

Words, Pictures, Sounds: 'Greekness' Expressed by Odysseus Elytis, Yannis Ritsos and Mikis Theodorakis

...The painter reshapes the poem into image, the musician transmutes the image into sound [...] The aesthetics of an art is the same as the other. It is the material that varies (Schumann, 1854/1985, p. 43).

How can we define the dialectic relation that is often created among poetry, painting and music and how is it influenced by the interpersonal relationships between the poet and the visual artist (painter), between the visual artist (painter) and the musician?

Even though, in the case of Odysseus Elytis (Nobel Prize in Literature, 1979), Yannis Ritsos (Lenin Peace Prize, 1977) and Mikis Theodorakis (Lenin Peace Prize, 1983), their interpersonal relationships had undoubtedly influenced their work, we will focus, accordingly to the context of this presentation, on the one hand, on the effect of their shared experiences in their work, and on the other hand, on the expression of 'Greekness' through the words, the images and the sounds of these three creators.

The additional specificity of these three artists is that the poets Elytis and Ritsos were as well visual artists, whilst the composer Theodorakis is also a poet.

Taking a brief look at the journey of their lives, we can observe the following:

- Admirers of Greek nature all three of them, they praise it in their works. The key element of the Greek landscape, the sea, which forms the Greek soul and the Greek temperament unites these three artists since birth: Yannis Ritsos (1909-1990) was born in Monemvasia – a littoral town in the southeastern part of the Peloponnese, also known due to its geographical location as 'the Gibraltar of the East', Odysseus Elytis (1911-1996) was born in Heraklion, on the island of Crete and he was originated from Lesbos island and Mikis Theodorakis (1925) was born on the island of Chios and he originates from Chania, on the island of Crete.
- The ancient Greek art and literature, the Byzantine tradition, the Orthodox belief and the Greek folk tradition, all these constitute their common origins and they consist the benchmarks and the inspiration for all three of them.
- The common historical memory and the active participation of all three in socio-political struggles for Peace, Freedom and Democracy in Greece of the 20th century shaped their personalities and their common artistic sensitivity. At the outbreak of World War II, Elytis was appointed Second Lieutenant at the 24th Regiment and he was transferred immediately on the first-line of the battlefields at the Albanian front. Ritsos himself, during the Italian-German Occupation, participated in the educational branch of EAM (National Liberation Front) and contributed indirectly to the resistance struggle. During the Civil War (1944-1949), due to his communist ideology, he was initially exiled to the island of Lemnos and then to the island of Makronissos and to the island of Ai-Stratis, while during the Dictatorship (1967-1974), he was arrested and exiled to the island of Giaros and to Partheni, on the island of Leros. Theodorakis, participated in both the Resistance and the Civil War, during which he was exiled due to his communist ideology as well, to the island of Ikaria and to the island of Makronissos, while during the Military Junta, he was arrested over again and he was banished to Zatouna, in Arcadia and he was interned in the concentration camp of Oropos.

But how these consistent elements of the personalities of the three creators are expressed in their work? We will try to answer this using as a point of reference the cycles of songs composed by Mikis Theodorakis: "Cyclades Minor" in poetry by Odysseus Elytis and "18 Short Songs of the Bitter Homeland" in poetry by Yannis Ritsos.

The cycle of songs "Cyclades Minor" comprises seven songs: 1) *Marina*, 2) *Maya*, 3) *The cricket*, 4) *Greek Young Children*, 5) *You saw it, now you know it*, 6) *The garden was entering the sea*, 7) *Of the little north wind*. The sixth of them: "The garden was entering the sea" is the part IX of the poetic work of Elytis "Sun the First", written in 1943, amid the Axis Occupation. The six other poems (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7) form part of the unity "Cyclades

Minor”, which is included in Elytis’ poetry collection “*The Trills Of Love*”, written in 1961 during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean by ocean liner towards the U.S.A., where Elytis was invited by the State Department. In this unity belongs the poem “*Between Syros and Tzia (Kea)*” that Theodorakis set to music and included in the cycle of songs “*Archipelagos*” (“Songs of the Islands”). Theodorakis set to music the poems of the cycle of songs “*Cyclades Minor*” in 1963, at a time when his collaboration with Elytis was really close, as they were preparing the first presentation and recording of the popular oratorio “*Axion Esti*”.

The key issue of the poems of this cycle of songs is love and Greek nature. Elytis writes in the introduction of his poetry collection: “*The Trills Of Love*”:

“...And the sea is endless, the birds are myriad, the souls are as many as the combinations that the sounds and the words can give birth, when love and dream reign over.”

The sea, with which Greek people have a special emotional attachment due to the geophysical singularity of their country, holds a leading role in these Elytis’ poems:

*“I prayed to March and to brief November
to the radiant August, to protect us from the evil.
Because we are young children, we are two Greek Young Children
into the light blue sea and the white clouds.”*

The personifications of the elements of nature:

*“I ordered the little north wind
to be a good child”*

the metaphors:

“tearing the blooming waves”

and the constant juxtaposition of images, which are interconnected associatively and are distinguished for their emotionally charged language:

*“The fountain with the doves
the sword Archangels keep
The orchard with the stars
and the well so deep”*

constitute the poet’s main means of expression and reveal the influence of surrealism on his work.

These pictures, together with the historical memory and the Greek tradition, instilled the poet some of his “visual poems”: temperas, drawings, watercolors, collage... The collage or “co-images” as Elytis calls them, a technique that uses in order to express himself since the age of 25 years old – his first collages appear in 1936 at the “First International Surrealist Exhibition of Athens” – are, according to the Director of the National Gallery of Athens and Professor in Athens School of Fine Arts, Marina Lambraki-Plaka, “*a visual reading of the modes of his poetry. Therefore, they find the best hospitality alongside with his verses, in his books*” (Lambraki-Plaka, *Kathimerini*, 1996).

Whereas, Elytis himself states regarding that:

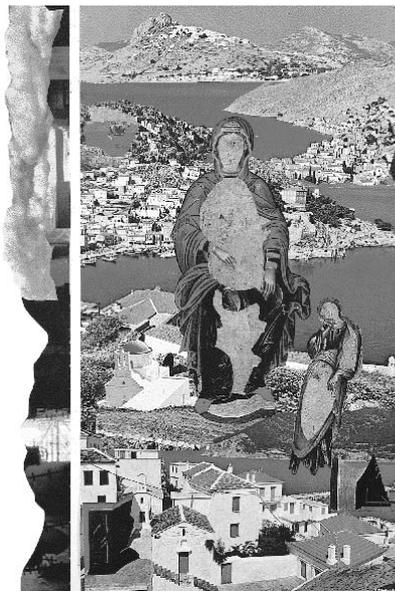
My purpose was not to play. It was to transliterate my poetics to a detached level from the nails of the language’s cross. And it seemed to me, with the experiment that I carried out, that I was probably holding in my hands the appropriate key. Several old appetencies of mine began to climb gradually, with other kinds of requirements, from the bottom of my poems on the surface (Elytis, 1986, p.8).

The ancient Greek statues, the Byzantine angels, the snow-white limed Cycladic houses, the Aegean light, the deep light blue sky and the endless profound blue of the sea, the violet colors of the nightfall...: are some of the elements that connect the history of Greece with tradition and the breathtaking natural landscape and that prevail both on the poetic and the visual work of Elytis.

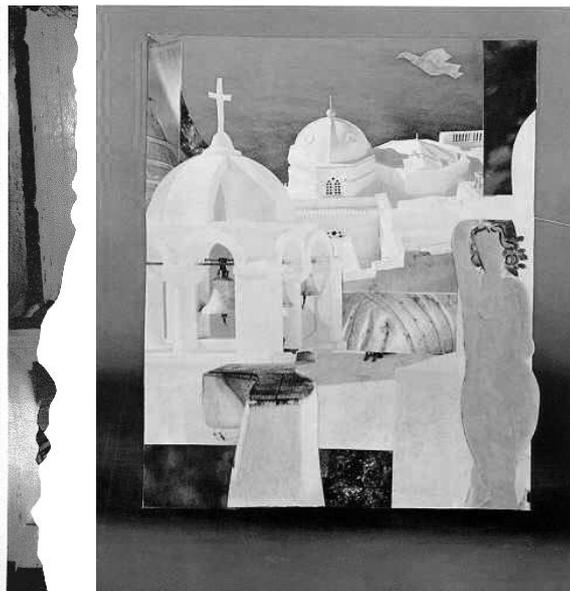
☞ see p. 184



Example 1



Example 2



Example 3

Considering the verses of “*Cyclades Minor*”, the collages: “*The Offering*” (1967) (Example 1), “*Virgin Mary protects the Cyclades Minor*” (Example 2) and “*Aegean Sea*” (1974) (Example 3), among others seem to constitute their inspired depiction.

The poetry of Elytis and eventually some of his “co-images” were converted to melodies thanks to Mikis Theodorakis.

The frequent occurrence of rhyme schemes in the poems, their harmonious inner rhythm, the rich, but unadorned lyrical language of Elytis, all these instilled the composer with “*lyrical, lighthearted, Aegean songs*” according to his writings (Theodorakis, 1997, vol. 1, p. 120).

It is about simple melodies in syllabic script. The rhythm that prevails is of 2/4, the major tonalities and the calmly vivid rhythms introduce in the best way both the optimistic vibe of the verses and the serenity of the three aforementioned “co-images” of Elytis. In addition, their lyricism reflects totally the spirit of the composer at the time, when full of enthusiasm and boldness laid down the roots of the Greek “cultural revolution” of the 60’s.

In particular, Theodorakis explains in one of the interviews he gave us:

I have an aegean, a seamanly root, because I was born in Chios, and lived both in Crete, in Makronisos, in Ikaria, in short within the Aegean Sea, and in the Ionian Sea, in Argostoli, on the island of Cephalonia ... the sea is my one element. The other, is the city, because I also grew up in the city, along with soldiers, with prisoners, with workmen when I was working as a young child... The latter yielded the city songs, the zeibekiko songs, which were “heavier”, more contemporary, more urban and I created the cycles of songs “Cities” (Πολιτείες) and the former yielded the countryside songs, the songs of the sea, which were more light blue, more ethereal, like Ballos dance (Greek folk island dance) and Kalamatianos dance (Greek folkdance) ... and thus, I created the “Cyclades”. (Stiga, 2006, vol. 3, p. 1253)

Nevertheless, the lighthearted, optimistic style of “*Cyclades Minor*” alters in the case of “*18 Short Songs of the Bitter Homeland*” and gives way to a rough and unadorned, but yet lyrical style through which the poet wants to express the sorrows of the tormented Greek scenery and touch the soul of the people. This poetic work of Yannis Ritsos, the so-called “*poet of Greekness*”, was written in 1968, in Partheni, on the island of Leros, where the poet was exiled by the regime of the Colonels. It consists of 18 short poems each of which comprises two couplets written entirely in iambic decapentasyllabic verse without any rhyme schemes. The references to the tradition and the historical memory are countless and they reveal the ceaseless struggles of Greek people.

Even the Greek landscape enhances the fight: the rocks, the wind, the birds, the flowers:

*“Upon these blocks of marble here, no foul rust-stain takes hold,
Neither chain around the ankle of the Greek and of the wind.
Here is the light, here is the sea-coast- golden, pale blue tongues,
Upon the rocks stags are chopping, chewing the iron fetters.”*

Even dead people are awake, as formerly were the guards of Byzantium, thus finding their continuity in modern reality:

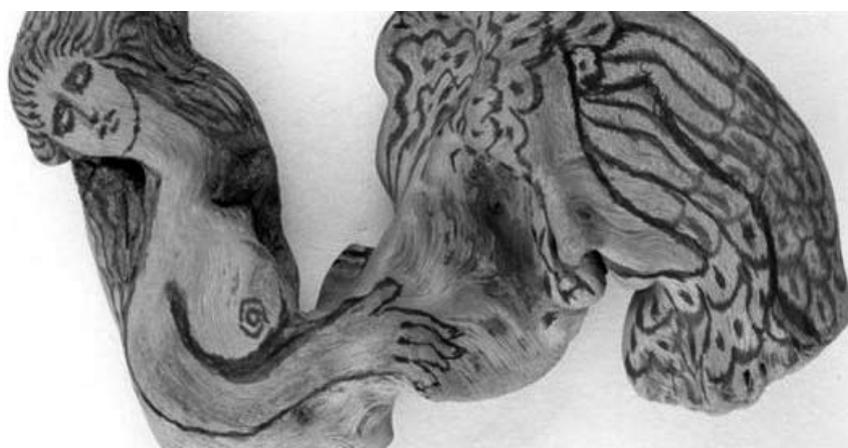
*“Be quiet: At work the hands become strong and they augment
And don’t forget that all night long the dead are also helping.”*

The aim of *“18 Short songs of the Bitter Homeland”* was to awaken the once again enslaved Greeks and to encourage them to strive afresh for Freedom and Democracy. *“Each couplet is a ring to be worn on the enslaved’s hand, so that he remembers his slavery and his yearning for freedom: a ring “made around of gold and inside of poison”, according to the demotic verse”.* (Prevelakis, 1981, p.377)

*“And that word hidden word- the single word of liberty,
Instead of wings brings forth swords and rends asunder the winds.”*



Example 4



Example 5

The agony about the future of his people, but also the *choking* he was feeling in exile gave impetus to the “visual poems” by Yannis Ritsos that were sometimes sculpted on stones (Example 4), sometimes carved on roots (Example 5) with strange forms that were washed up on the shore, sometimes crafted on bones and sometimes designed on paper or on canvas. The poet himself states regarding that:

... Each material has its own features, it inspires different forms. The roots submit ferocity. The bones and the stones submit beauty or elegiac features. (...) I did no longer paint landscapes on them, but human faces and bodies. After all, the entire Greek art is human-oriented and whose main value is the ideal of beauty. During dictatorship, to oppose a beautiful face or body in the general gloom and oppression was a form of resistance. (Ritsos, in *Word*, 1981)

Moreover, *“parallel and allegorical [was] the relationship between his painting and his poetry, since the one was lightened by the other, while both of them were lightened by the sun of his fate. His painting constituted a visual extension of the respective poetry of this specific period of time.”* (Delavinia, 1997, in *Research*, p. 34)

Having himself experienced the excruciating isolation and the physical and mental tortures of exile, the self-exiled to Paris, Mikis Theodorakis, is inspired by the pointed words of Ritsos and sets to music the *“18 Short Songs of the Bitter Homeland”* between 1971 and 1973, namely during the most difficult and intense phase of the anti-dictatorial struggle.

It is about unadorned melodies, mostly in syllabic script (e.g. the song *“Conversation with a flower”*) and with precise tempo (e.g. *Lentement, comme une lamentation d’Epire* at the song *“Commemoration”*; *Dansant, joyeux, lumineux* at the song *“Dawn”*; *Comme une litanie, très lyrique* at the song *“The white chapel”*), which emphasize the semantic content of the unadorned verses of Ritsos. The influence of Byzantine, demotic and Greek popular music is evident on both the melodic and the rhythmic level (e.g. *kalamatianos* rhythm at the song *“Slender girls”*, *zeimpekikos* rhythm at the song *“Epitaph”*, etc.).

The ‘Greek’ style of these 18 songs, the unique interpretations of M. Farantouri, P. Pandis, Af. Manou etc., and the composer’s himself, always accompanied by the translation of the verses to the audience during the concerts as part of the anti-dictatorial struggle, was, along with other works by the composer, the cry of the enslaved Greek people, the cry of *Greekness*.

Conclusion

Sea, light, colorful and vibrant Greek nature, bravery, loyalty, passion, struggle for freedom: these are the elements that constitute the *Greekness*. This non-translatable word. The *Greekness* is what makes Greeks to cry, to laugh, to hurt, to struggle, always with passion! For the *Greekness* that Elytis and Ritsos served with passion and dedication, is Mikis Theodorakis still struggling, by trying to lit a new “Spark” in the hearts of Greeks...

*“Here the birds become silent, the church-bells become silent too
And the bitter Greek becomes silent together with his dead.
And upon the stone of silence, he sharpens his finger-nails;
He is alone and unhelped, the one who’s pledged to liberty.”
(Y. Ritsos, 18 Lianotragouda of the Bitter Homeland, The One who’s pledged)*

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Santrauka

Žodžiai, vaizdai, garsai: graikiškumo išraiška Odysėjo Elyčio, Yannio Ritso ir Mikio Theodorakio kūryboje

Graikiškumas (gr. Ρωμιόςυνη (Romiosyni)) ir visa, kas su juo susiję – didingumas, nuosmukis, tikėjimas, aistra, gamtos grožis, meilė, laisvė ir t. t. – visada įkvėpdavo ir iki šiol įkvepia graikų menininkus – rašytojus, poetus, dailininkus, kompozitorius, tarp kurių yra ir poetai Odysseus Elytis (Nobelio literatūros premija, 1979) ir Yannis Ritsos (Lenino taikos premija, 1977) bei kompozitorius Mikis Theodorakis (Lenino taikos premija, 1983).

Theodorakio kūryboje graikiškumas pasireiškia per lyriką poezijoje ir garso spalvą muzikoje; Elyčio ir Ritso kūryboje jis labiausiai išryškėja paveikiuose poezijos veikaluose, taip pat originaliuose šių menininkų paveiksluose (koliažuose, piešiniuose ant akmens ir medžio šaknų, tapyboje ant drobės ir t. t.).

Baltojo marmuro lengvumas, ryški saulės šviesa, besikeičiančios Graikijos jūros spalvos, cikadų čirškimas – visa tai yra giliai įsišakniję tiek Elyčio ir Ritso poezijoje bei vaizduojamojo meno darbuose, tiek Theodorakio muzikoje.

Siekiant atskleisti dialektinius ryšius tarp poezijos, tapybos ir muzikos, straipsnyje analizuojami dainų ciklai „Mažosios Kikladės salos“ (eilės O. Elyčio) ir „Aštuoniolika trumpų rūsčiosios gimtinės dainų“ (eilės Y. Ritso) bei keletas šių poetų vaizduojamojo meno pavyzdžių.