ABSTRACT

In "Of Ephesus" Odysseás Elytis drew on the teachings of Heraclitus in an attempt to disrupt our ordinary view of reality and spark an alternative vision. Among the Heraclitean teachings that figure in Elytis' poem are the doctrine of the hidden unity of the opposites, the contrast between a child's and adult's experience of the world, and the conviction that our bodily senses provide an inadequate basis for understanding the real nature of things. Elytis' use of these Heraclitean ideas reflected and confirmed the truth of his belief in the continuity of Hellenic culture over two milennia.

Odysseás Elytis' Conversation with Heraclitus: "Of Ephesus"

In memoriam Diskin Clay (1938-2014)

Over the course of his long life, Odysseás Elytis (1911-1996) published seventeen collections of poetry, wrote numerous literary essays, created and exhibited works of art, and held senior administrative posts in a number of European cultural organizations. A portion of his poem "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. Yet despite this record of achievement, Elytis' poetry remains relatively unknown in English-speaking countries. In what follows I discuss "Of Ephesus," a poem written during the last year of Elytis' life which illustrates some of the main themes in his work.

Elytis' poetry is unusual in four respects. Its first and most striking feature 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 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." 2 Elytis offered this explanation: "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." 3 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. 4 In his first *Surrealist Manifesto*, for example, André Breton had 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." 5

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 Solitary 6 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 (*Collected Poems,* p. 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:

> 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 (*Collected Poems*, p. 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..." 7

The final 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 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 Romanós 8 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.” 9

Each of these features can be seen in an especially challenging poem Elytis created in the last year of his life, “Of Ephesus” 10:

> 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
> For a life unsurrendered from the start. With no candles with no chandeliers
> With only an anemone in place of a golden wedding ring's diamond
> Where groping is it going? And seeking what? The half shadow of our moon
> It is absolutely necessary for you to reassure even the graves
> Whether or not they're all your countrymen's. 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
Well what! Peasant of the night's green, a word suffices for you to fit into:
Ephesus! The fourteenth generation of grandfather of uncle and of phosphorous
In the golden orange orchards and the chisel's bordering words
Awnings before they are spread and others afloat suddenly the colt-trotting
Of lost poles. Preachings of the seabays opposite
Double scythes of floors for temple or theater
Verdant meadow waters and curly "gar" and "ara" waters
Purling. If ever wisdom drew circles
Of clover and wildweed then it would become
Different as before your fingertips' imprintings
There will be letters. Men shall read and history
Again shall grasp its own tail. As long as the vineyards gallop and the sky
Remains unbridled as children want it
With roosters and with pinecones and with cyan-blue kites flags
On Saint Heraclitus' day
a child's kingship. 11

"Of Ephesus" begins and ends with vivid impressions of an unconstrained nature—of vineyards rolling across the landscape, an untrammeled sky, a "runaway donkey" (*onos pheugátos*) ascending toward the clouds, flaming pinecones, roosters, and colorful kites and flags. The upward direction of all this movement 12 is significant, as Elytis elsewhere explained: "There is in my poetry a kind of meteorism; there are creatures who have a tendency to mount up

into the sky, to rise toward the heights...This happens all the time in my poetry." 13 The poet reflects on what the winds of fate 14 have fashioned for him, and admits to feeling exposed in a precarious location. 15 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.16 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 names 17, fruit-laden orchards, 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. 18 The poet appears to take some comfort from the continuity of the present with the past 19, 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" and an "unbridled sky." This last point appears to be stressed above all others—the importance of a fresh, childlike 20 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." 21 Through its multiple topographical references and verbal echoes 22, "Of Ephesus" seeks to capture and convey such an awareness, to present a litany of unique features of the Aegean world. 23 A single word is large enough for the poet to fit into: "Ephesus!"

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" (*Collected Poems*, p. 379). 24 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* (*Collected Poems*, p. 508) 25

In the face of this pessimistic outlook, Elytis called upon the teachings of Heraclitus of Ephesus to explain how, under certain circumstances, it might be possible to experience a higher reality. This at least appears to be the point of the poem's concluding line, "*a child's kingship*", which Elytis emphasizes through the use of italics, 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. 26

The point of the remark, at least for 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 many expressions 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 (cf. 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 that controls the cosmos. In between the two comparisons, almost certainly intended to go with the phrases on either side, 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. 27

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 rhínes diagignôskoun*...)

The likely source here is Heraclitus fragment B 7:

If all existing things were to become smoke, noses would diagnose them. 28

While there are many interpretations of this remark 29, 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 cosmos.

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 is regarded as a superior reality from one perspective may be 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 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." 30

A third Heraclitean echo may be heard in the opening lines of "Of Ephesus":

> Vineyards run free beside me and the sky
>
> Remains unbridled.

In speaking of vineyards that run (*trechoun*) in contrast with the sky that "remains" (*menei*), Elytis echoes the contrast drawn by Plato in his statement of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux at *Cratylus* 402a: "all things give way and nothing remains." 31 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" (*Collected Poems*, p. 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 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*?” (*Carte Blanche*, p. 60). In a letter to Kimon Friar written some years earlier, Elytis explained how, during the bleak war years, Heraclitus’ doctrine of the unity of the opposites had helped him “to think in poetic terms.” Here also he connects his understanding of Heraclitus with the 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. 32

Thus in “Of Ephesus”, as elsewhere in his poetry, Elytis fashioned a series of striking juxtapostions with the aim of disrupting our ordinary experience of reality and sparking an alternative vision. Drawing on his knowledge of the history of the Aegean region, he took solace from the history of the ancient city of Ephesus, from its generations of ancestors, and from the revelatory teachings of its most famous resident, the philosopher Heraclitus. As a consequence,

"Of Ephesus" both displays and confirms the truth of Elytis' belief in the continuity of Hellenic culture across the centuries. 33

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FOOTNOTES

1 Quoted portions of Elytis' poetry come 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 *Collected Poems*. Each of these phrases appears in Elytis' "The Elegies of Jutting Rock" (*Collected Poems*, pp. 509-37), but similar combinations can be found in poems from various periods of his career.

2 Marinos Pourgouris, *Mediterrean Modernisms: The Poetic Metaphysics of Odysseus Elytis* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 25-6.

3 Odysseás Elytis, *Analogies of Light*, ed. Ivar Ivask (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), p. 10. See also Kimon Friar, "The Imagery and Collages of Odysseus Elytis," *Books Abroad* 49 (1975): 703-11.

4 See Elytis' "Report to Andreas Embirikos" in *Carte Blanche: Selected Writings,* trans. David Connolly (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), pp 11-40.

5 André Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924) in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 26. See also Robert Jouanny, "Aspects of Surrealism in the Works of Odysseus Elytis," *Books Abroad* 49 (1975): 685-9.

6 Practices characteristic of the reclusive religious life.

7 Quoted in Ivar and Astrid Ivask, "Odysseus Elytis on his poetry," *Books Abroad* 49 (1975), p. 641.

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

9 Artemis Leontis, *Topographies of Hellenism: Mapping the Homeland* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 213.

10 From *West of Sorrow* (1995) in *Collected Poems*, pp. 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 *Odysseas Elytis: The Oxopetra Elegies, West of Sorrow*, trans. with an introduction and notes by David Connolly (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. 56 and 58.

11 Elytis placed the final line "a child's kingship" (*paidós ê basilêiê)* in italics.

12 "Conflagrations" or "wildfires" (*pyrkagies*) "exchanging pinecones" (a traditional source of fuel in the Greek countryside) also suggests smoke rising into the sky.

13 Ivar Ivask, ed., *Odysseus Elytis; Analogies of Light* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 19755 and 1981), p. 13.

14 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 *Collected Poems*, p 102.

15 "Exposed in the chamois' open air." "Chamois" (*aigárôn*) is the name of a mountain animal, as in "chamois of the rocks' air-draught stretch / Their rough necks" ("Stepchildren" in *Collected Poems,* p. *260*).

16 Elytis 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" (*Open Papers*, p. 137).

17 Cf. "They carve my stone with a bitter chisel" from Psalm III of *Worthy It Is* (*Collected Poems*, p. 143).

18 In *The Little Seafarer* Elytis writes of "Priests and boys, in boats, carrying Seraphim-icons on poles" (*Collected Poems*, p. 495).

19 In *Open Papers* Elytis tells 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" (*Collected Poems*, p. 680).

20 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' (*Carte Blanche*, p. 50). Cf. also *The Rhos of Eros* (*Collected Poems*, p. 598).

21 Connolly (p. 57) translates "What's everything is/ For the scent of earth...", which accurately reflects Elytis' *Tò pân εἶναι* ("The all is"), a Heraclitean way of speaking.

22 The onomatopoetic effect of "curly 'gar' and 'ara' waters" is evident in the Greek *sgourà toû gàr kaì toû ἄra Rheoúmena*, that is to say *gargara*: "gargling"). Evident also is the alliteration in the penultimate line *Mè kokórous kaì mè koukounária kaì mè kuanoús chartaetoús sêmaîes*. Here again, Elytis seeks not so much to describe reality as to reveal it.

23 The term "litany" is not to be taken loosely. For a discussion of the liturgical aspects of Elytis' poetry, see Panagiotis Roilos, "Ritual and Poetics in Greek Modernism" in *Greek Ritual Politics*, eds. Dimritrios Yatromanolakis and Panagiotis Roilos (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 121-6.

24 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 Covenience* (*Collected Poems*, p. 384).

25 Capitalization and italics as in Carson and Sarris.

26 *aiôn pais esti paidzôn, pesseuôn; paidos hê basilêiê*. I follow the Greek text of the Heraclitus fragments in Thomas Robinson, *Heraclitus*: *Fragments*: A *Text with a Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). English translations are my own. The fragment numbers follow those in the "B" or *fragmente* section of Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker,* 6th edition (Berlin: Weidmann, 1952).

27 Pourgouris 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" (*Mediterranean Modernisms*, p. 86).

28 *ei panta ta onta kapnos genoito, rhines an diagnoien*.

29 See the various readings identified in Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 256-59; and Miroslav Marcovich, *Heraclitus: Greek text with a short commentary* (Sankt Augustin: Academic Verlag, 2001), pp. 419-20.

30 *Carte Blanche*, p. 60.

31 *panta chôrei kai ouden menei*. I owe the point to Alexander Nehamas.

32 *The Sovereign Sun*, trans. with introduction and notes by Kimon Friar (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), p. 16. For Heraclitus' influence on Breton, see Jonathan Eburne, "The Obscure Object of Revolt: Heraclitus, Surrealism's Lightning Conductor," *Symploke* 8. 1-2 (2000): 180-204.

33 I am grateful to Jennifer Kellogg, Pavlos Kontos, Alexander Nehamas, Anna Ribeiro, Eleanor Rutledge, and Alan Shapiro for helpful comments on an earlier draft. I owe a special debt to Diskin Clay for times “we tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky.”