

Nobel Prize in Literature 1979



Odysseus Elytis

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1979 was awarded to Odysseus Elytis *"for his poetry, which, against the background of Greek tradition, depicts with sensuous strength and intellectual clear-sightedness modern man's struggle for freedom and creativeness"*.

Odysseus - the sefarer, the Homeric poem's hero, alive with the spirit of freedom, with defiant intrepidity, enterprise, and an insatiable appetite for all the adventures and sensuous experiences that the seas and isles of Greece can offer. Odysseus is the name given to the poet by his parents. It testifies to the feeling for the past and to the links with the myths and distinctive character of Greek tradition. The family comes from the Aegean islands. The poet was born in Crete just before the liberation from Turkish rule.

Elytis is the name he adopted at the very beginning of his career as a writer. The name is a composite one, with allusion to several concepts dear to the poet's heart - it could be called a much abridged manifesto. The components in the name are to serve as a reminder of the Greek words for Greece (Ellas), hope (elpídha), freedom (elefthería) and the mythical woman who is the personification of beauty, erotic sensuality and female

allure, Helena (Eléni). Eros and Heros are closely connected in Elytis's world of poetry or myth.

The sea and the islands, their fauna and flora, the smooth pebbles on the beaches, the surge of the waves, the prickly black sea-urchins, the tang of salt, and the light over the water are constantly recurring elements in his writing - like the bright flood of sunlight which baptizes this world with its all-pervading lustre, at once fertile and purifying. Sensuality and light irradiate Elytis's poetry. The perceptible world is vividly present and overwhelming in its wealth of freshness and astonishing experiences.

But through Elytis's evocative verbal art, this world is also elevated to a symbolic reality. It becomes an ideal for the world that is not always so bright and true and wonderful, but which should be, and could be. We should always praise and worship this world for what it ought to be, and for what it, thereby, can be to us: a life-giving source of strength. Elytis's extolling of existence, of man and his potentialities, and life in communion with the rest of creation, is no idealizing or illusory escapism. It is a moral act of invocation of the kind to be found so many times in Greek history, from the present-day struggles for freedom against fascist or other oppression far back through the centuries to the heroic phase of the classical era. What matters is not to submit. What matters is constantly to bear in mind what life should be, and what man can shape for himself in defiance of all that threatens to destroy him and violate him.

This is not political writing in the narrow sense of the word. It is a writing of preparedness, which aims at defending the moral integrity or pride that is essential if we are to be able to resist at all, and to endure hardships and dangers, outrage and adversity. These sides of Elytis's poetry emerged strongly during the first years of the 1940s when he took part in the campaign in Albania against the fascist invasion. He passed through what he himself calls a crisis. Everything had to be tried out afresh - how to live, what the use of poetry was, how the beauty of poetry and art could serve in the fight for human dignity and resistance, yet preserve its freedom as art.

The poem, *Heroic and Elegiac Song for the Lost Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign* was written during this war, most of it based on personal experience. It immediately evoked response and became a kind of generation document for the young. It has kept its position as an expression of the Greeks' indomitable spirit of resistance. The fallen soldier is a representative of the Greeks who were killed in this war, but also of all those who have fallen during Greece's long history of struggle for national liberty and individuality. Here, as so often in Elytis's writing, realistic and mythical depiction are combined.

The Albanian campaign and the "heroic and elegiac song" about it were, in a way, a turning point for Elytis as a poet. His first verses had been published in the middle of the 1930s in a magazine which was then a forum for young writers, *Nea Ghrámmata* -- in fact, a school for budding poets. The impulses from French surrealism, in particular, made themselves felt - in Elytis's case, chiefly from Paul Éluard. Surrealism became a liberator. It helped the young writers to find themselves, not least, in relation to the great Greek classical tradition, which might threaten to become oppressive and to stagnate in stereotyped and rhetorical formulae. Elytis's first poems, before *Heroic and Elegiac Song*, are youthfully sensual, full of light, brilliant, and very evocative in their visual and charming freshness. They quickly established him as one of the leading new Greek poets.

With *Heroic and Elegiac Song*, however, other sides of the writer emerged and insisted on becoming part of his creative world - sides which had been there from the outset but which now demanded more room: the tragic and the heroic. In the poetic cycle which many regard as Elytis's foremost work, *To ´xion estí (Worthy It Is)*, these very complex experiences and programs have been given a form which makes this work one of 20th century literature's most concentrated and richly-faceted poems. The cycle is a kind of lyric drama or myth with strains from Hesiod, the Bible and Byzantine hymns. In its severe and polyphonic structure it is also linked to the avant-gardism of modern western writing. The cycle begins almost as drama of creation, concerning not only the poet himself, but, through him, us all. For, Elytis says, "I do not speak about myself. I speak for anyone who

feels like myself but does not have enough naiveté to confess it." But it is also about the origin of Greece, in fact of the world. Then follows an architecturally complicated section with descriptions of the war and other scourges that have afflicted Greece and modern man. After this section, which represents a crisis or path of suffering, comes a concluding part, the actual song of praise; mature man is tempered and strengthened through his experiences but also fortified in his indomitable and defiant will to defend life and its sensuous abundance.

In one of his short essays, Elytis sums up his intentions: "I consider poetry a source of innocence full of revolutionary forces. It is my mission to direct these forces against a world my conscience cannot accept, precisely so as to bring that world through continual metamorphoses more in harmony with my dreams. I am referring here to a contemporary kind of magic whose mechanism leads to the discovery of our true reality. It is for this reason that I believe to the point of idealism, that I am moving in a direction which has never been attempted until now. In the hope of obtaining a freedom from all constraints, and the justice which could be identified with absolute light..."

In its combination of fresh, sensuous flexibility and strictly disciplined implacability in the face of all compulsion, Elytis's poetry give a shape to its distinctiveness, which is not only very personal but also represents the traditions of the Greek people.

For more details please visit:

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1979/press.html