”). Cf. “streams purred all day” in “The Axion Esti” (CP, 129). Evident also is the alliteration in the penultimate line *Mè kokórous kai mè koukounária kai mè kuanoús chartaetoús sēmaies*. Here again, Elytis seeks not so much to describe reality as to recreate it.

²¹ The term “litany” is not to be understood loosely. For a discussion of the liturgical aspects of Elytis' poetry, see Roilis 2004, 121-6.

²² Elytis also writes: “...maybe it's because/ I don't know reading and writing all alone/ I am hanging/ since Heraclitus' time/ like *the almond of the world/* from a branch of the North Aegean...” (from *Three Poems under a Flag of Convenience* (CP, 384).

²³ Capitalization and italics as in Carson and Sarris.

use of italics, thereby reinforcing the earlier reference to the world remaining “unbridled as children want it.” The phrase occurs in Heraclitus fragment B 52:

A lifetime is a child playing, pieces on a blackboard, a child’s kingship.²⁴

The point of the remark, at least with respect to Heraclitus, appears to be that what from one perspective might be regarded as a matter of supreme importance can from a second perspective be regarded as a matter of little importance, one of several variations of the Heraclitean doctrine of the unity of the opposites. Here a human lifetime (*aiôn*) is equated with a child’s playing (*pais paidzôn*) in so far as human activities are childlike when compared with those of the divine (similarly, Heraclitus B 79: “A man hears himself called silly by a divinity as a child does by a man”). The kingship is said to belong to a child, which is to say that the most powerful human political institution can be viewed as childish when compared with the power which controls the cosmos. In between the two comparisons, almost certainly intended to go with the phrases on both sides, are the pieces on a blackboard (*pesseuôn*), evocative of both a child’s game and the political machinations of rulers. Elytis appears to be quoting Heraclitus’ phrase not to discount the significance of human affairs in comparison with divine ones, but rather to alert his readers to the possibility that the world as experienced by children may have a better claim to reality than the one we construct as adults.²⁵

A second, parallel reference to Heraclitus appears in these lines:

Something must be happening on Saint Heraclitus' day
That not even noses can diagnose (*mête oi rhînes diagignôskoun...*)

The likely source here is Heraclitus fragment B 7:

²⁴ As in DK: *aiôn pais esti paidzôn, pesseuôn; paidos hê basilêiê.*

²⁵ Pourgouris 2011, 86 comments: “Poetry, like children, innocently discloses a truth that is revolutionary in its suggestion of an unconventional view of the world. The greatest influence of Freud on Elytis is precisely the disclosure of a world that lies beyond constructed reality.”

If all existing things were to become smoke, noses would diagnose them.²⁶

While there are multiple interpretations of this remark, on one plausible reading Heraclitus is asserting (in a typically cryptic manner) that our sense faculties afford us only a limited insight into the nature of things. If all existing things were to become smoke—although there is no reason to suppose this could ever be the case—then under those circumstances our noses would serve as an adequate guide to the nature of things. However, as things presently stand, since the cosmos consists of far more than just smoke, noses can tell us little about the way things are. When read in this way, B 7, like B 52, contributes to the Heraclitus’ disparagement of our faculties of sense perception as unreliable guides to the nature of reality—“bad witnesses” as he calls them in B 107—unless they are guided by a proper understanding of the *logos*.

The reference to “St. Heraclitus” in connection with both B 52 and B 7 supports this interpretation: in noting the limited capacities of our sensory faculties, and in pointing out how what counts as a superior reality from one perspective may count as an inferior one from another, Heraclitus, as Elytis understood him, was seeking to alert his audience to the possible existence of a higher realm of being. Elytis 1999, 60 identifies Heraclitus, Plato, and Jesus as guides on the path from here to “the beyond, that second reality”:

From Heraclitus to Plato and from Plato to Jesus Christ, we can discern this “bond” that, in various forms, comes down to the present day and says roughly the same thing: that this world contains, and the elements of this world can recreate, the other world, the world “beyond,” that second reality superimposed on this one, in which we live contrary to nature. It is a reality that is ours by right but that we fail to attain because of our own incompetence.²⁷

²⁶ DK: *ei panta ta onta kapnos genoito, rhines an diagnoien*.

²⁷ Pourgouris 2011, 117 understands the pursuit of an alternative reality to be one aspect of Elytis’ “Solar Metaphysics”: “[Heraclitus’] influence on Elytis in relation to the theory of Solar Metaphysics concentrates on three major themes: the existence of an alternative reality, the synthesis of opposites, and the view of the sun as an ethical symbol.”

In poem XV of *The Little Seafarer*, Elytis had mentioned a number of ways in which opposite qualities line up against each other:

Willy-nilly, we constitute not only the matter but also the instrument of an eternal exchange between what preserves us and what we give to it so that it preserves us: the black, which we give, so that it be given back to us as white, the mortal as everliving. And we owe to the duration of a flash of light our possible happiness. (CP, 477)

The unity of black and white invites comparison with Heraclitus' criticism of Hesiod who "did not know day and night, that they are one" (B 57), while the linking of a flash of light with happiness is reminiscent of Heraclitus B 118: "a flash of light is a dry soul, wisest and best." Elytis 1999, 60 also called attention to the relationship between the opposites in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "In as much as conscience is cleared and filled with light, its dark spots give way and vanish, leaving gaps that—just as with the laws of physics—are filled by their opposites... Has not Heraclitus already spoken of *the finest harmony coming from opposites?*" In a letter to Kimon Friar written some years earlier, Elytis 1974, 16 explained how, during the bleak war years, Heraclitus' doctrine of the unity of the opposites had helped him "to think in poetic terms." Here again he connects his understanding of Heraclitus with views promoted by the French Surrealists:

It seemed to me scandalous that, confronted by such sudden suffering and the dark and unknown future both of my country and of my personal fate, I should at all be disposed to think in poetic terms. But the sudden contrary turn given my habitual life began slowly to take on before my eyes the symbolic significance of those contraries which a poet undertakes, when he functions truly, in order to reach the one identical desired goal. Through the way up and down of Herakleitos, it became necessary for me to proceed toward that spear-point where life and death, light and darkness ceased to be contraries. Surrealism, from which I had once begun, had proclaimed the same thing to me through the mouth of André Breton.²⁸

²⁸ For Heraclitus' influence on Breton, see Eburne 2000, 180-204.

Thus in “Of Ephesus,” as often elsewhere in his poetry, Elytis fashioned a series of striking juxtapositions intended to disrupt our ordinary experience of the world and spark a vision of an alternative reality. In the process he drew heavily on Heraclitus’ affirmation of the unity of the opposites, the representation of fire as the basic power that rules the cosmos, and the conviction that beyond the world we know through sense experience lies a second, higher reality.