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Odysseus Elytis and the Thirties Generation in Modern Greek Poetry

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I have conceived my figure between a sea that comes to view right behind the whitewashed little wall of a chapel and a barefoot girl with the wind lifting her dress, a chance moment I struggle to capture, and I waylay it with Greek words.

If I spoke at the beginning about a girl and a chapel, at the risk of sounding less than serious, I had my reasons. I would have liked to draw that girl into the chapel and make her my own, not to scandalize anyone, but to confess that Eros is one, and also to make more dense the poem I wish to make out of the days of my life.
If there is, I think, for each one of us a different, a personal Paradise, mine should irreparably be inhabited by trees of words that the wind dresses in silver, like poplars, by men who see the rights of which they have been deprived returning to them, and by birds that even the midst of the truth of death insist on singing in Greek and on saying, “Eros, Eros,” Eros!”¹ (39-42)

It is in this way that Odysseus Elytis who died on March 18, 1996 describes his poetry in his collected prose work Anihta Hartia, published in 1974. And it is as a poet of Eros (love), erotic love, girls, sunlight, and the Paradise of the imaginative intellect that he will be remembered and admired. Uncomfortable with the title, Elytis was known as the poet of the Aegean, a title bestowed to honor the wealth of images and associations in his poetry which he largely derived from the Aegean islands.

Perhaps what Kimon Friar said of Kazantzakis’s Odyssey best describes Elytis’s poetry: “The sun, flame, fire, and light compose the chief imagery of the Odyssey, flowing in a dazzling current throughout the poem, just as the sun in Greece itself pulses throughout the clarity of its azure atmosphere, blazing on rocks, mountains, and the deviously tortured coastlines and islands of that sun-washed country.” (Kazantzakis xxxii)

Odysseus Elytis was born Odysseus Alepoudhelis, whose father was the son of a wealthy landowner on the island of Lesbos. His father, however, left his island home in early youth and settled on the island of Crete. Having founded a successful soap factory, the father revisited Lesbos to marry and again returned to Iraklion, Crete, where the poet was born on November 2, 1911, the youngest of six children. In 1914 the family left Crete to settle permanently in Athens where the poet resided until his death.

Alepoudhelis chose his pseudonym Elytis to reflect the themes of his poetry. It is derived from the prefixes Ellas (Greece), elpidha (hope), eleftheria (freedom), and Eleni

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¹JOURNAL OF THE HELLENIC DIASPORA
(Helen of Troy). The suffix *iax* he claimed, is a general and common Greek ending which does not limit him to any particular section of Greece.

Of the poets of his generation, that period of Greek literature known as the Generation of the Thirties which was to produce George Seferis, Andreas Embiricos, Nikos Engonopoulos, Nikos Gatsos, Yannis Ritsos, and Nikiforos Vrettakos, among the best known, Elytis admired most the new poetry of George Seferis even if he could not accept the world of ruin and desolation it so mercilessly delineated. It was surrealism which was just beginning to make itself known in Greece which gave Elytis the key to a forbidden world whose existence he had dimly suspected but had not dared confess to himself. In 1929, at the age of 18, he chanced upon a book by Paul Eluard which was to greatly influence his writing. His first attempts at poetry occurred between 1930-35 while attending the School of Law at the University of Athens. In 1935 Elytis left the university without getting a degree when he met Andreas Embiricos who had just published *Ypsikaminos* (*Blast Furnace*), the first book of surrealist automatic writing in Greece. Whereas he was to use automatic writing of more or less unrelated images and tropes in a few of his poems, Elytis had by this time found his voice, a voice which rejected a purely uncontrolled onrush of associations, extravagant and far-fetched comparisons; for equally strong in him, though still latent, was a sense of composition which he admired, even then, in the neoclassical constructions of the poems of Andreas Kalvos (1792-1869).

What seems to have drawn Elytis to surrealism was not its negative discarding of traditional meters and patterns but its insistence in particular that feeling, intuition, and the subconscious had a logic of their own utterly distinct from that of the conscious mind. For him poetry needed no longer to unfold in a development of themes encased in previously adapted forms. He felt that surrealism heralded a return to magical sources which years of rationalization had calcified; it represented a plunge into the wellsprings of fantasy and dream, a free-flowing clustering of images creating its own shapes. This view of surrealism was greatly to influence the course of subsequent poetry in Greece.

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At the same time, however, the poet could not completely divorce himself from the symbols and myths of Classical and Hellenistic times, a living heritage that appears over and again in the poetry of his contemporaries Cavafy, Kazantzakis, and Seferis. But Elytis yielded to these influences sparingly, preferring to create his own personal mythology out of his evolving experience; out of the Greek landscape and mores; out of the Greek historic consciousness in its long struggle for freedom; out of the development of the Greek language as one integral whole, out of the liturgy of Byzantine hymnology and the Orthodox Church, with its sublimations of Dionysian and Eleusinian mysteries; and primarily out of the sea, sky, rock, and whitewash of the Aegean world that surrounded him.

In order to understand Elytis's poetry more fully, however, this paper will do two things: first it will place the poet in the context of the period in which he wrote and second, it will draw parallels between his work and that of the only other Greek poet to win the Nobel Prize, George Seferis (1963).

Although modern Greek poetry begins with the vernacular Akritic epic cycle composed between the ninth and tenth centuries, it was not until the poet Kostis Palamas (1859-1943) that a completely new kind of life was infused into Greek poetry. It was Palamas who rejected the Romantics and the "Purist" form of Greek (katharevousa) to lead his contemporaries and such younger poets as Elytis and Seferis into a fresh world of literature in which the full possibilities of the modern Greek language and its rhythms were explored. And yet, the proper beginning of modern Greek poetry as we understand it today can be said to have occurred in the early 1930s. It was during this period that George Seferis's first book of poetry, perceptively titled Turning Point, was published (1931) to mark the beginning of the strongest wave of Symbolism to enter Greece; it was also the key moment for Greek Surrealist poetry, with the founding of the periodical Ta Nea Grammata in 1935. In March of the same year there appeared two more seminal texts of modern Greek poetry—George Seferis's Mythistorama and Andreas Embiricos's Ypsikaminos—while in November of the same year Ta Nea Grammata published the first poems of Odysseus Elytis. Just a year earlier in 1930 Yannis
Ritsos's first book of poetry, *Tractor*, appeared, as did Takis Papatsonis's *Selection I*.

In this new poetry of the thirties, which clearly and definitely turned from old Greek forms to the more avant-garde techniques of western Europe, in particular to French Symbolism and Surrealism, modern Greek poets were to create a poetry so heavily imbued with the past of that nation that the body of their work cannot be seriously discussed without some consideration of the past.

Modern Greek poetry of the thirties was caught in the great debate over Greek identity—a debate on-going since before the Greek Revolution of 1821. It involved two strains: one strain followed the European or foreign view of Greek identity which I shall refer to as the Hellenic view characterized by a long-term love affair with the distant classical past, as a source of the values that informed European culture. This strain maintained a distinct distaste for post-Byzantium modern Greece as an ethnically mixed grab-bag of largely oriental attitudes. The European view was shared by intellectual Greeks of the Diaspora who were to provide the new leaders of what they regarded as a backward native population. In opposition to the Hellenic view was the second strain, which I shall refer to as the Romeic view. Adopted by the autochthonous or indigenous native Greeks who populated the Turkish lands, it accepted the mixed demography of Greek lands that resulted from the variety of invasions and migrations that afflicted Greece across its history; the Romeic view defined itself as a pluralistic, largely lower class oral culture whose origins could be effectively traced to the Byzantine and Ottoman empires.

It was this unresolved debate that we find reflected in the poetry of the generation of the thirties. Preoccupation with the past as opposed to insistence on living in the present became a dominant theme which was shared by the poets of this period. Attempts to define Greek identity are torn between the Europeanized approach, exemplified by the poetry of George Seferis with its reliance on the classical past for modern meaning and the internal, subconscious view of Odysseus Elytis which finds its direction by indirection, effectively resolving the issue by avoiding it.

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Let us first consider Seferis. Using the Homeric hero Odysseus as a continuing figure throughout his poetry, Seferis finds for his modern Greek audience a persona at home in the global world, a man of action who, certain of his eventual return to Ithaca, does not know despair. Seferis takes this very liberal Odysseus and transforms him into an exile, a fatherly-sea-captain, a pilgrim. His Odysseus, unlike Homer's, cannot return to the world of social and physical reality—to Ithaca—for he is incapable of communication with the dead who alone hold the secret of his return. The secret of how he is to return home is withheld from Seferis's Odysseus, a pathetic sufferer who bends to his fate, unlike his ancestor Homer's Odysseus, the man of action, who wrestles old Proteus as he transforms into various beasts until, at the end, exhausted, Proteus is compelled to reveal Odysseus's future. Again in the underworld Homer's Odysseus approaches the dead to learn from the prophet Teresias the fate that awaits him in Ithaca. Seferis's modern Odysseus, by contrast, unable to return home, must persist in his never-ending quest, without issue, overwhelmed by the memories of lost friends and relatives, weak companions submerged or dying. Seferis reminds us that in modern times Homeric Odysseus has become a shadow of regret, a ghost which haunts us "with eyes reddened by the salt of the sea." This twentieth century Odysseus conveys the inadequacy of the present-day Greek in equaling the feats of his forefathers; he serves as a voice for all men tormented by alienation and the futile search for a Paradise which is no more. A surrogate for the poet himself, he is cut off from his homeland by two world wars and a lifetime career in the foreign diplomatic corps.

If a counterpart to his Odysseus exists in Homer's world, Seferis suggests, then Elpenor—a common sailor in Odysseus's crew—must be he. It is Elpenor who succumbs to the fatal charms of the goddess Circe. Trapped by Homer in a foreign mythic landscape which he does not understand, Elpenor, at a loss in heroic times, is very much at home in Seferis's world. "Sentimental, mediocre, wasted," in Seferis's words, Elpenor is the "poor devil" that modern man has become, while the Classical Odysseus is only the shadow of what modern man "should be."
Coordinate with Seferis's groping hero of resignation and defeat, the landscape of this poet's world is one of mutilated statues and altars, hulks of ships coated with rust and brine, a harsh and ruined legacy. These echoes of the past torment the dislocated,

What then are they looking for, our souls that travel
On rotting sea-timbers
From one harbour to another harbour?

Shifting broken stones, breathing in
Each day less easily the pine trees' coolness
Swimming now in the waters of this sea
And now of that one,
Without the sense of touch,
Without men,
In a country that is no longer our own country
And is not yours either. (Seferis 19)

Seferis retreats to the past in his own life as well as in the life of his poetry. Going back into his childhood to create an individual mythology, he becomes himself a lonely island in time. In a letter written in 1941, he refers to the conditions of creation which feed into his poetry: "There are nights," he says, "when I wake with the feeling that I am a golden fish in a bottle of electric liquid. It is an atmosphere of sick childhood; stimulating with dryness, stimulating in a bad way." This childhood world, this past, this source of his own creativity, as well as the creativity of his people, becomes identified in Seferis's mind with the world of the dead, a world he finds more real than that of the living. Past and present become confused, fragments of history floating like memories of waking life in our dreams:

I awoke with this marble head between my hands
Which tires my elbows out. Where can I put it down?
It was falling into the dream as I rose from the dream
And so our lives grew one, hard now to be separated.

(Seferis 12)
And only in death does the possibility exist that the past might become present again, the "appearance" of the former fusing with the "reality" of the latter. Perhaps the ruins will become full again, in "the hour of death" Seferis muses in one of his poems (Memory II).

Thus in Seferis, where the echo of the past is constant, one can never be certain whether he is in the company of the living or the dead. The quest is for the past, for an end to the perennial dislocation in time. It is a persistent search for the lost world of the now-dead which somehow is yet-alive; for an insistent and yet anonymous racial memory which at the same time is now a part of past history. Memory leads to disorientation and to interiorization of the external event, it leads to fatalism and to a sense of the unreliability of real time. It is the interpenetration of the inherited past and time-present removed from the accidence of time that represents, for Seferis, essential reality.

Seferis's view is a tragically paradoxical one; there can be no hope of an end, save in cessation of the search, no likelihood of a resolution, save in catastrophe. The sense of present loss and of imminent failure is constant. Seferis's hero in conclusion is a passive figure, his Odyssey a resigned event which merely poses fatalistically the question of deliverance. The poet's final answer to the quest comes in his poem, "The Thrush." Here he paraphrases from Plato's Apology Socrates's response at his trial:

And then there came that old man's voice, this one
I felt
Drop to the heart of the day
Calm, changeless, still:
"If you sentence me to drink poison, I thank you.
Your law shall be made my law. And where should I go
Running about in foreign lands, a rolling stone?
I choose death rather.
Which of us goes to the better fate God knows."

(Seferis 99)
Such a reduction in stature of the man of action to acquiescence in his own death—the only end to his quest in modern times—leads in Seferis to pathos. Through Socrates’s response, Odysseus is reduced to an Elpenor.

As we now move our discussion to consider Elytis, our starting point is the poet’s rejection of literal uses of myth that seek identity with the Classical past. “I have reacted against this, often quite consciously,” he says, “because I thought all this was a bit too facile, yes, even in the theater. Many French and other European writers have, as you know, adapted the Electra myth, among others. Since my chief interest was to find the sources of the Neo-Hellenic world, I kept the mechanism of mythmaking but not the figures of mythology” (Elytis, “Interview” 639). Elytis, thus, references mythical characters in his poetry but leaves them nameless. He personifies abstract objects and apprehends the world, as did the surrealists, through his senses.

Elytis’s perception of the world through the senses is conditioned by the sanctified aura he ascribes to all he perceives. “I have tried to harmonize these two terms,” he says; “that is, whenever I speak of the most sensuous matters, I conceive of them as being in a state of purity and sanctity. I aim at the union of these two currents. I am not a Christian in the strict sense of the word, but Christianity’s idea of sanctification I do adapt to the world of the senses” (Elytis, “Interview” 631-632). Through the senses, Elytis seeks to find in the description of the Greek landscape an “analogy” in the world of spiritual values. Each image he describes possesses for him an ethical or moral equivalent. “Once you accept this theory,” he says, “you will be able to see that my fondness of the Greek landscape is not a form of nationalism, but rather an effort at transposition” (632). The poem, “The Girl the North Wind Brought” is illustrative of this method and Elytis’s poetry in general:

At a great distance within the fragrance of mint I pondered where
I was going and I said that I might not be at the mercy of the
wilderness I shall find a small church to speak to

The roar of the sea ate up the darkness within me like a goat and left me an opening that beckoned more and more to the Felicities But there was nothing no one

Only the divination of the wild olive tree became incandescent around me

And all the mountain slope along the length of the sea spray and high above my head spoke oracularly in susurration with myriads of mauve quiverings and small insects like cherubim Yes yes I agreed these seas will be avenged One day these seas will be avenged

And then up there breaking away from her ruined shelter gaining in height and as beautiful as can be with all the whimsies of birds in her movements the girl the North Wind brought appeared and I waited

And as she proceeded a few lengths ahead by leaning her small breasts for the wind to withstand a terrified joy within me mounted to my eyelids and fluttered there

Ah the rages and the insanities of my country!

Kindled orbs of light burst behind her and left in the sky something like the elusive sign of Paradise

I was in time to see for a moment the forks between her legs grown wide
and all of the place inside with even the little saliva of the sea
Afterwards her odor reached me like fresh bread and wild mountain licorice

I pushed open the small wooden door and lit a candle
Because one of my ideas had become immortal.

(Elytis, *Sovereign* 141-142)

Elytis focuses on the ideal of virtue, represented for the Romans by Virtus and for the Greeks by Arete, figures appear that to beam rays of light into darkness. In Elytis’s search for identity in the Greek past, the idea of virtue, the ray of hope, is personified in the girl the north wind brought. The Greek spirit in the poetry of Elytis inevitably assumes the shape of a winged girl, she who comes from the Byzantine north, Constantinople, so that “one day these seas”—the Aegean Sea, heir to the Hellenic tradition, which possesses all that is valued in the Aegean World—“will be avenged.”

Passing “within the fragrance of mint,” the poet is guided across the Greek landscape to seek his identity in the past. Through his senses again in “the roar of the sea” which “ate up the darkness within me like a goat,” he finds himself able to penetrate the dark wilderness which surrounds him in search of a church which, found, elevates the sensibly experienced world to a plane of sanctity and happiness: “and all the mountain slope along the length of the sea spray and high above my head spoke oracularly in susurration with myriads of mauve quiverings and small insects like cherubim.”

Elytis’s evocation of the past is instantaneous, experienced at the moment he begins to open the church door. The instant itself holds not only the fullness of the moment, but the essence of every moment. Suspended in time, the whole poem embraces that moment, leaving the poet at the end where he began entering to light a candle: “I pushed open the small wooden door and lit a candle because one of my ideas had become immortal.”

Elytis’s search for the past occurs outside the boundlessness of clarity: “I am not,” he says, “for the clarity of intel-
ligence, that which the French call “La belle clarte,” he tells us, “No, I think that even the most irrational thing can be limpid.” This limpidity or transparency which finds behind each comment another and different comment and behind that still another is for Elytis, essential to Greekness, a quality characteristic of events understood in the context of the Greek landscape. Nature’s own limpidity in the intense Greek sun and in the sun’s refraction as it bounces back against the sea brings up things that appear other than they are. The limpid is thus, at times, irrational, irrational and surreal.

From his earliest poetry what drew Elytis to the surreal was its insistence that feeling, intuition, the subconscious express a logic distinct from that of the conscious mind. Elytis deserted thematic development to immerse himself in the free flow of fantasy and dream, images whose clustering created their own unique shapes. Through he surreal, Elytis infused spirit into the material world. Through personification he molded the abstract into concrete forms as we see in his poem “Body of Summer”:

A long time has passed since the last rainfall was heard
Above the ants and the lizards
Now the sky burns endlessly
The fruit trees paint their mouths
The pores of the earth very slowly open
And beside the trickling and syllabic waters
A huge plant stares straight into the sun.

Who is this who sprawls on the far beaches
Stretched on his back, smoking the smokesilver olive leaves
Crickets warm themselves in his ears
Ants scurry to work on his chest
Lizards glide in the long grasses of his armpits
And through the seaweed of his feet a wave lightly passes
Sent by that small siren who sang....

(Elytis, Sovereign, 75)
The animate inanimate is found in fruit which paint their mouths in the summer heat and transform into earth's swelling pores. Summer itself is a boy stretched out on the shore while "crickets warm themselves in his ears/Ants scurry to work on his chest/and lizards glide in the long grasses of his armpits." And through summer's seaweed feet "a wave lightly passes." Infused with light and idyllic joy, these are images of hope, joy, and sensuality, bathed in the light that has become the trademark of a poetry free of the sentimentality made popular in Greek poetry by the earlier work of Kostas Karyotakis.

Elytis, unlike Seferis, felt that the true face of Greece was not to be found in the Classical past which, as he had come to know it, was a past created by Post-Renaissance northern Europe. Elytis searched for identity with the Greek world from a Greek perspective. But to find it, he had to return to the European sensibility. "In order to achieve this task," he states, we [who adopted surrealism] had to destroy the tradition of rationalism which lay heavily on the Western world. Hence, the great appeal of surrealism for us, from the moment it appeared on the literary scene. Many facets of surrealism I cannot accept such as its paradoxical side, its championing of automatic writing, but after all, it was the only school of poetry—and, I believe, the last in Europe—which aimed at spiritual health and reacted against the rationalist currents which had filled most Western minds. Since surrealism had destroyed this rationalism like a hurricane, it had cleared the ground in front of us, enabling us to link ourselves physiologically with our soil and to regard Greek reality without the prejudices that have reigned since the Renaissance. The Western world always conceives of Greece in the image created by the Renaissance. But this image is not true. Surrealism, with its anti-rationalistic character, helped us to make a sort of revolution by perceiving the Greek truth. At the same time, surrealism contained a supernatural element, and this enabled us to form a kind of alpha-
bet out of purely Greek elements with which to express ourselves. (Elytis, "Interview" 631).

Elytis found his "purely Greek elements" in the Byzantine past, the modern Greek folk tradition, and the demotic tradition from the Cretan Renaissance through the nineteenth century, echoes of which, while they reverberate throughout Elytis's poetry are especially heard in his major work, The Axion Esti (1959):

Then he spoke and the sea was born
And I saw and marveled
And in its midst he sowed small worlds in my image
and likeness:
Steeds of stone with names erect
and amphorae serene
and the slanting backs of dolphins
Ios Seriphos Sikinos Milos
"Every word a swallow
to fetch you spring in the midst of summer," he said
And ample the olive trees
to sift the light through their fingers
as it spreads softly over your sleep
and so ample the cicadas
that you do not heed them
as you do not heed the pulse in your hand

and broad the sky above
that you may read the infinite yourself

THIS
small, this great world! (Elytis, Sovereign 101)

This long work in three parts, Genesis, The Passions, and the Gloria, from which I have just quoted, the poet's autobiography figures forth the life of all poets. Together with the poet is born "THIS small, this great world" which is both Greece the microcosm and the universal macrocosm. Composed mostly in demotic, The Axion Esti includes elements linking the
great periods of Greek literature—from the Septuagint, the Byzantine *troparia*, Demotic songs and folk legends of the medieval period, from *Erotocritos*, Makriyannis, Solomos, Kalvos, Sikelianos, Palamas, and Papadiamandis.

Into the riches of this poem, Elytis pours the figures of his earlier poetry, raising them from a physical to an ethical plane. In a trance and transported high above the physical world, the poet finds himself present at the moment of creation. That which first comes into being is the sea, Greece, himself, by extension “This small this great world,” our earth and the entire universe. He has become the landscape in which he lives and the landscape is himself, “And in its midst he sowed small worlds in my image and likeness.” He is Greece from its creation to the present. His landscape becomes human as olive trees shift the light through their fingers and he unites and becomes one with the sounds and images of Greece’s landscape, “so ample the cicadas that you do not heed them as you do not heed the pulse in your hand.” In this intensely personal and physical vision, the poet has himself become his past.

The 1930s, in sum, provided a pivotal point in modern Greek poetry. It was clear by this time that Greece’s dream of a future return to its former greatness would never be realized. The Smyrna disaster of 1922 and World War I put an end to Greece’s “Great Idea” of an empire extending once again to Constantinople. Greece was now a small, somewhat insignificant country in the European community, a land of refugees and displaced people seeking an identity. Another world war, more horrible than the first was already imminent a war that was to leave Greece completely defeated. The highly romantic and sentimental poetry which had its roots not in Greece but in the poetry of Europe was no longer adequate. Poets, thus, turned to new forms and to their country’s past to seek their identity and to discover the meaning of their existence.

George Seferis was able to bring to Greek poetry the sense of displacement and dissatisfaction he felt in the contemporary Greek after World War I and the Smyrna disaster of 1922; what he found there was an unbearable burden which the con-
temporary Greek, aware of his unequal standing in the face of the greatness of the past, could not shoulder.

Odysseus Elytis, on the other hand, rejected Seferis’s aristocratic and pessimistic view. Elytis considered the Classical past he inherited a construct created by foreigners; searching that past could not produce an identity. He turned then to Greece’s other pasts—the Byzantine past, the Turkish Occupation, and the Greek War of Independence. But even there, truth escaped him; these pasts too were the constructs of others. Truth had to be sought in oneself. Elytis thus used these pasts as a source of inspiration to lead to a personal and meditative state that reached deep into the subconscious for true identity.

The fullest understanding of Elytis’s poetry is perhaps best expressed in the poet’s Nobel acceptance speech:

Poetry—which stands erect at that point where rationalism puts down its arms—takes up the task of advancing into the forbidden zone, thus proving itself to be that which is least corroded by usury. It assures, in the purity of their form, the safety of the permanent givens by which life remains a viable labor. Without poetry, and its vigilance, these givens would be lost in the obscurity of consciousness, just as algae become indistinct in the depths of the sea.

This is why we have a great need for transparency: to perceive clearly the knots of this thread, which is stretched across the centuries and which helps us remain upright on the earth. We perceive these knots, these ties, distinctly, from Heraclitus to Plato and from Plato to Jesus. Brought to us in diverse forms, they acutely tell us the same thing: that it is in the interior of this world that the other world is contained, that it is with the elements of this world that the other world is composed—the beyond, that second reality which is situated above the one that we live against nature. It is a matter of a reality to which we have a total right, and of which only our incapacity makes us unworthy.

Whether it is Apollo or Venus, Christ or the
Virgin, who incarnates and personifies our need to see materialized that which we experience as intuition, is of no importance. What is important is this breath of immortality that penetrates us. And in my humble opinion, Poetry must, beyond all doctrinal arguments, allow us to breathe this breath. (Elytis, “Nobel” 100)

Translated by Andonis Decavalles (Decavalles 11-12).

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