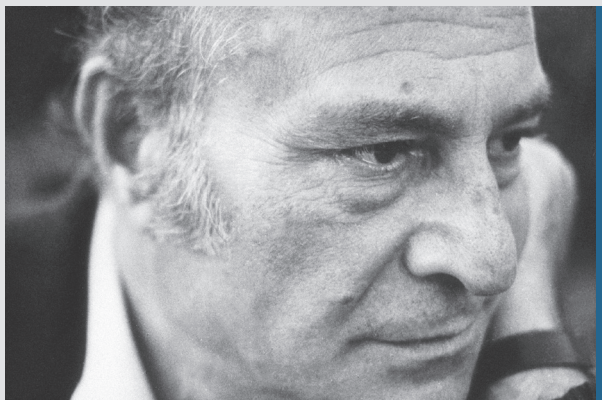




ELYTIS' GREECE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF HIS PROSE WORKS
SELECTED AND EDITED BY IOULITA ILIOPOULOU

TRANSLATED BY DAVID CONNOLLY

IKAROS

ELYTIS' GREECE

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ON ELYTIS' GREECE

*So beautiful a homeland and strange
like that allotted me I know no other.*

THE SOVEREIGN SUN

“Where I find support is in the Greece of Solomos, in *in the future, robed in boundless glory*”, Odysseus Elytis had said in an interview in 1972 thereby differentiating the current Greece –the Greek state of any given period– from the diachronic one. The distance separating the one from the other has also to do with our own diachronic responsibility; the responsibility of the citizen, of the individual in his private, social or public role, whatever that may be.

The bicentennial anniversary of the birth of the modern Greek state offers an

opportunity for study, reflection, *thought and dream*. It is also an opportunity for re-defining terms and for reassessing events and actions. In such a process, Odysseus Elytis' penetrating thought is invaluable, not only as a reference and as a source of hundreds of apophthegms, but also as a revealing and persistent investigation into the roots of meanings. His thought is an unfettered intellectual force that was never afraid of opposing current opinion and that constantly sought the truth. Sometimes speaking with the immediacy of words which daily construct and shape our views of reality and sometimes with the allegory of a personal poetic grammar, Odysseus Elytis digs up ideological ground, which, though appearing familiar, is shown to conceal what to our eyes are virtually unknown treasures.

He himself admits in “Things public and private” that he likes to “discover the Greece that pre-exists within him and who is little concerned whether this corresponds to reality. There’s plenty of time for reality to follow. Before this, it has first to be created by thought.”

In Elytis’ work, Greece, homeland, country, Hellenism, language, art, Aegean, politics, nation, state, are words which are deeply etched in the mind and which often wound the soul, but which are also the canvas for our activity. Words as expectations of a country, of our country, half-real, half-imaginary – “a second Greece of the world above”, as he called it in *The Little Mariner*. Words as the faint lines of our fingerprints.

With deep foundations in its language, with lofty aesthetics; the aesthetics of its

natural beauty and of the way in which its people incorporated these into its creations, the numerous hardships in our history, with the uniqueness of its island culture, and yet with inequalities, with sharp contrasts between virtues and vices, Greece emerges from Elytis' work as a peculiar material and spiritual entity, endless in terms of time, tiny in terms of space: "the golden land of Littleness which renders useless the value of number; but also the black land of Inequality, where no destiny is cut to the initially given measure."

His poetic discourse is priceless, his prose is invaluable. In the texts of his two books, *Cards on the Table* and *Carte Blanche*, but also in his collection of interviews, *And Furthermore*, Elytis fashions another form of patriotic discourse in which discovery supplants description, in which bold judgement sur-

passes established understanding, in which the poetic act dominates every actual standpoint. He clarifies, urges, denounces and offers us Ariadne's thread for a voyage in Greece and in its related concepts.

In seven sections, which are not strictly separated, because in terms of their subject matter the one often overlaps the other, I have arranged one hundred and thirty selected passages from Elytis' prose writings: a) Greece, b) the history of Hellenism, c) the Greek language, d) the Greek sea – the Aegean, e) Greek nature, f) Greek art, g) Greek reality. These constitute the central themes around which the notional meandering over the pathways of ideas and sensibilities of our country proceeds; our country, that is, as it was seen and understood by Elytis, who believed that neither geography, nor even history as purely teaching, or nationality

as a given attribute could help us to know. History, yes, essential knowledge which becomes indelible when and “as you discover it emerging within you, from your personal experience, which events or objects of art simply recall and illustrate”. Language, yes, but not merely as a means of communication but as a powerful mechanism that “happens to be an instrument of magic and a vehicle for moral values”, as Elytis writes.

Having himself lived through the greater part of the twentieth century, he experienced the country’s history, highlighted the importance of the linguistic identity but also of the physical character of the land, with the lucidity and passion of a man who was not afraid to feel and declare himself a Greek “organically, psychologically, sensuously, invincibly!” And from here, from this beleaguered yet *glorious threshing-floor*

of Solomos, Elytis spoke Greek to the universal human-being.

Let us, then, reflect on “the worlds that we defended, the worlds we fought and let’s not hesitate *for one small moment* to review our endeavours”, as Odysseus Elytis wrote, speaking, of course, about poetry; and, in reviewing it, he at the same time detected its new beginning. I am borrowing these words of his for a present-day call to reflect on, to rethink, as we often say, the two hundred years of modern Hellenism but also the millennia of diachronic Greece, not so much to celebrate as to connect with a future the significance of which will depend on us and the multiple possibilities of which were systematically made evident by the discourse of Odysseus Elytis.

Ioulita Iliopoulou



1970

ELYTIS' GREECE

*I called love the rose's flourish the ray
That by itself straight finds the heart
Greece that stands assuredly on the sea
Greece that ever transports me
To bare snow-celebrated mountains.*

SUN THE FIRST, III

GREECE

*I inhabited a land that came out of the other,
the real one, like a dream out of the events
in my life. I called this land Greece too and
sketched it on paper that I might see it. It seemed
so small; so elusive.*

“Anoint the eminent”, II, THE LITTLE MARINER

O YES, IT'S NO SMALL thing to have the **ages** on your side, I kept saying and went on.

“Poetry first and foremost”, CT

BEING IN THE LEAST poetical, I loved poetry to the maximum, in the same way that being in the least “patriotic”, I loved **Greece** to the maximum.

“Poetry first and foremost”, CT

A “PRE-PACKAGED” TRUTH concerning Greece, for instance, is its history as interpreted by official **Greeks**. Another “pre-packaged” one is its history as presented to us by Europeans. The living truth, I believe, is to be found once again in its history, as you discover it emerging within you, from your personal experience, which events or objects of art simply recall and illustrate.

“Poetry first and foremost”, CT