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Thomas Stearns Eliot, George Seferis & Odysseus Elytis: Three Different Approaches Representing and Reflecting the Post- War Era in Europe and Beyond

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Thomas Stearns Eliot, George Seferis & Odysseus Elytis:
Three Different Approaches Representing and Reflecting the Post-
War Era in Europe and Beyond

MA Thesis Literature

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Introduction

The special relationship of influence between the Anglophone Modernist pioneer and poet Thomas Stearns Eliot and the two most influential Greek poets of the Generation of the 1930s, Georgios Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, will be the central point of investigation of this thesis. Of particular interest is the manner they exploit the notions of culture, (historical) time and identity, and post-war conditions, which I will analyze through extracts from their works, *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets*, *Mythistorama*, and *Axion Esti*. As the Greek poets and their relation to T.S. Eliot may not be that generally known, this introduction will offer a general historical overview.

Brief historical overview

Both Greek poetry and prose since the Greek Revolution (1821) and for approximately a century after until the 1920s, were deeply influenced by tradition. Most artists and artistic movements, even those which opposed each other, maintained roughly the same principles regarding style, themes and tone, with the most dynamic change being the shift in language from Katharevousa¹ (a conservative combination of Ancient and Demotic Greek) to Demotic Greek² (supported by the New Athenian School). During the 19th century, the political and financial situation in the emancipated new Greek nation was frail and unsettled. Inspiration was drawn from the heroic achievements of those who fought for the nation, but also from the general disposition of the Greek people to overcome their traumatic past and re-envision the future of their nation. The New Athenian School was also influenced by two major French literary movements, namely Parnassianism, which re-visited Antiquity and especially Ancient Greek mythology, and its counteract, Symbolism, which would flourish in the next generation

¹ Appendix 1.

² Appendix 2.

as well. Up until the 1930s, the poetic figure that would mark 20th-century modern Greek poetry, denouncing current traditional and artistic movements, and shaping his own path through realism, was none other than the (in)famous Constantinos Cavafis, born in the prosperous Greek community of Alexandria.

Beginnings of Greek Modernism

Political affairs rapidly evolved after the turbulent, yet unsuccessful Venizelist coup in March 1935³, which intended to halt the re-establishment of Monarchy. Consequences of this failed attempt included the abolishment of the Constitution, exiles of politicians and intellectuals, illegitimate referendums and the return of Monarchy.

The main reaction from the literary scene emerged with the publication of an extreme surrealist poem by Andreas Empeirikos, *Ypsikaminos*, and the renowned collection of 24 poems by Georgios Seferis, *Mythistorema*. In both of these literary works, the influence of French symbolism is prevalent, as is the break from pure poetry and a shift towards a more austere and abstract language, freer rhythm and various poetic forms. However, Argyriou⁴ distinguishes between Seferis' innovative writing style and Empeirikos' surrealism. More precisely, he strongly suggests that Anglophone modernism (especially represented by T. S. Eliot) held sway for the 24 short poems of *Mythistorema*. Consequently, according to Argyriou and other critics, the year 1935 can be considered as the year of birth of Greek modernism, considering the extent to which *Mythistorema* 'touched upon' literary works of the period and the audience. Arguably, Argyriou underlines the way the collection of poems evoked feelings of total satisfaction and gratification. At about the same time, another young poet emerges in the turbulent political and cultural environment of the 1930s, and that is Odysseus Elytis, with

³ Appendix 3,4.

⁴ Ibid. 270-273

the surrealistic collection of poems *Orientalisms (Prosanatolismoi)* inspired by French surrealists Lorca and Elyard.

The Generation of the 1930s

The conditions which allowed the emergence of modernism, and in fact enabled it to flourish, however, were not just these individual publications, by poets who had lived – or had been living – in Paris, and in other cultural centers of Europe, and had witnessed the shift in the form and the alienation for the traditional order. Since approximately 1928, a group of intellectuals, poets and novelists, assembled and cooperated for the purposes of the publication of New Letters Periodical (Nea Grammata, 1935-1944). This literary journal functioned as the spark that would ignite the most influential generation of modern Greek writers, driven by the sole purpose of reinventing Greek poetry and prose, inspired by the notions of Surrealism and Modernism, known as the Generation of the 1930s⁵.

What distinguishes this movement is their collective identity and shared purposes, a phenomenon organically unique to the history of Greek literature. Besides Nea Grammata, what other critics attribute as a driving force for the emergence of this generation and their will to redefine Greek literature, is the suicide of poet Kostas Karyotakis, one of the greatest representatives of the 1920s. In his manifest, *The Free Spirit*, a book that Georgios Theotokas wrote one year after Karyotakis' death, he highlights the need to move away from 'parochialism' and attempt to bridge the cultural gap with Europe, which alienated Greek artists from the cultural milieu. His 'proposal', which was later adopted as a principle from the Generation of 1930s, was to approach current events by addressing them through art.

These current events were no other than two World Wars, and the Asia Minor Catastrophe, which were followed by the imposition of a dictatorial regime in 1936. As is often

⁵ Appendix 5.

the case, poets and writers of this generation drew inspiration from these current issues and produced artistic pieces centering around themes of historical memory, tradition, war, and nature as a living organism affected by these harsh conditions. Modernist writers felt uneasy and were often openly dissatisfied with the emphasis put on tradition by older generations, a fact which drew Greece away from European literature. The new literary representatives actively sought to establish communication channels with Western Europe. Among other events that facilitated this shift from tradition to modern poetry, was the contribution of poet and academic Takis Papatsonis, who first had translated T. S. Eliot's *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land*, and the publication of a single poetic collection by Theodoros Dorros, *Stou Glytomou to Chazi*⁶, which engaged critics (as Mario Vitti) with its controversial nature that laid between surrealism and modernism.

The Literary Friendship of Pound and Eliot

At the same time as the Generation of 1930s emerged and the redefinition of Greek poetry began, in Britain, poetic Modernism had already been redefining English-language poetry since the early 1910s, especially through Imagism, a form of poetry with more freedom of form and use of language than late nineteenth-century Victorian verse, and a unique utilization of images and subjects. Its leading figure and pioneer, Ezra Pound, changed the course of Modernism, with his blunt yet constructive literary criticism, his mania for pure poetry, and his occult competence. He also wholeheartedly supported artists whom he believed encompassed talent for the new and experimental in literature, amongst them T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. Only a very select group of writers were held by Pound to be free from the general 'stupidity' —Eliot,

⁶ Ibid. 264-266

Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis were the trio in whom he had abiding faith—and he tended to be dismissive of, or inattentive to, almost everyone else⁷.

Pound and Eliot both had left their home country America, to settle permanently in Europe and most specifically in London, at the heart of most famous and exclusive literary circles (W.B. Yeats, D.H Lawrence). which “offered them the artistic milieu and resource they craved and lacked in their homeland”⁸. They met in 1914, three years before Pound started writing *The Cantos*, a collection of poems he would continue composing for the rest of his life. Pound helped publish Eliot’s first poems, and introduced him to many artistic circles. Throughout his life, Pound lived in London, Paris, Venice and other places in Italy – images of all of these places can be found in his poetic works. Eliot, on the contrary, “physically and mentally” put down roots in Britain, and became a British citizen in 1927. However, in their experience “of assessing the difference between the foreign and the familiar” both poets acquired a valuable dual viewpoint, which led to “a sense of proportion, to a feeling of what is important, enduring and valuable and what is not”⁹. With their poetic work they set to investigate what was permanent, what recurrent and what merely transitory in poetry.

Similar to Pound, Seferis travelled a lot and lived in many places due to the nature of his professional life (working as diplomatic ambassador). This allowed him to distance himself from the Greek environment, but also to gain knowledge of many different cultures and societies. Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard highlight in the foreword of *George Seferis: Collected Poems* (1995) that “the distinguishing attribute of Seferis’s genius—one that he shares with Yeats and Eliot—was always his ability to make out of a local politics, out of a

⁷ Collini, Stefan, 'Modernists: Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot', *Common Writing: Essays on Literary Culture and Public Debate* (Oxford, 2016; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 May 2016),

⁸ Klapheck, Eva-Maria, “T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound: Examining the basis of their literary friendship.” Munich, GRIN Verlag, 2003 15-16

⁹ Ibid. 16

personal history or mythology, some sort of general statement or metaphor”. Seferis becomes sensually alive and interact with his surroundings through Poetry.

“Whenever I travel Greece wounds me.

On Pelion among the chestnut trees the Centaur’s shirt [..]

On Santorini touching islands that were sinking [..]

At Mycenae I raised the great stones and the treasures of the house of Atreus [..]

On Spetses, Poros and Mykonos [..]”

In the Manner of G.S pp. 41-42 (transl. Keeley & Sherrard)

Thomas Stearns Eliot, Georgios Seferis and Odysseus Elytis

The years 1931 to 1935 were instrumental for the influential relationship between T.S. Eliot and Seferis. Revealing with the autobiographical elements it contains is Seferis' "Letter to an English Poet" which reads;

Christmas Eve 1931; I was looking in an Oxford Street bookshop at Christmas cards. Then, for the first time, among the colourful lithographs, I caught hold of a poem by Eliot. It was Marina of the Ariel Poems series. [..] I returned home with Marina and a small volume of poems, the one that ends in The Hollow Men, if I'm not mistaken. The quote from Petronius - "What do you want?" made me look at "The Waste Land". I don't think I understood much of the context of the poem. [...] But the dramatic manner of the poet had me intrigued. After the Dada excursion and the experiments of Surrealism that I had attended in France, after that terrifying excavation and the ego's explosions that brought to the atmosphere of that time the electricity of a tropical climate when the rainy season was about to begin, the revival of the dramatic tradition I saw in Elliot took me to more extreme regions. Perhaps it is surprising, I feel, that I should speak thus on the occasion of a poem like "The Waste Land" which more than

any other gave the feeling of thirst among the narrow-minded wretches we have known in our happy years. But the difference is that this thirsty despair found expression in France in the search for a desperate technique, while in Eliot's England it was expressed in the presence of human characters [...] In simpler words, apart from the face of the Mediterranean "Marina", Eliot's poetry came to offer me something much deeper, which could not but thrill a Greek; the element of tragedy¹⁰.

Another phenomenon that explains the enormous fascination of Eliot's poetry in Greece is the study of Seferis, who characterized Cavafy and Eliot as parallels. In this study, Seferis excludes, of course, the possibility of an interaction, but this does not prevent him at all from believing that these two poets have been in the same parallel. More specifically, Cavafy's *Those who Fought for the Achaean League* gave Seferis, as he himself says, the first occasion to reflect on the poet of *The Waste Land*¹¹.

The younger Elytis, having acquired a passport that allowed him to travel, left for France in the midst of the Greek Civil War (1946-1949)¹², where he resided for the years 1948-1951, and then again during the Dictatorship from 1969 to 1971. In 1948 he meets T.S. Eliot, Breton, Reverdy, Char, Ungaretti and Picasso in Paris. The following year he meets Matisse, Leger and Giacometti¹³. In his work we see strong influences from French surrealism. He also made a decisive contribution to the dissemination of French culture in Greece by translating Elyard, Lautréamont, Rimbaud¹⁴. In an interview in 1979, he explains how he found refuge in French poetry in a period when the poetry in Greece was undergoing a crisis; "For me, my

¹⁰ Argyriou, Alex. "Introduction to the poetry of G. Seferis" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 91-92

¹¹ Malanos, Timos. "Cavafy and T.S. Eliot. (Are they really similar?)" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 51

¹² Appendix 6.

¹³ Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997.570-573

¹⁴ Ibid.

encounter with foreign poetry was beginning to break my bonds, it helped me. I am flattered to think that I did not imitate what the English and the French did, but I was able to combine it with my own personal experiences, which were of course deeply Greek, and with the Greek tradition which I found had a way of being renewed”¹⁵.

In the course of the next chapters, I attempt to examine some of the most notable works of T.S. Eliot, Georgios Seferis and Odysseus Elytis under three common themes; the mythical method – the incorporation of mythical figures, places, and personas –, the use of light, landscape and natural elements and, at last, the exploration of mysticism, religion and holiness.

¹⁵ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 203

Chapter 1 – The Mythical Method

Introduction

Modernism brought about a series of changes and introduced new pioneering techniques by modernist writers to explore complex themes and ideas and to produce resonant works of art that speak about the human condition in an uncanny, yet lasting way. One such technique is the mythical method, initially coined as a term by T.S. Eliot, to describe James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Prior to that, this method had been incorporated in a series of literary works, which drew upon myths and legends to delve into complicated themes, and to create in an innovative manner allusion between the myth and contemporary reality. This mythical method is particularly important for the study of Eliot, Seferis and Elytis, as it is a common link that resurfaces - in different versions - in their poems *The Waste Land*, *The Four Quartets*, *Mythistorema* and *Axion Esti*. The analysis of the mythical method may offer insight into the unique and brilliant ways in which these three modernist poets made use of this method in their works, and to clarify their purposes behind this deliberate use of myths (varying from Egyptian, Greek, Christian and Byzantine) and legends, as well as how the myths interact with dominant themes of disorientation, cultural hybridity, identity and memory.

Definition of the Concept

The mythical method as a literary term attributes, according to Eliot's criticism¹⁶, to a way of 'ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history' by evoking a common thread between cultural continuity and traditional order. He also refers to it as a method of manipulation in its creation of 'a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity'. In the modernist canon, the essentiality of

¹⁶ T.S. Eliot, *Ulysses, Order, and Myth*, in Frank Kermode (ed.) *Selected Prose* (New York, Harvest Book, 1975), 177.

the notion of connecting the present to the past became possible with the unified narrative of cultural order and tradition. By reinventing ancient mythologies and juxtaposing them to what was considered ‘current’ at that time, poets managed to associate the past to the present in an intricate way.

Eliot’s *The Waste Land* draws upon numerous myths and archetypes that create a sense of cohesion and structure in the poem. More often than not, mythical figures are redefined and reinterpreted within the poem in light of the modern condition. As Gavalas¹⁷ observes in his book “Theory of Archetypes and Contemporary Poetic Persons”, the mythical method for Eliot is more than just a mere poetic technique. It is able to transcend the written word and affect the psychosynthesis of the ordinary man, by provoking identification with several personae. In his poem, “any persona merges with one another and adopts new behaviors”.

Similarly, the mythical method is a key aspect of *Mythistorema*¹⁸ whose structure is based on the 24 books of Homer’s *Odyssey*, with 24 poems and extensive use of references to Greek mythology, which develop a new association between life and death.

Comparatively, the later collection of poems by Elytis, *Axion Esti*¹⁹, includes a range of cultural traditions, including Greek mythology, Christianity and Byzantine culture. Interestingly, the approach to Greek Mythology by the two poets differs substantially - as will be indicated – in that Seferis ties Greek tradition with spiritual grief, but Elytis is transformed into “a bright sun that fights against this gloomy grief”²⁰.

¹⁷ Gavalas Demetrios. *Theōria Tōn Archetypōn Kai Synchrona Poiētika Prosōpa: T.S. Eliot - O. Elytēs - K. Kabaphēs - K. Karyōtakēs*. 2017, 260

¹⁸ Seferis, George. *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard, Princeton UP, 1995.

¹⁹ Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997.

²⁰Thassitis, Panos. "Odysseus Elytis.The conscience of Greek myth." *Introduction to Elytis' Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, pp. 147-170.

The use of fragmented Mythic structures in *The Waste Land*

Initially, by incorporating the mythical method Eliot juxtaposes the ancient myths to the void and desolation of contemporary life. With this method, he is able to express his experience. With the internalization of the first World War externalities, he composes *The Waste Land*, reflecting on the barren land that has deeply affected the poet, and has resulted in many people developing neurosis. Yet, Eliot transforms this calamity and horridness, by dealing with this human condition as a creative transformation.

Eliot perceives myths and legends of the past as a way to reconfigure the new. He argued, in fact, in his essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’²¹ that tradition counts for nothing when it is no longer contested and modified. With *the Waste Land*²², the poet is being given the opportunity to shape new traditions, by transforming ‘fixed’ myths and mythical personae, into new characters that converse and interact with the complex landscape of human condition, as they seek to comprehend the nuances of what it means to be human. Teiresias, for one, is such a transformed persona, deriving from the Greek mythology as a fortuneteller, who witnessed goddess Athena bathing and was punished with the loss of his eyesight, but gifted with the skills of a prophet. In the poem, Teiresias roams the streets of London and is able to transcend time.

And along the Strand, up Queen Victoria Street.

O City city, I can sometimes hear

Beside a public bar in Lower Thames Street,

The pleasant whining of a mandoline

And a clatter and a chatter from within

Where fishmen lounge at noon: where the walls

²¹ Matthiessen, Francis Otto. *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot: An Essay on the Nature of Poetry*. 1967.

²² Eliot, T.S. *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. 1936. Faber and Faber, Ltd., 2020.

Of Magnus Martyr hold

Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold.²³

(The Fire Sermon, 258 – 265)

In “What the Thunder Said”, Teiresias is found in a complicated conundrum between two other figures. According to the Greek myth, Teiresias was punished by Hera and was transformed into a woman, and then back to a man by Zeus. Thus, in this extract, it is evident that the antique myth is perpetuated in a description of a contemporary struggle of loss of identity, and uncertainty about one’s life companions. This struggle may reflect the identity crisis experienced by many individuals after the First World War, many of whom were afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorders, after having left behind several dead comrades.

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not know whether a man or a woman

—But who is that on the other side of you?²⁴

(What the Thunder Said, 359 – 365)

In a way, Teiresias enjoys a ubiquitous presence in the poem, where his mythological skills of knowing the future are reestablished in the contemporary sphere that wonders after the traumatic events of the world war, what does the future hold. Teiresias is able to see, although he is blind, he is able to sympathize with other tragic figures as he has lived as both man and woman. His place in the ‘Waste Land’ is established by his relation to the various diviners and

²³ Eliot, T.S., “The Waste Land” from *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. 1936. Faber and Faber, Ltd., 2020.

²⁴ ²⁴ Eliot, T.S., “The Waste Land” from *Collected Poems, 1909-1962*. 1936. Faber and Faber, Ltd., 2020.

fortunetellers – subject of other myths – and is indicative of his understanding of reality as is constructed in the poem, with a plethora of timescapes and intersections of places, and persons. Still, his presence does not portray him as the central figure, nor main character of the poem. For one thing, Teiresias functions as an omniscient observer, who witnesses the current despair and spiritual sterility of the time, and is able to reflect on his own past experiences. To a certain extent, Teiresias' behavior mirrors Eliot's process of defining the new in response to what has already been established. In any case, *The Waste Land* functions as a remarkable observation of the modern condition; towards the end of "The Burial of the Dead", the poet addresses the reader (you and I): "You! hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable,—mon frère!" (76) Eliot thus creates a bridge that connects the reader to the poem and urges them to recognize their own condition within the complex parallelisms he has made. He welcomes, in a way, personalized interpretations of the poem, while placing each of us (the readers) in the position of the main character.

Myth and History intertwined in a modern Odyssey

*Mythistorema*²⁵, a much-acknowledged collection of 24 poems that introduced modernist poetry in Greece, follows a contemporary 'Odyssey' of the recent trauma of modern Greece. Its ambiguous title takes on various meaning as mythical story, novel, romance, and myth and history. For this chapter, the one deemed most appropriate is myth and history, as it combines mythical voyagers who revive the "immemorial drama"²⁶ of contemporary Greece. The characters, derived from Greek mythology, are modern Argonauts, exiles, pilgrims, as well as a harassed Orestes, and an expectant Odysseus. In comparison to *the Waste Land*'s fragmented

²⁵ Seferis, George. *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Phillip Sherrard, Princeton UP, 1995.

²⁶ Zahareas, Anthony N. "George Seferis: Myth and History." *Books Abroad*, University of Oklahoma, Jan. 1968, 202.

use of mythical references, Edmund Keeley²⁷ notices how Seferis makes use of consistent characters and recurrent mythical motifs. Most certainly, this is a deliberate choice for Seferis's audience, as the Greek readers are familiar with Greek mythology and can identify certain representations and interpretations of the poem. In contrast, the Anglo-Saxon audience cannot relate to the experiences of prophet Teiresias, nor other mythical figures' experiences in *The Waste Land*. Seferis's use of the mythical method is indeed influenced by *The Waste Land* - due to his engagement with the Greek translation of the poem -, but what characterizes it is the intimacy and coherence. *Mythistorema* utilizes only one mythology, maintains a single narrative voice, tone and style. The narrator speaks in plural ("we") as it expresses a group of modern voyagers with direct Homeric descendants (*We who set out on this pilgrimage*, 21).

at dusk we go down to the river
because it shows us the way to the sea;
and we spend the nights in cellars that smell of tar.
Our friends have left us
perhaps we never saw them, perhaps
we met them when sleep
still brought us close to the breathing wave
perhaps we search for them because we search for the other life,
(5')

Thus, the mythical voyage revisits the past as a way of "self-examination and meditation upon the human condition"²⁸, as it progressively delves deeper into themes of social responsibility against tradition and memory, but also enduring reality after the occurrence of tragic events.

²⁷ Keeley, Edmund. "Seferis and the Mythical Method" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 401-428

²⁸ Ibid.

The mythologies incorporated successfully achieve coherence as Seferis maintains a consistent reference to the Greek myths of Odysseus and the myth of Jason and the Argonauts, thus ‘limiting the scope’ of his mythical method within the Aegean Sea. This is about an informed choice, one that is essential to convey parallel meanings and allusions to the Minor Asia catastrophe, which took place in the same aquatic environment. In fact, the Aegean archipelago functions as a common denominator among all myths that Seferis is utilizing, because the islands and coasts reflect the voyage of Odysseus and his comrades, and of Jason and the Argonauts, and in modern history, they refer to actual events as the naval Battle of Samos (against the Ottomans), and of Lemnos during the First Balkan Wars. Indicative of this, passage 13’ *Hydra* incarnates the bravery and greatness of the heroes of 1821, and brings to life the naval battles and the ‘sound of cannons’, the ‘white sails’ and the ‘rhythm of drums on stilled waves’

In this way, Seferis draws a connective link between Greek antiquity and the most modern traumatic historic events, which touch upon the ordinary man’s psyche, bringing about a historical identity crisis. The whole nation, which adopts a dual role within the poem (both the agent as in “we” and the receiver) has to ‘carry on their shoulders’ the weight of a long-standing tradition,

I woke with this marble head in my hands;
it exhausts my elbow and I don’t know where to put it down. (3’)

We brought back
these carved reliefs of a humble art. (1’)

beyond the broken
statues and the tragic columns (6’)

and then the smiles, so static, of the statues. (20’)

Unpacking the words ‘marble head’, ‘carved reliefs’ and ‘broken statues’ a bit further allows the reader to understand that these once glorious mythical figures are now symbols that presage upcoming putrefaction. Nevertheless, the overall message is obscure. Is the poet referring to the natural decay of Greece, as once a country with long history and tradition that has recently endured violence and hardships, resulting in its statues suffering from fossilization and decay (‘limbs incapable, mouths cracked’ (1), ‘My hands disappear and come towards me mutilated’ (3)), or is he hinting at the eventual corrosion of the human spirit that grieves its losses (‘That’s all I’m able to do.’ (3))? It is important to notice in this extract the shift in tone between the prototype phrasing in Greek ‘I have no more strength’ and the translated equivalent by Edmund Keeley ‘That’s all I’m able to do’. We see here that the change in syntax deducts from the translated the negation (no more), as well as the word ‘strength’, that ties beautifully with the surrounding wording ‘it exhausts my elbows’. Yet, the preferred wording by Keeley, highlights the agency of the poetic subject ‘I’m able’, that connects it seamlessly to the rest stanza ‘I look, I speak, I hold’.

Exiled as the Argonauts and Odysseus, Seferis’ nostalgic tone conveys feelings of loss, grief and expatriation, that a lot of Greeks – from the Minor Asia coast – share with the poet. Seferis, by including himself in the poem (by using ‘I’ and ‘we’ alternately), creates a collective understanding of the Greek tradition, while simultaneously expresses grief and sorrows for the lost past.

in a country that is no longer ours

nor yours.

(8’)

Whatever I loved vanished with the houses [..]

and crumbled in the winds of autumn.

(18’)

There is sorrow for the fallen comrades:

Our friends have left us
perhaps we never saw them, perhaps
we met them when sleep
(5')

And for the loss of direction and purpose:

What are they after, our souls, travelling
on the decks of decayed ships
(8' – transl. E. Keeley)

Seferis compares the contemporary man with Odysseus, who initially had a strong sense of direction, but his voyage was constantly intercepted by abrupt 'stops' and 'delays' that disoriented himself and his naïve crew (15), endangering his memory of his past which functioned as a reminder of where he should be heading – home, to Penelope ('Pity those who wait with such patience' 15). In the same passage, the poet's extensive report to Elpenor²⁹ operates as criticism to the 'comrades' of modern Odysseus that are characterized by naivety and indifference, and tend to prolong the journey back home. For the poet, Elpenor is the most 'mindless' out of all the comrades; he is a representative sign of the humble portion of people that rarely receive the light of great destiny, and thus remain in history's uninterrupted oblivion³⁰ ('No one remembers them' – 4, *Argonauts*).

²⁹ The youngest of Odysseus comrade. While on the Island of Circe, he became drunk and decided to spend the night on the roof. In the morning he slipped on the ladder, fell, and broke his neck, dying instantly. His comrades were too busy to look for him, and as a result they left the island without him. Odysseus meets him again when he travels to Hades, and Elpenor demands of him a proper cremation and burial in Circe's island,

³⁰ From Homer he was referred to as "a certain Elpenor, who was neither a man of war, nor strong in mind"

The Odyssey's structure reflected in Mythistorema

Organizationally, it is worth examining the structure of the collection influenced by Homer's *Odyssey*. In the beginning of this chapter, it was mentioned that *Mythistorema* follows the division of *The Odyssey* into 24 poems (or rhapsodies). The repetition of phrases regarding sea voyages³¹, ship parts³², sea breezes and coasts³³, the company³⁴ and loss of comrades³⁵, the adventures³⁶ and meanderings³⁷ of the crew, all are leitmotifs drawn by *The Odyssey*. What Seferis cautiously does that differentiates *Mythistorema* from the heroic epic, is removing the core of *The Odyssey*, namely Odysseus' perseverance and willingness to complete his journey (and the epic poem), in other words mankind's achievement. Because the poet alludes to imagery of degradation, despair and mourning, the reader realizes the pessimistic nature of the poem, and the unsuccessfulness of the whole voyage.

The calm melancholy of the last poem does not reassure the reader of a positive future; rather, it remains deliberately ambiguous, to invite readers to contemplate about the nation's contemporary squalor against the ancestral glory, a burden that Seferis conveys throughout the whole collection. By directly addressing the next generation of descendants 'Those who will someday live here where we end -' Seferis warns and pleads them simultaneously about the duty to their ancestors, and towards their tradition. They are now responsible to ensure myth and history lives on, as well as the achievements of the heroic figures 'among the asphodels'.

³¹ Westward the sea merges with a mountain range.

From our left the south wind blows and drives us mad (7)

³² Ship's keel (1)

³³ on this promontory, open to the south wind (7)

³⁴ those friends who still remained loyal to us (2),

They were good, the companions, they didn't complain (4)

³⁵ The companions died one by one,

Our friends have left us (4)

³⁶ as we were passing the deserted island with the Barbary figs

We went past many capes many islands the sea (4)

³⁷ wandering among broken stones, three or six thousand years (22),

We knew that the islands were beautiful

somewhere round about here where we grope, (8)

Once again, the poet dips his pen into the Greek mythology with the reference to ‘Erebus’ and illustrates life’s ephemeral nature, by appealing the next generation to ‘turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus’. According to Hesiod’s *Theogony*, Erebus (= darkness) is the offspring of Chaos, and the father of Death, Destruction and Fate, but also of Sleep, Dreams, Friendship and Pity. Thus, the last poem invites twofold interpretation. The souls of the victims turn ‘towards Erebus’ either to ‘receive’ their absolute death and destruction or to accept the pity of the Gods, that grants them with a new life.

Here end the works of the sea, the works of love.

Those who will some day live here where we end —

should the blood happen to darken in their memory and overflow —

let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels,

let them turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus:

We who had nothing will school them in serenity. (24’)

Erebus is an ambivalent figure, much like Tiresias (mentioned above), although the latter casts its presence throughout the whole poem.

On the one hand, the (hi)story infused myth of Seferis, and the myth infused poem of Eliot reflect the overall atmosphere of the first decades of the twentieth century, the disillusionment and despair of the post-war era, mortality, decay and loss. On the other hand, hints of rebirth and redemption are not that explicitly imminent in the *Waste Land*, yet *Mythistorema*’s last two poems draw the reader out of the abyss and into the comforting atmosphere of Spring.

A little farther

we will see the almond trees blossoming

the marble gleaming in the sun

the sea breaking into waves

a little farther,
let us rise a little higher.

(23')

On this note, tradition and myth are closely intertwined with nature and how each poet relates to their surrounding environment. That being said, Seferis' myths originate from local tradition that has strived to remain alive through years of world and civil wars, Ottoman occupation, and serve as a reminder of a great era, that directly unites its subjects, namely the Greek nation. Eliot's poems lack this directness to the human subject through tradition and myth, and yet they refer to such humane feelings and emotion (despair, detachment, degradation of the soul) that probe identification universally.

Past and future are, thus, merged in a moment that expresses hope for rebirth and collective peace. Death and life acquire a new meaning, a new sense of contact which is based on the preservation of collective memory. Individuals need to move from the painful awareness of the past to the comforting recovery, and relay lucidity to the next generation.

Here end the works of the sea, the works of love.
Those who will some day live here where we end —
should the blood happen to darken in their memory and overflow —
let them not forget us, the weak souls among the asphodels,
let them turn the heads of the victims towards Erebus:
We who had nothing will school them in serenity.

(24 – transl. E. Keeley³⁸)

³⁸ All extracts are taken from: George Seferis, "Mythistorema" from *Collected Poems (George Seferis)*. Translated, edited, and introduced by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. The numbers 1 to 24 correspond to the poems.

The “contemporary Greek myth” of Elytis

In an interview to Ivar Ivask (1975)³⁹, Odysseus Elytis denies having used ancient myths in “the ordinary way”. He goes on to clarify that especially for Greek writers, the incorporation of Greek myths is particularly beneficial, considering the grade of their familiarity with the myths of Oedipus and Antigone, for instance. Some critics⁴⁰ (Fragkopoulou, Dimitroulis) often speak of a ‘construction’ of a “personal mythology”, especially in works as *Axion Esti*, where the poet employs elements of ancient myths and of the Greek nation, which he modernizes by attributing new symbolisms (i.e. the reference of Moires in *Genesis*). This profound “modern Greek mythology” combines history, the arts and Hellenism. On the contrary, Vitti⁴¹ warns that critics, in order to exempt themselves from the need to formulate a personal opinion on such a complex topic, confuse “myth” with “theme”. He, in fact, distinguishes the way myths inspired him and the way he makes use of them in his works. Elytis⁴² calls this merge of myth-infused elements ‘mythogenesis’, which is the “mechanism of personifying abstract ideas, without converting them into recognizable forms.” This chapter attempts to illustrate Elytis’ unique technique to locate the origins of the modern Greek world, instead of what Seferis did, which was to use ancient myths to comment on recent historical events.

In regards to the first section of *Axion Esti*, “*Genesis*”⁴³, Elytis ‘resurrects’ the plight and sufferings inflicted by World War I, the German Occupation and the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) by ‘giving birth’ to a whole new world, divided into 7 hymns, based on the 7 days

³⁹ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 118

⁴⁰ Demetroulis, D. "Axion of History and Esti of Rhetoric." *Chartes*, 21-23 Nov. 1986, pp. 326-328. and Fragkopoulou, D.Th. "An Opinion for Elytis." *Nea Estia*, 1 & 15 Apr. 1997, pp. 466.

⁴¹ Vitti, Mario. "'The contemporary Greek myth' of Elytis." *Nea Estia*, 1 & 15 Apr. 1997, pp.598-599

⁴² Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 119-120

⁴³ Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 121

of creation of the Old Testament. Although, Elytis does not incorporate explicitly any myths or mythical personas as Eliot and Seferis do, the presence of mythical themes is ubiquitous. In this new world, greed, hate and lust for power are not welcome. In comparison to the *Waste Land* where Eliot emphasizes the negative values of mankind, connecting them to the degradation of the natural world, Elytis illustrates and rejuvenates nature that characterizes the Greek surroundings (sea, sky, olive trees), thereby suggesting that nature is essential for the vitality of the humankind, and unlike humanity it is able to reborn.

The two poets incorporate natural elements (flowers, season's changes, weather phenomena) in order to establish a universal emotion that is shared among those who are familiar with the scenery. In the case of Eliot this could be interpreted as an emotion of despair, disappointment and dullness ('cruellest month, dead land, dull roots, forgetful snow'). Elytis paints a more optimistic emotional disposition ('green blood' in contrast to red blood which signifies death, 'golden bulbs, exquisite sea'). Nature reflects both poets' internal instincts and anxieties.

The third and last section of *Axion Esti* might be considered the most well-structured poem of the collection, in terms of rhythm and geometry. The first and last parts follow the pattern of six quatrains, one tercet, six quatrains, one tercet, five quatrains and seven couplets. The second part follows a slightly different pattern of six quatrains, one tercet, six quatrains, one tercet, six quatrains, one tercet and then, five quatrains and seven couplets. This meticulous and attentive arrangement goes to show the poet's attempt to establish order and the cautious process of choosing each word and stanza in order to achieve this rhythmical balance. The *Gloria*⁴⁴, in its full potential, is the single part that ties the aforementioned mathematical structures with the mythical method, incorporated by Eliot and Seferis, as indicated above. In

⁴⁴ Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 179

the beginning of this paragraph, I argued that Elytis does not explicitly involve mythical characters in *Axion Esti*, due to the fact that the sole character is both his past and future self. Seferis also remains 'rigid' and opts for a universal first-person character with whom the audience can identify. Eliot, on the contrary, opts for several mythical personas, the most dominant being Teiresias, who is both a man and a woman. Thus, the question arises; if Elytis does not subjectify any mythical figure, how does he partake in the process of mythical conjunction? This conundrum could be elucidated by focusing on the plethora of asyndeton schemes as the 1) tercet of the Islands '*Sifnos, Amorgos, Alonnesos, Thasos, Ithaca, Santorini, Kos, Ios, Sikinos*' 2) the tercet of the Flowers '*The Lily, the Rose, the Jasmine the Campion, the Lilac, the Hyacinth, the Violet, the Daffodil, the Aster*' 3) the tercet of the Female Names '*Ersi, Myrto, Marina, Eleni, Roxanne, Fotini, Anna, Alexandra, Cynthia*', 4) the tercet of the Ships, the Mountains, and the Trees. All of these 'listings' include nine elements and correspond to the classical philosopher Plotinus (*the nine steps Plotinus climbed, 3rd part*) and his collection of writings, *The Enneads*.⁴⁵

Unlike Seferis's austere and figurative language, Elytis develops a unique lyrical expression and employs different voices, both 'I' and 'we' that serve as subjective or objective commentary. Thus, it is evident that words are cautiously selected to match the strict rhymes and metrics, but also to serve as a reference points that allow audience to engage into meaningful (and suggestive) associations. For instance, in Psalms 7-8 the poet mentions 'The Sage the Founder and the Geometer', who came as 'friends' when in reality they were 'enemies' to criticize the behavior of those 'Blackhooded men' in *Ode 8*, who took advantage of the situation and cooperated with the oppressors by betraying their fellow patriots. The three figures can be found in Aristofanes's *The Birds*, a comedy that indirectly satires the Athenian

⁴⁵ other interpretations may associate the nine-element lists with the number of letters in the title *Axion Esti*, also nine, the nine Muses, the nine days it takes to fall from heaven to hell

political and social life after the Sicilian Expedition and the Peloponnesian Wars. At this point, it should be mentioned that the English translation lacks to convey the full meaning of the Greek word 'prosopithophoroi' (prosopo(n.) < face + phero(v.) < to carry, to bring) derived from 'prosopitha' the designated theatrical masks ancient hypocrites and chorus used to wear, when disguising.

This complex association indicates the thought process of the modernist poet, who in comparison to poets of the past, desires a certain level of involvement and versatility from the readers. As both Eliot and Seferis, so does Elytis 'demands' from the reader to become an active and investigative recipient of their poetry, and that can be achieved with the incorporation of extradiegetic elements derived from other literary works (Dante, Homer) ancient myths, religious parables and historical events. This technique, on the whole, differentiates modernist poetry from other movements, and highlights the plural meaning and rich use of the mythical method.

Contrasted Objectives

While Eliot intended to describe and paint the disappointment and despair of the current epoch with his poetry, Seferis is much preoccupied with the Deep South; and with his poetry, he desires to define the tragic moments of Greek history, and shed light to an unexpected phenomenon that is up to this day relevant to the Greek modern society; namely, how a frustrated region continues to live and exist in the shadow of its legendary past and immense cultural traditions. Besides, *Mythistorema* can be considered as a myth narrating the Minor Asia catastrophe of 1922, a historical event that affected the poet and his family, forcing them to move from the Asiatic coast of Izmir to Athens.

Shifting broken stones, breathing in
the pine's coolness with greater difficulty each day,
swimming in the waters of this sea

and of that sea,
without the sense of touch
without men
in a country that is no longer ours
noryours.
(8')

Seferis incorporating themes as suffering, and grief⁴⁶, places this tragedy at the center of the poetic myth but also at the center of readers' memory, while simultaneously stressing the importance of remembrance.

The companions died one by one,
with lowered eyes. Their oars
mark the place where they sleep on the shore. [..]
No one remembers them. Justice
(4' transl. E. Keeley)

As a result, the poets' conviction about the incorporation of mythical elements in poems as *The Waste Land* and *Mythistorema*, is different and dependent on several layers. For one, a number of literary theorists⁴⁷ attribute the wide use of mythical figures and stories (in *Mythistorema*) to Seferis' translation of *The Waste Land*, that occurred some years before publishing *Mythistorema*. Others⁴⁸ argue, that within the emergence of innovative and west-inspired

⁴⁶ What are they after, our souls, travelling
on the decks of decayed ships
crowded in with fallow women and crying babies
unable to forget themselves either with the flying fish
or with the stars that the masts point our at their tips; (8)

⁴⁷ Sherrard, Philip. "The poetry of T.S. Eliot and G. Seferis. *A contradiction*" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 31-50 and Malanos, Timos. "Cavafy and T.S. Eliot. (*Are they really similar?*)" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 51-84

⁴⁸ Karantonis, Antreas. "The poet G. Seferis" (extract) *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 13-22 and

Generation of the 1930s, Seferis felt compelled to reconstruct ancient myths and traditions as a way of redefining the past glories, and rejuvenating Greek poetry, that up until then was rigid, limited and archaic. However, what this thesis attempts to illustrate with the comparison of three modernist poets is their unique perception of the war and the diversity in which they are incorporating such tragic themes and events within their poetry to resonate the ensuing feelings. The noteworthy historical events of the modern Greek period that transpired and influenced heavily the spiritual intellectual society of the years which *Mythistorema* was published were the Minor Asia Catastrophe in 1922, with the compulsory repatriation of thousands of Greeks residing in the coast of Turkey, the coup against King Konstantinos, and the outburst of the second World War in 1939. Through writing, Seferis stresses the importance of ‘mneme’ (memory), and the associative link of myths for the continuation of a nation that has suffered several catastrophes and political tragedies. Similarly, Elytis links memory and tradition with religion, but also with the uniqueness of the Greek landscape which is able to transcend time and space, and will forever be the source of inspiration and ray of optimism within a repressed and frustrated nation. Religion⁴⁹ is central to this conviction of trying to find inner peace within the self and society. Eliot parallelizes the modern human condition with an extended fragmentation of distorted identities, cultures and figures. The aftermath of the world war is evident in the contemporary psyche of most individuals, and is bound to worsen, if they do not realize the ephemeral nature of life. Eliot’s poetry originates out of suffering, as is Seferis’ and Elytis’. Nevertheless, their expressive styles and approaches differ and welcome readers to a spiritual journey that is certain to redefine their relationship with nature, memory and tradition.

Argyriou, Alex. “Introduction to the poetry of G. Seferis” *Introduction to Seferis’ Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 85-110

⁴⁹ More on Religion in Chapter 3

Chapter 2 – Light & Landscape

*To be Greek means to feel and to react in a certain way, nothing else. It is a function directly connected to the drama of **Darkness and Light** we all act here in this corner of the globe⁵⁰*

Introduction

Employing landscapes, light and shadows is significant for modernist poetry due to its potential to capture the complexity and ambiguity of the modern world. Modernist poets were interested in discovering new modes of representation of the human experience, and the use of these elements allowed them to explore vivid and evocative imagery that conveyed the dislocation and alienation characteristic of modern life. By associating the speaker with specific landscapes and using light and darkness to reveal their emotional and psychological states, modernist poets explored the relationship between the individual and the surrounding environment. Additionally, by using these elements, modernist poets were allowed to approach and engage with the past, suggesting the continuity of human experience across time and place, and underlining ways the past continues to shape the present and influence its interpretations. Nonetheless, the use of landscapes, light and darkness reflects, ultimately, modernism's characteristic interest in experimentation, fragmentation and exploration of new innovative ways to capture the complex and unpredictable character of modern world.

⁵⁰ Elytēs, Odysseas. "Open Papers." *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 557

Interplay of light, landscape and historical memory

In *Mythistorema* George Seferis employs landscapes and light as powerful symbols of the past and the personae's identity, which is in a way the identity of the poet. The associations vary ranging from the ancient Greek mythology to more recent historical events. There are vivid descriptions of the sea, mountains and islands ...

We went past many capes many islands the sea
leading to another sea, gulls and seals

(4')

Westward the sea merges with a mountain range.
From our left the south wind blows and drives us mad,
the kind of wind that strips bones of their flesh.

(7')

We knew that the islands were beautiful
somewhere round about here where we grope,
slightly lower down or slightly higher up,
a tiny space.

(8' transl. E. Keeley)

Through such descriptions Seferis evokes a sense of place and history⁵¹ that serves as a metaphor for the search of identity and meaning in a complex and changing world that has left people lost, disoriented and without a purpose of direction. The wind in '7 – *South Wind*' is indicative of this disorientation that carries their souls hither and tither in '8' :

What are they after, our souls, travelling
on rotten brine-soaked timbers

⁵¹ Nikolareizis, Demetres. "Homer's presence in Georgios Seferis' Poetry." *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 23-24

from harbour to harbour?
Shifting broken stones, breathing in
the pine's coolness with greater difficulty each day,
swimming in the waters of this sea
(8')

The wind is closely tied to the landscape and seascape that Seferis describes in *Mythistorema*. Initially, wind and other weather phenomena reflect Seferis's interest in exploring the relationship between the natural world and the human experience. Moreover, the weather conditions signify powerful symbols of transformation and change, reflecting the emotional and psychological state of the poet. Another interpretation⁵² explores how the bodies and souls of the poetic subject are so vulnerable and lost, that are carried away by wind *from harbor to harbor* (8), functioning as a wider metaphor for the people lost at the Aegean Sea, after the Minor Asia catastrophe in 1922. What is more, the wind and weather are powerful natural forces that play a significant role in ancient Greek Mythology and especially in the myth of Argonauts, where the sailors were confronted with the clashing rocks dashed together by the force of winds.

Our country is closed in. The two black Symplegades
close it in. When we go down
to the harbours on Sunday to breathe freely
we see, lit in the sunset,
the broken planks from voyages that never ended,
bodies that no longer know how to love.
(10')

⁵² Argyriou, Alex. "Introduction to the poetry of G. Seferis" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 95

Another dimension of the employment of contrasting imagery between light and darkness is the poet's quest for achieving an equilibrium between these two extremes. While the case with using light and darkness metaphors in literature is often associated with the opposing binary between good and evil, or knowledge and ignorance, in *Mythistorema* Seferis symbolizes through light and darkness the struggle to reconcile the opposing forces of historical memory and ignorance.

Each of us writes you the same thing
and each falls silent in the other's presence,
watching, each of us, the same world separately
the light and darkness on the mountain range
and you.

Who will lift this sorrow from our hearts?

(7')

The 'sorrow' can be seen to symbolize the burden of tradition and history, as in their duty to inform the next generations and shape a future, that incorporates the past. Historical documentation⁵³ has various sides and is always open to different interpretations that challenge its subjective nature, thus each 'writer' desires to describe the 'same (historical) event, even though their perspectives of the 'same world' differ. Seferis, often employs the theme of historical memory that can 'resurface' through the ruins and rubbles, reminding readers about the responsibility of those who witnessed.

having known this fate of ours so well
wandering among broken stones, three or six thousand years
searching in collapsed buildings that might have been our homes
trying to remember dates and heroic deeds:

⁵³ Ibid. 94-95

will we be able?

(22')

seeing your shadow grow and diminish,
lose itself in the other shadows, in the other
world that let you go yet held you back.

(15')

In this extract from '15', the poem addressed to Elpenor – a complex and tragic figure, who slept drunk on the roof of Circe's palace, and died falling from the ladder the next morning, forgotten by his comrades – Seferis uses shadows to indicate the ephemeral and elusive nature of human existence, exactly as suggested the ancient myth of Elpenor⁵⁴. The image of the speaker's shadow 'growing and diminishing, losing itself in the other shadows', reflects the idea that human beings are constantly in a state of flux, always changing and adapting to the world around them. The 'other world' (poem 15') as an extensive symbolism to the world of Hades, refers to the place where lost souls depart to after their death. According to the myth, when Odysseus visited Hades, the first to greet him was Elpenor, pleading him to return to the island of Circe to offer him a proper burial ceremony. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for the complex and multi-layered nature of human experience, in which individuals are constantly negotiating between different realms of existence and struggling to find their place in the (after)world. In this set of opposing forces (life – death) the reader (or Elpenor) has to recognize the cyclical nature of time and to learn to navigate the opposing forces of life and death, light and darkness, memory and ignorance⁵⁵. The image of the growing and diminishing shadow, disappearing into the other shadows, creates a sense of uncertainty and mystery that

⁵⁴ See Chapter 1. Footnotes 25-26

⁵⁵ Nikolareizis, Demetres. "Homer's presence in Georgios Seferis' Poetry." *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 28

underscores the poem's themes of change, transformation, and the search for meaning in a complex and uncertain world.

Towards the last poems of the collection, Seferis uses the image of light to convey a sense of hope and possibility, particularly in the context of a violent and chaotic world. The boy's experience of seeing 'the light under the plane tree' is described as a moment of transcendence, a glimpse of a higher reality beyond the immediate chaos and destruction of war.

Now that you are leaving, take the boy with you as well,
the boy who saw the light under the plane tree,
one day when trumpets resounded and weapons shone
and the sweating horses
bent to the trough to touch with wet nostrils
the green surface of the water.”

(17' transl. E. Keeley)

The use of light in this passage is also significant in contrast to the darker imagery that surrounds it, such as the 'trumpets resounding', 'weapons shining, and horses sweating'. Overall, Seferis's use of light in this extract serves to convey a sense of hope and possibility in the midst of a violent and chaotic world. The image of the boy seeing the light suggests that even in the darkest of times, there are moments of beauty and transcendence that can offer a glimpse hope beyond the immediate turmoil of the world. The vision of the poem is ambivalent. For one, it does neither suggest an atmosphere of total despair, nor total redemption, but something precariously in between, that is deliberately ambiguous to welcome interpretations from the reader⁵⁶.

⁵⁶ Zahareas, Anthony N. "George Seferis: Myth and History." *Books Abroad*, University of Oklahoma, Jan. 1968, 203

Between two Homelands

Considered one of T.S. Eliot's most complex yet important works, *Four Quartets* explore themes of time, memory, history and the human condition. One of the central themes in *Four Quartets* is the interplay of light, shadows and natural landscape. The four poems, although published separately, in the years between 1935 and 1942, belong to the same collection of poems, and bear characteristics that unite them in sets; Each poem's title refers to a particular natural element; air, earth, water and fire⁵⁷. In addition, Eliot explicitly sets each poem in a specific season; spring, summer, fall, winter. All these characterizations affect the imagery the poems evoke and sets a distinct tone for each one of them. The changing seasons are, thus, used to illustrate a wider metaphor related to the change of the human condition, the passing of time and the vulnerability of the natural world. Another factor that perplexes the readers' understanding and aims to increase the poems' difficulty is the personal association of Eliot, to the places of each poem. Eliot invites readers to unravel the mystery, as he often addresses them throughout the course of the poem. This phenomenon embodies the poet's claim that modern literature has to be difficult since "our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity", therefore the poet needs to "become more and more comprehensive, more allusive and indirect, in order to force language into his meaning"⁵⁸.

Initiating our analysis, the recurring leitmotif of the 'rose garden' introduces a symbol of the spiritual realm, which allows the thinker to enter a state of being that transcends time and space. J. M. Reibetanz⁵⁹ speaks of how at first the image of the 'rose garden' is ambiguous, perplexing and uncertain in meaning. It is not until the end of the poem, in Little Gidding, that the image of the roses concludes, she adds, 'the fire and the rose are one', that the poetic subject

⁵⁷ Atkins, G. *Reading T.S. Eliot: Four Quartets and the Journey Towards Understanding*. Springer, 2012. 28

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ J. M. Reibetanz, "Four Quartets as Poetry of Place," *Dalhousie Review*, 56 (Autumn 1976), 539.

(the poet) realizes its understanding to it. Although, some⁶⁰ argue with this interpretation, it seems to me that the initial image of the 'rose garden' as a place of sudden illumination, uncovers the poem's reference to spiritual meditation. Contemplation and introspection are suggested by Eliot to grant access to this garden, this state of being, where the boundaries of the physical world dissolve. In this utopic place, the readers can wonder 'what might have been' different in the 'present', if they had gone 'down the passage', inviting them to reflect on their own past experiences and how they are shaping the present and future, and to seek for the 'doors never opened' which allow them entrance to their own 'rose garden', an idyllic place where time pauses, and meditation begins.

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden. My words echo
Thus, in your mind.

But to what purpose

Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves
I do not know.

(Burnt Norton I, 9-18)

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall

⁶⁰ Ellis, Steve. *The English Eliot: Design, Language and Landscape in Four Quartets*. Routledge, 2015.

Be remembered; involved with past and future.

Only through time time is conquered.

(Burnt Norton II, 92-96)

The garden is oblivious to passing time. Its exact location is nor in the past, nor in the present.

The first stanza uses the image of the garden painted with shadows created by the passage of time, evoking a sense of missed opportunities and unfulfilled potential. This stanza concludes on a note of doubts and ‘what if’, in the garden of immense possibilities that was not explored.

The third stanza introduces hues of light and darkness to explore the idea of disaffection and distraction. The imagery wavers in a series of dualities; ‘daylight’ and ‘darkness’, ‘permanence’ and temporality’, ‘plenitude’ and ‘vacancy’. This juxtaposition emphasizes the fleeting and transitory nature of life, and the opposing impact of temporality and permanence. Light and darkness are symbolic of the circle of life.

In a dim light: neither daylight

Investing form with lucid stillness

Turning shadow into transient beauty

With slow rotation suggesting permanence

Nor darkness to purify the soul

Emptying the sensual with deprivation

Cleansing affection from the temporal.

Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker

Over the strained time-ridden faces

Distracted from distraction by distraction

(Burnt Norton III, 109-118)

In East Coker, which connotes Earth and Fall, Eliot employs darkness to indicate the inevitability of death.

O dark dark dark. They all go into the dark,

(East Coker III, 288)

Everyone, regardless of their social and financial status, ultimately will end up in darkness. The absence of light represents the absence of life, the uncertainty and the idea that death is an inevitable journey into the unknown. The emptiness of ‘vacant spaces’ points to the imminence of death⁶¹. Darkness punctuates that despite all pretensions of glory in a capitalist-turning society, death erases past splendor and does not consider wealth, fame, and social prestige.

The vacant interstellar spaces, the vacant into the vacant,
The captains, merchant bankers, eminent men of letters,
The generous patrons of art, the statesmen and the rulers,
Distinguished civil servants, chairmen of many committees,
Industrial lords and petty contractors, all go into
the dark,

(East Coker III, 289-295)

Ellis in his book *The English Eliot: Design, Language and Landscape in Four Quartets* talks about England as an image of a vast “necropolis”⁶². East Coker refers to ‘old stones that cannot be deciphered’, Dry Salvages to ‘the significant soil’, and Little Gidding to ‘an illegible stone’. What Eliot, however, is attempting to achieve via the vast burial references, is to illustrate that the human life is closely intertwined with the life of those who died before us, ‘we are born with the dead’, those who marked history, and whose ‘history is now England’. Eliot, as Seferis and Elytis, draws a connective link from the antecedents to his descendants. That is how he

⁶¹ Ibid. 102-103

⁶² Ibid. 95

achieves to bridge generations in a “timeless perspective” which suggests a common origin and end⁶³.

And that, consequently opens up a completely new conversation on the way in which Eliot ‘includes’ both American and British landscapes into the poem, - his origins (in the US) and his ‘end’ in Britain. By bringing actual landscapes into each of the *Four Quartets*, Eliot demands of the audience to ‘read’ them literally, and not metaphorically – as was often intended in *The Wasteland* –⁶⁴. In his essay, *The Influence of the Landscape upon the Poet*, he explains how early childhood memories in Missouri, Massachusetts and St. Louis differ from the ones he experienced as an adult in England. Yet, he concludes that they are both ‘significant’ and ‘emotionally charged’ since they signify both his origins on the banks of ‘the Mississippi’, and his end in ‘Somerset’⁶⁵. While Reibetanz⁶⁶ parallels the use of landscapes in Eliot to the use of nature in romanticism (W. Wordsworth, P. B. Shelley, S. T. Coleridge) in that the “substance of the poem is determined by the poet’s experience of the place” since it “accepts and celebrates man’s emotional ties with nature”⁶⁷, Ellis offers a contradictory viewpoint that highlights the “chronically devoid landscape”⁶⁸ of the *Four Quartets*, signifying both emotional and spiritual vacuity.

To counteract this spiritual emptiness Eliot employs several religious references throughout the whole poem to reinforce notions of spiritual enlightenment and rebirth, and suggest a mystical union between the individual self and the universal divine. Eliot suggests that the darkness is not only absence of light and life, but in fact a manifestation of God’s

⁶³ Ibid. 78

⁶⁴ J. M. Reibetanz, "Four Quartets as Poetry of Place," *Dalhousie Review*, 56 (Autumn 1976), 528.

⁶⁵ Eliot, T. S. "The Influence of Landscape upon the Poet." *Daedalus*, vol. 126, no. 1, 1997, 428

⁶⁶ J. M. Reibetanz, "Four Quartets as Poetry of Place," *Dalhousie Review*, 56 (Autumn 1976), 533.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 530

⁶⁸ Ellis, Steve. *The English Eliot: Design, Language and Landscape in Four Quartets*. Routledge, 2015. 105

presence. Unlike common negative symbolisms of darkness in poetry, here death is not something to be feared of. On the contrary, it should be embraced as a way of approaching God and relinquishing the self of human desires.

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on
darkness,

(East Coker III, 300-304)

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.

(East Coker III, 321-323)

Overall, Eliot suggests to embrace the uncertainty, engulf the darkness and allow oneself to be lost before one can find their self again. That way, darkness becomes the means towards self-awareness, that people should not fear nor hesitate to enter. To transcend towards the ultimate darkness presupposes having achieved 'empty desolation'. East Coker romanticizes the transition from life to death, as a journey towards understanding oneself and embracing uncertainty in order to find meaning.

You say I am repeating
Something I have said before. I shall say it again.
Shall I say it again? In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.
And what you do not know is the only thing you know
And what you own is what you do not own
And where you are is where you are not.

(East Coker III, 329-342)

Death is not the end of the journey, rather the beginning of life with introspection.

We must be still and still moving
Into another intensity
For a further union, a deeper communion
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.

(East Coker V, 404-409)

The influence of the Greek landscape into the development of the Language

Odysseus Elytis has been characterized as “the poet of the Aegean”⁶⁹, an attribute that ‘entraps’ Elytis as a naturalist⁷⁰. However, he clarifies that in reality, “when I talk about the light, about the sea, about the winds, I'm not just talking about the physical elements. I use the natural

⁶⁹ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 202-203

⁷⁰ Ibid. “Because when people hear “poet of the Aegean”, they think he is a naturalist, a person who sees the sea and the islands like a tourist, who does something similar to what the postcards of the islands would do. It's not that at all” 202-203

elements as one uses the letters of the alphabet to write, and these are analogous to other things deeper, and which are on a transcendental level”⁷¹.

It is crucial to understand the connection between the landscape and the poet’s psyche. The authenticity of the poet is highlighted by his love for the light, purity and clarity, which is the main factor of the Greek landscape⁷². In an interview, Elytis states: "I charge the physical elements with moral forces. And therefore, nature becomes an alphabet in my hands to say things up to the metaphysical, transcendental"⁷³. The geographical landscape allows the poet to create his own language, which is not flat but has the property to fluctuate deriving its energy from the landscape⁷⁴. This movement can be literally seen in the structure and shape of the poem that does not follow a strict indentation (particularly in *The Genesis*). In the *Psalms II*, however, it becomes apparent that the energy of the landscape interacts with the Greek land and influences our own existential specificity.

I WAS given the Greek language;
a poor house on Homer's beaches.
My only care my language on Homer's beaches.
Seabream there and perch
windbeaten verbs
green sea-currents amid the azure currents
which I felt light up in my viscera
sponges, medusae

⁷¹ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 203

⁷² "Tribute to Odysseus Elytes (1911-1996)." *Journal NEA ESTIA*, 1997 p. 129.

⁷³ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 210

⁷⁴ Manos, A. *Brightness & Transparency: The Here and the Beyond in the Work of Odysseas Elytis*, Athens, Typotheto. 1998, 13.

with the first words of the Sirens
pink shells with their first black shivers.
My only care my language with the first black shivers.
Pomegranates there, quinces
swarthy gods, uncles and cousins
pouring olive oil in huge jars;
and breaths from the ravines smelling
of chaste-tree and lentisk
broom and ginger root
with the first cheeps of the finches,
sweet psalmodies with the very first Glory to Thee.

(The Passion, Psalms II)

In this passage Elytis expresses the need to appreciate the value of the past (Homer's epics), and show respect to our ancestors. He uses familiar images and objects (beaches, olive oil, sponges) in an unpredictable way, that transcend the conventional meaning of the language⁷⁵.

Axion Esti as a sign of times

From a historical perspective, it is essential to note Elytis' involvement in the second World War that affected his writing and expressive style, both in poetry and prose, as well as his emotional ties with the surrounding landscape in the Albanian mountains. In 1940, he serves as lieutenant under fire on the Albanian Front. The following year, deathly ill with typhus writes *Sun the First*.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ For further reading on the topic of Elytis' metaphysics Pourgouris, Marinos. *Mediterranean Modernisms: The Poetic Metaphysics of Odysseus Elytis*. 2011

⁷⁶Elytēs, Odysseas."Sun the First." *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 75

I no more know the night death's fearful anonymity

In an inlet of my soul moors a fleet of stars.

...

I no more know the names of a world that denies me

...

As in tears I cross the sea of immortality

The night that's only night I no more know.

(Sun the First⁷⁷)

Elytis has abdicated his initial surrealist expressive style, that treats nature as an idealistic symbol of life, longevity and energy. The landscape Elytis now paints evokes different emotions that the ones of his early poems⁷⁸ (i.e. Orientations), structurally more condensed and perplexing.

The years that followed were extremely difficult for writers and intellectuals, many of whom, as surrealist poet Embeirikos, were arrested, and others turned to hiding. In 1945, *Song Heroic and Mourning for the Lost Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign*⁷⁹ is published for which Elytis had wrote "They had killed him a thousand times and a thousand time he had sprung up again, breathing and alive. He was no doubt the measure of our civilization, compounded of his love not of death but of life"⁸⁰. The poem's beginning is evident of the poet's emotional state as can be reflected in the natural elements of the 'sun', 'trees' and 'sky'.

There where the sun used to dwell

...

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Thassitis, Panos. "Odysseus Elytis. The conscience of Greek myth." *Introduction to Elytis' Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, 149.

⁷⁹ Elytēs, Odysseas. "Song Heroic and Mourning for the Lost Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign." *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 105-118

⁸⁰ Letter to Kirnon Friar, quoted in his *The Sovereign Sun*, Temple University Press, 1974, 17

As the wind was snowing from the shaken almond tree
And riders were lit on the grasses' peaks

There where the splendid plane tree's hoof struck
And high flag fluttered earth and water

...

But the whole sky's toil

The whole world shone like a waterdrop

(Song Heroic and Mourning⁸¹)

For Elytis "light and history were one and the same thing, meaning [...] the one reproduces the other, [...]"⁸². As the sun shines and reveals the world in the first hour of dawn, so does it reveal the sufferings and struggles inscribed on the mountains, the trees and rivers.

So tell the sun to find a new road

Now that its homeland has darkened on earth

If it doesn't want to lose its pride;

Or then again with soil and water

Let it create in azure a little sister Greece elsewhere! Tell the sun to
find a new road

So it doesn't confront even a single daisy

(Song Heroic and Mourning⁸³)

On the note of his experience in the second World war, Elytis attempted to elevate his poetry without reducing the importance of history. His participation in the war, prompted the poet to

⁸¹ Ibid. 107

⁸² Elytēs, Odysseas. "Open Papers." *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 557-558

⁸³ Elytēs, Odysseas. "Song Heroic and Mourning for the Lost Second Lieutenant of the Albanian Campaign." *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 112

turn towards the historical and collective feeling in his work⁸⁴. As he explains in his autobiography, “Albania was an unbearable adventure for my physical being, but a deep cut for mental being” and he goes on to add that “the war became the reason for me to realize what the struggle is, the collective instead of the individual. What I mean to say is to fight as part of a group, which has certain ideals, fights for them.”⁸⁵

In all the Readings of *The Passion* the poet prioritizes the mental over the historical event⁸⁶ which illustrate his lyricism and internal space-time, which in turn is aligned with the actual event. In Readings 3 and 4, Elytis employs once conventional images of nature to grasp the psyche of the nation’s youth that had organized a protest in Athens.

I N T H O S E D A Y S the boys met together secretly and, because bad news kept increasing in the capital, took the decision to get out into the streets and squares with only one thing remaining to them: a hand's length of space beneath their open shirts, with the black hair and the sun's little cross. Where Spring had its state and its authority.

And because the day was near when the nation celebrated the other Rising, they chose that day for the Exodus. And they went out early into the sunlight, with their fearlessness unfurled wide as a flag, the young men with swollen feet they called bums. And they were followed by many men and women and the wounded with their bandages and crutches. And suddenly you could see their faces so lined, that you might think many days had gone by in a short hour.

⁸⁴ Thassitis, Panos. "Odysseus Elytis. The conscience of Greek myth." *Introduction to Elytis' Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, 151-152

⁸⁵ Elytēs, Odysseas. *Autoprosōpographia: Se Logo Prophoriko*. Athens, Ypsilon, 2000.

⁸⁶ Historical events are not a source of inspiration for the poet. In fact, he regretfully notes that poor poets feed on facts, mediocre ones on feelings, and good ones on the transformation of nothing into something. Elytis, Odysseas. *Ek Tou Plēsion*. Athens, Ikaros, 1998. 34

The Others, however, hearing of such audacity, were upset exceedingly. And calculating their possessions with their eyes three times, they took the decision to get out into the streets and the squares with only one thing remaining to them: an arm's length of fire beneath the iron, with the black gunbarrels and the sun's teeth. Where neither shoot nor blossom ever shed a tear. And they fired at random, their eyelids shut in despair. And Spring possessed them. As if there were no other road on the entire earth for Spring to take except this one, and speechless they had taken the same road, gazing far off, beyond the edge of hopelessness, at the Serenity that they would become, the young men with swollen feet they called bums, and the men and women and the wounded with their bandages and crutches.

And many days went by in one short hour. And the beasts slaughtered many, and arrested others. And the next day they put thirty men against the wall.

(Third Reading, *The Exodus*⁸⁷)

Along similar lines, *Axion Esti*'s lyrical journey through times of suffering and despair is expressed extensively in the Readings. More specifically, the Fourth Reading – *The Vacant Lot with the Nettles* refers to the 'sunless day of the winter' during which Athens was occupied by the Germans, and the neighboring areas were obstructed by German roadblocks. The landscape is experiencing the grief and loss of the nation.

Because the poor houses quaked back

⁸⁷ Elytēs, Odysseas. "The Axion Esti." *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 154

and forth and in many places the tarpaper fell off and, in the distance, behind the sun, weeping women appeared kneeling in a vacant lot full of nettles and clotted black blood. While the big clock of angels chimed exactly twelve.

(Fourth Reading, *The Vacant Lot with the Nettles*⁸⁸)

In conclusion, in *Axion Esti* the poet casts a whole new role for nature, by employing it as an agent that unconsciously guides the poet (the 'I' and 'he' of the poem) throughout the journey to find his biological and poetical direction ('*My soul sought a Signalman and Herald*'⁸⁹), and accompanies the conversation with God until the 'I' and the 'he' are merged into the individual persona of the poet '*He passed into me And became he who I am*' // '*The Sun assumed its face The Archangel forever on my right / THIS then am I / and the world the small the great!*'⁹⁰, so that it (the concluded persona) can welcome 'The Passion' '*BEHOLD here am I / created for young Korai and Aegean islands*'⁹¹.

The Passion, thus, concludes the "Genesis" of the poet, and the genesis of the world through the eyes and consciousness of the poet, with its 7 hymns (in accordance to the 7 days of creation)⁹².

The mystery of light

In *Open Papers*, a collection of thirty prose texts, Elytis discusses poetry, nature, light and his interaction within these elements. In the introductory quote of this chapter, Elytis describes the interdependence of light and darkness in the psyche/mentality of Greeks⁹³. He contradicts that

⁸⁸ Ibid. 159

⁸⁹ Ibid. 123

⁹⁰ Ibid. 133

⁹¹ Ibid. 137

⁹² Savvides, G.P. "Axion Esti" the poem of Elytis "Introduction to *Elytis' Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, 141

⁹³ Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997.557

by mentioning how Western writers always locate mysticism within night and darkness⁹⁴. In 2.4, I mentioned how “light is history” and how “the one reproduces the other, the one interprets and justifies the other”. This conclusive paragraph attempts to illustrate how analogies of light lead to what Elytis calls light or sun’s metaphysics. It is crucial to understand that the metaphysical light for Elytis originates from the Sun, which is a very powerful element, and has the ability to carry life. In *Open Papers* he clarifies, however, that “the sun has no connection with sunshine, nor the sea with boating, nor death with the zero, nor the firmament with the infinite”⁹⁵. The metaphysic power of the light lies in its ability to clarify (not what French called “la belle clarté”)⁹⁶. By ‘clarification’ Elytis in fact means ‘transparency’ which is a central concept in the process by which he conceives and understands the world. The essential cornerstone of ‘transparency’ is light, which etymologically is included in the Greek word for transparency – *thiaphania* (διαφάνεια) > *thia* (via) + *phanerosi* (clarify) > *phaos* (*phos* = light). Light is able to reveal “that behind a specific object, lies another, and behind that, lies something completely different”⁹⁷. What is relevant in this chapter, is how landscape participates in this process in Elytis’ poetry. In 2.3 it became evident how language is noted “in words but interpreted in the soul as vibrations whose extensions reach very far, sometimes [...] to something that no longer has any connection with the original meaning of words”⁹⁸. This kind of linguistic plasticity allows the reader to perceive things contextually and not within the boundaries of each word. In *En Lefko*, another collection of prose, Elytis explains the notion

⁹⁴ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 127

⁹⁵ Elytēs, Odysseas. “Open Papers.” *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997.564

⁹⁶ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 128

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Elytēs, Odysseas. “Open Papers.” *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997.564

of 'transparency' further; "It is time to understand that the mountain is not – because for some is - a landscape [...] if we are missing something, it is a sense of proportion. We find difficult the poetry that requires knowledge of history or literature [...] and easy poetry that deals with the most crucial aspects of the existential problems through their analogy to a tree or to a wave. When I talk so often about transparency, I mean exactly that: the ability to see through the innocent, the guilty, and through the white, the black"⁹⁹. We should always be aware of each object's, landscape's and element's metaphysical dimension, the one that will allow us to abduct the 'physical' interaction we have with that object, landscape or element.

⁹⁹ Elytes, *Odysseus. En Lefko*. Athens, Ikaros, 1993. 179

decades of 1940s and 50s as the origins of a new era for Elytis and his relationship with the reader¹⁰². During this period, Elytis publishes *Axion Esti*, which instantly tore down the stereotypical belief of Elytis as the poet of the eternal Greek summer. Nevertheless, he refuses to describe himself as ‘patriotic’ or ‘nature lover’ as he explains in *Open Letters*: “Greece in my youth was a dazzle. I have been neither patriot nor nature worshipper, and so when I saw these attributes ascribed to me I was much surprise - .// Being in the least degree poetic, I loved to the greatest degree Poetry, in the same way that, being in the least degree "patriotic;" I loved to the greatest degree Greece. Anyway, it is not from awkwardness that I become *another man* when I take up my pen”¹⁰³.

The war also had a profound impact on T. S. Eliot’s sense of identity and belonging. As an American living in England during the Great war, he felt disconnected from both cultures and struggled to find a sense of purpose in his life. *The Waste Land*, published in 1922, reflects the disillusionment and fragmentation in the aftermath of World War I, and employs themes of sterility, isolation and alienation many individuals experienced. In the later collection of the *Four Quartets* Eliot attempts to present modern humanity as being too ‘distracted’ to perceive reality in its fullness. Whilst he suggests that people are consumed by irrelevant distractions of the modern life, race against the inevitability of time, and are disconnected from one another and from the natural world, he also explores the theme of mysticism as an alternative path to deeper and more spiritual reality that lies underneath the surface of modern life. In parallel lines, *Axion Esti* is a lyrical reflection on the mystical and metaphysical aspects of Greek identity and history, as it explores the concept of the divine and draws upon ancient Greek mythology and religious traditions from the byzantine era. This chapter addresses the social

¹⁰² Ibid. 7

¹⁰³ Elytēs, Odysseas. “Open Papers” *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 557-558

circumstances around which three poems emerged and redefined literary receptiveness, namely *The Waste Land*, *Axion Esti* and *Four Quartets*, their similarities towards the themes and symbols they are employing, the societal impact their works reflected, and the way they continue to relate to contemporary history.

Sterility of Mind and Body in *the Waste Land*

“How can a fragment be identified as a fragment unless there is also the conception of a whole from where it is broken off?”¹⁰⁴ – this brief statement encapsulates the gist of Eliot’s most acknowledged poem, *The Waste Land*. The poem can be considered as a rich collage, including a plethora of narratives and myths as well as fragments of canonical texts by Dante and Shakespeare. These, at first perplexing, literary references, once within the poem are forced into new and unsettling juxtapositions, that disdain chronology and produce new meaning, within the reconstructed framework of a ‘land’ that has endorsed massive destruction, and yet is able to resurface.

The ordinary yet wounded individual of the poem has lost touch with himself and others. The characters in the poem are often portrayed as being disconnected from each other and unable to find a sense of meaning in their lives.

The typist home at teatime, clears her breakfast, lights
Her stove, and lays out food in tins.
Out of the window perilously spread
Her drying combinations touched by the sun’s last rays,

(The Fire Sermon, 222-226)

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
A small house agent’s clerk, with one bold stare,

¹⁰⁴ Longenbach, James. “The Waste Land: Beyond the Frontier.” *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past*, Princeton University Press, 1987, 201

One of the low on whom assurance sits

(The Fire Sermon, 231-233)

The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,

Endeavours to engage her in caresses

Which still are unreprieved, if undesired.

Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;

Exploring hands encounter no defence;

His vanity requires no response,

And makes a welcome of indifference.

(The Fire Sermon, 236-242)

The characters are also isolated from the world around them, which evokes sterility and decay as indicative of the aftermath of the war. Specifically, unpacking the words ‘defence’ and ‘assault’ a bit further allows the reader to examine how these words can be used to describe an intimate moment between two lovers, but at the same time connote violent acts of war. Eliot uses a variety of metaphors and images to convey this sense of barrenness and violence including descriptions of dry, dusty landscapes, dead trees and empty streets.

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing (2)

Dull roots with spring rain. (4)

A little life with dried tubers. (7)

And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,

(The Burial of the Dead, 23)

The beginning and end of Eliot in the *Four Quartets*

More than a decade later Eliot starts publishing poems which in 1942 would comprise the collection entitled *The Four Quartets*, a collection that would offer readers a transitory glimpse of the divine, and a profound reconstruction of the mystical, as an invitation to a new life, that

disembarks from obsolete notions of the past, and involves the willing sacrifice of the self to the will of God. The poem ‘ponders’ over Catholicism and Puritanism. In other words, the poet incorporates elements both of meditative mysticism and of activist pietism, drawing on Catholicism and Puritanism. In order to facilitate a better understanding of the mysticism behind *Four Quartets*, it is essential to bear in mind the poet’s own experience with religion as an American expat in Europe. Barry Spurr in his book *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity* elaborates on Eliot’s conversion to Christianity and his reasons behind it¹⁰⁵. In Europe, Eliot became acquainted with Christianity, Catholicism and Puritanism which would eventually ‘release’ the faith of the poet from the confinement of Unitarianism, and the rigid beliefs endorsed by his family in America. In a way, *Four Quartets* can be seen as the poet’s attempt to provide an alternative divine reality, that would suit modern life and would elevate the worthlessness of the ordinary life. After all, he had spent a lot of time searching among a variety of belief systems, weighing eastern and western religions, as well as its traditions and practices.

To make matters more explicit, Eliot’s American origins “weighed him down”¹⁰⁶ with the provinciality and parochialism of the Unitarian culture and moral. In Europe, he discovered Catholic Christianity, “with its doctrinal rigor, historical continuity and centuries-old devotional traditions”¹⁰⁷, and embraced the Anglo-Catholic movement, at a period in life where he encountered much despair, disappointment and personal suffering. In *Four Quartets* his Puritan origin and thought cannot be ignored, and this thesis invites a comparative reading of the poem as a juxtaposition of the two religious movements, which had a great impact on

¹⁰⁵ Spurr, Barry. *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity*. 1st ed., The Lutterworth Press, 2010.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 35

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 131

the life, and teachings of the poet. Examining the way Eliot perceives and approaches religious teachings will help clarify what himself calls “In my beginning is my end” (East Coker I, 198).

The common denominator, present in all four poems is the mystical moment, the ‘still point’, “ the moment in and out of time” (Dry Salvages – V, 638), “The moment in the arbour where the rain beat, / The moment in the draughty church at smokefall” (Burnt Norton – II, 93-94), “the moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree” (Little Gidding – V, 912) and “Not the intense moment / But a lifetime burning in every moment” (East Coker – V, 391, 393). The ‘still point’ is also the perception or its lack thereof, of time; “The point of intersection of the timeless / With time” (The Dry Salvages – V, 632-633). Eliot’s preoccupation with time and at the same time, with the passing time, implies the ephemeral nature of human beings on earth, as theme in *The Waste Land*, which brings into question the way individuals perceive of their death according to religious movements. For instance, according to New England Puritans, union with Christ is not the end but the beginning of the Christian life. Yet, the Catholic church fathers propose a meditative process of “descent and ascent”¹⁰⁸ that then allows the mystical union with God. In ‘Dry Salvages’ Eliot embraces the puritan ascetism and presents the mystical moment or ‘still point’ as the basis for spiritual growth and freedom.

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, **the moment in and out of time,**
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music

¹⁰⁸ Kim, Dal-Yong. “T. S. Eliot’s “Still Point” and New England Puritanism.” *Mystical Themes and Occult Symbolism in Modern Poetry: Wordsworth, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Plath*. 2009. 158

While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is **Incarnation.**
Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and **reconciled,**
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement—
Driven by daemonic, chthonic
Powers. **And right action is freedom**
From past and future also.¹⁰⁹
(The Dry Salvages – V, 637-657)

‘Prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action’ all are Puritan beliefs of activist pietism that stress the individual’s relationship with God, and lead to Assurance of Spiritual Salvation. These beliefs are for Eliot “a way of purging sinful human nature”¹¹⁰ that can be associated with several behaviors illustrated in *The Waste Land* and are critical for the way he perceives of humankind in *Four Quartets* as unable to grasp the reality of the world.

human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
(Burnt Norton – I, 44-45)

¹⁰⁹ The **bold** style has been used by Kyriakou N. for emphasis

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 160

For Eliot modern humanity is too distracted and disoriented to perceive what is real and what important, to consciously seek the divine and lead a life according to its teachings. In fact, there are only 'hints and guesses' that express the difficulty of spiritual life, the unsatisfactory and insufficient pursuit of the absolute truth, in the ever-changing game of running with and out of time.

at the still point, there the dance is,
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor
towards,
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

(Burnt Norton – II, 66-71)

The lack of movement (“neither movement, neither ascent”) corresponds to the inexistence and stagnation of progress towards knowledge. In addition, stability can only be found within the ‘still point’, the moment of ‘time past and time future’ (217). Ordinary people are not mentally capable of ascending towards knowledge, spiritual life nor freedom. At the same time, they are unable of descending to the past, to redefine their pursuit and change course. In a way, people are trapped in an ‘entropy’, often unable to control the course of their lives due to intellectual or spiritual inefficiencies. The poet’s negative attitude implies that reality is eternal and this cannot be subjected to the laws of time, nor can be attained during the course of life of an ordinary individual. There is, however, the higher spiritual reality that is inspired by the extensive sense of void in the ephemeral human existence.

Here is a place of disaffection
Time before and time after
In a dim light: neither daylight

Investing form with lucid stillness
Turning shadow into transient beauty
With slow rotation suggesting permanence
Nor darkness to purify the soul
Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal.
Neither plenitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by distraction
(Burnt Norton – III, 97-108)

There are also profound references to biblical personas and events: in the third section of *The Dry Salvages* the poet refers to ‘Krishna’ (*The Dry Salvages* III, 546) and ‘Arjuna’ (592) as evidence of his earlier engagement with Indian texts, as well as evidence of an intertextual dialogue with *Waste Land* and its fifth part, entitled *What Thunder said*. In the fourth section of the same poem, the reference to the garden (“After the frosty silence in the gardens”) to the visionary scene of the first part of *Burnt Norton* (“Into the rose-garden”) refers, in one sense, to Eden and the Protoplasms, and possibly opens a dialogue with the hyacinth garden of *Waste Land*. The prayer to the Virgin Mary (*The Dry Salvages*, IV) encapsulates the meaning of the whole third poem, which reflects Eliot's own perspective towards her: The Virgin Mary, if not equal, is at least comparable to the Holy Trinity and a central figure to his Anglo-Catholic faith. On this basis, Eliot discusses the need for submission before salvation, a submission that is both necessary and costly. Prayer to Mary responds to both the need for submission and the need for guidance¹¹¹.

¹¹¹ Spurr, Barry. *Anglo-Catholic in Religion: T.S. Eliot and Christianity*. 1st ed., The Lutterworth Press, 2010. 159

Pray for all those who are in ships, those
Whose business has to do with fish, and
Those concerned with every lawful traffic
And those who conduct them.

Repeat a prayer also on behalf of
Women who have seen their sons or husbands
Setting forth, and not returning:

(The Dry Salvages IV, 597-603)

What is perceived is the constant and permanent heliocentric demand for clarity, purity, doctrinal accuracy without discounts/alterations in the interpretation of the Bible, as a presumption necessary and a prerequisite condition for the salvation of the human soul.

Both Kyrou¹¹² and Kim¹¹³, identify this demand for clarity and purity in the third section of East Coker, towards the end;

[...]In order to arrive there,
To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,
You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.
In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.
In order to possess what you do not possess
You must go by the way of dispossession.
In order to arrive at what you are not
You must go through the way in which you are not.

¹¹² T.S. Eliot. *Ash Wednesday, Ariel Poems, Four Quartets*. Translated by Kleitos Kyrou, Athens, Ypsilon Books, 1993.

¹¹³ Kim, Dal-Yong. "T. S. Eliot's "Still Point" and New England Puritanism." *Mystical Themes and Occult Symbolism in Modern Poetry: Wordsworth, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Plath*. 2009.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know

And what you own is what you do not own

And where you are is where you are not.

(East Coker III, 331-342)

Cl. Kyrrou identifies the same apparent paradox that can be found in the instructions of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*¹¹⁴ in which Saint John of the Cross explores “the concept that mystical experience involves the purgation of human sinfulness for spiritual health and rebirth”¹¹⁵.

"In order to find pleasure in everything, seek to

to find pleasure in nothing.

To attain to possess everything, desire to possess nothing.

To attain to be everything, desire to be nothing.

To come to know everything, desire not to know

nothing.

To reach that which you have no pleasure in, you must go from

a road where you have no pleasure.

To attain that which you do not possess, you must go by a way that you

do not possess.

a road that you do not possess.

To get to what you are not, you have to go through what you are not.

you are not."

(Book 1, ch. XIII, 11)

¹¹⁴ Book 1, ch XIII, 11

¹¹⁵ Kim, Dal-Yong. "T. S. Eliot's "Still Point" and New England Puritanism." *Mystical Themes and Occult Symbolism in Modern Poetry: Wordsworth, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Plath*. 2009. 165

Holiness and Spiritism that span Centuries

When in 1935 Elytis publishes his first poems, profoundly influenced by surrealists Lorca and Elyard¹¹⁶ the Greek artistic society is still under the influence of Karyotakis' poetic reality, which was closely intertwined with the exploration of nature, vivid imagery, iconoclastic themes, traces of expressionism and surrealism. At the same time, a group of intellectuals was emerging in the periodical "Nea Grammata // New Letters" who would bring about the Hellenization of new poetics, inspired by European movements and figures, but always having Greek society in mind. They attempted to link themselves and their works to the spiritual tradition of Greece, in order to modernize poetry and ensure the continuity of Greek tradition.

Elytis was still a young law student at that time, and his poetry was indicative of youthful naivete, but also unusual clarity and liveliness. Critics soon started characterizing his poetry, in the midst of two wars, as careless and insensitive, and himself as a deluded daydreamer. What I mean by this, is that early on, Elytis had been considered by critics as a surrealist, whose poetry explored lyricoromantic musing and idealistic escape from social life to embellished Greek nature, of the sun and Aegean Sea¹¹⁷. All this goes to show that with the publication of *Axion Esti*, in 1959 the criticism suffered such a shock¹¹⁸ that for almost a year, it ceased. Thassitis¹¹⁹ calls this peculiar phenomenon "Silence Conspiracy" and attributes it to the inability of critics, at least for the early years, to fully fathom the authentic mastery of the pure intellect of Elytis. The poet 'listened' to the spiritual challenge of the times and with unwavering hope produced a lyrical poem of great magnitude that for the first time embraces

¹¹⁶ Karantonis, Andreas. "The 'First Elytis'" *Introduction to Elytis' Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, 53

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 66

¹¹⁸ Keeley, Edmund. "The Voices of Elytis's the Axion Esti." *Books Abroad*, University of Oklahoma, Jan. 1975, 179

¹¹⁹ Thassitis, Panos. "Odysseus Elytis. The conscience of Greek Myth" *Introduction to Elytis' Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, 148

both national and folk traditions, as a historical and human-like action. Elytis's poetry, from this moment onwards, marks a decisive shift from iconoclastic and naturalistic to an ethical poetry.

In this chapter, in which we are exploring the mystical powers, the occultism and spiritism of *Axion Esti*, it is of utmost importance to establish – mainly, for the international readers – the way Elytis, as a Christian Orthodox treats religion in his work. It is, also, important to distinguish between Greek mythology – a set of tales, inspired by Homer and Hesiod, that include twelve anthropomorphous deities, who interact with local heroes and influence the course of their lives -, and Christianity, which was at the peak of its power in Constantinople, the capital of the Byzantine empire. Around 1000 CE, Greece as it is known today was part of the vast Byzantine empire, which covered contemporary Italy, Greece and Turkey. Up until 1453, the official religion was Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and the official language Greek. That explains, consequently, the affinity of modern Greeks to the medieval byzantine heritage and the Christian literary tradition as well as pagan past or the subsequent invasion of renaissance influences from the West¹²⁰ The third part of *Axion Esti*, The Gloria, follows the byzantine ecclesiastical rhythm, consisting of songs and hymns. Over the course of The Gloria, Elytis explores several models of holiness.

THE LEADING WINDS who officiate

who raise the sea like the Mother of God¹²¹

The Virgin Mary is a role model for the church body since, as the Theotokos, she gave life to the God-Man Christ and at the same time she consciously committed herself to follow the will

¹²⁰ Keeley, Edmund. "The Voices of Elytis's the Axion Esti." *Books Abroad*, University of Oklahoma, Jan. 1975,

¹²¹ Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 181

of God¹²². Her life is distinguished by its selflessness since she dedicated it to God. The element of purity distinguishes the Virgin Mary, an element that for Elytis has a special significance through a sensual understanding.

Purity;' he said, "is this
on the slopes as in your guts"
And he spread his arms like
an old prudent God to mold together clay and heavenliness
"Purity:' he said, "is this"
and filled with yearning I caressed the body
kisses teeth to teeth; then one into the other

(Hymn 6¹²³ 129)

The person of Christ is referred to in many excerpts, although rarely explicitly, and due to the ambiguous nature of the references, can receive several interpretations, as in the following excerpt;

It seemed for a moment that I saw Him
who gave his blood for me to incarnate
once more ascending the Saint's rough road

(Hymn 7¹²⁴)

The sacrifice refers to Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself, and established his holiness, with the crucifixion, but it can be interpreted as a reference to Holy New Martyr Theodore the Hatzis of Mytilene, claimed as an ancestor of the poet¹²⁵. In the same passage, Elytis recalls “Far

¹²² Rouska, Vassiliki . *Memory, Senses and Holiness in Elytis' Axion Esti*. 2014. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Master's Dissertation. 68

¹²³ Elytēs, *Odysseas. The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 129

¹²⁴ Ibid. 131

¹²⁵ Ibid.

away, at the edge of my soul, I saw [...] Saint Marina with the demons”¹²⁶ who sacrificed herself for God¹²⁷. And again, in The Gloria her martyrdom is revived;

Marina as before she existed
with the dog's skull and with the demons
Marina the horn of Selene the Moon
Marina the very ruin of the world

(The Gloria¹²⁸)

In the beginning of the third part, before the glorification hymn that echoes the Byzantine Acathist Hymn (‘Hail to thee Burning and Hail to the Verdant’), Elytis explores the martyrdom of Saint Cyricus and Julitta¹²⁹;

AXION ESTI celebrating the memory
of Saints Cyricus and Julitta
a miracle burning threshing floors in the heavens
priests and birds singing the hail:¹³⁰

(The Gloria)

The exploration of holiness, and in particular, of instances of Saints that sacrificed themselves for God and Christianity, is evident for the development of eastern Christian orthodox doctrines concerning Resurrection and Incarnation. Specifically, the death (sacrifice) and resurrection of

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Rouska, Vassiliki . *Memory, Senses and Holiness in Elytis' Axion Esti*. 2014. Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Master's Dissertation. 72

¹²⁸ Elytēs, *Odysseas. The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 186-187

¹²⁹ Cyricus was Julitta's son. They were martyred when he was three, during the persecutions of Diocletian (r. 284-305). Alexander, an abbot or provincial governor of Tarsus in Cilicia, tried to win over the boy with flattery to condole him, but Cyricus, lisping the name of Christ, kicked him in the belly; so, the tyrant flung him down the steps of the judgment seat and burst his head open. His mother died after many tortures.

¹³⁰ Elytēs, *Odysseas. The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 183

Jesus Christ is believed to put a stop to the vicious circle of death and sin for humankind, thus the leit motif of martyrdom functions as a reminder for not only the Christian martyrs' sacrifice but all those heroic figures who gave their life during the hardships the country faced, from the origins of the nation until modern times. The Gloria is an hymn that glorifies the natural elements 'The Islands'¹³¹, 'The Flowers'¹³², 'The Mountains'¹³³, the heroic figures from Homer 'Hera'¹³⁴ and Sappho 'Arignota'¹³⁵ to Vincenzos Cornaros 'Aretousa'¹³⁶ and the Saints 'Cyricus and Julitta'¹³⁷ to Dionysios Solomos 'the earthquake's chasm that filled with flowers'¹³⁸.

Sanctification of the Senses

Elytis believed that "poetry helps us live"¹³⁹ and navigate the world through the senses. For the poet, sanctification is a destination. One reaches sanctification through the senses, a fact that Elytis attributes to the phenomenon of surrealism. He perceived the most sensual things to exist in a state of purity and holiness, that is why he tried to harmonize the terms of sanctification and Christianity. Nevertheless, in an interview to Ivar Ivask in 1975, he claims; "I am not a Christian, but I am adapting the Christian concept of sanctification to the world of the senses"¹⁴⁰. It is difficult, in our analysis of *Axion Esti* as a poem that delves into Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and personifies Christian Saints and martyrs, to deeply understand what Elytis means, by denying his Christianity. Looking at his prose collections, *En Lefko*, we find

¹³¹ Ibid. 182

¹³² Ibid. 184

¹³³ Ibid. 188

¹³⁴ Ibid. 183

¹³⁵ Ibid. 185

¹³⁶ Ibid. 185

¹³⁷ Ibid. 183

¹³⁸ Ibid. 188

¹³⁹ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 52

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 113

relevant excerpts; “I am a heathen who unwittingly, happened to touch from the other side, Christian holiness”¹⁴¹ and *Open Papers*; “In Poetry, man is neither heathen nor Christian, neither heretic nor orthodox, neither communist nor fascist, [...] right or wrong it doesn't matter on the near side of Necessity.”¹⁴² In a later interview in 1979, a few days before the news of the Nobel Prize award, Elytis clarifies; “I don't like to use the word religious because the reader is directly associated [...] with a certain concept of Christianity.”¹⁴³ These excerpts are enough to illustrate that Elytis distinguishes between Christian sanctification, and sanctification of the senses. Studying the works of Elytis, one understands they enable man to touch holiness. The holiness of Elytis, therefore, cannot be understood independently of the senses or independently of the human freedom, it is holiness expressed through the human being himself. and through the trivialities of the world.

So sensible the Incomprehensible

(The Genesis, 124)

Secret syllables through which I strove to articulate my identity

"Bravo!" he said to me, "you know how to read

and there is still a lot you'll come to learn

if you study the Insignificant in depth

(The Genesis, 127)

Morphology inspired by the Divine Service

The morphology of such a perplexing, multidimensional poem, can shed light into the different tones, structural elements and expressive styles which are found in it, and reflect the

¹⁴¹ Elytes, Odysseus. *En Lefko*. Athens, Ikaros, 1993. 207

¹⁴² Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 565

¹⁴³ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 181

‘architecture’ of Divine Service, that occurs in the Eastern Orthodox church. *Axion Esti* in its fullness follows the symbolic celebration of the liturgy and dramatically culminates the religious and ritualistic perception of the mystery of life. The Genesis with its free verse and lyrical tones, initiate the ritual with the ‘birth’ of the poet, and the creation of the world according to his consciousness¹⁴⁴. The second part describes the agonies (Pathos) of Christ in a collective level, but also the personal struggles of the poet at the individual and historical level through the Readings. The third and last part, transcends from death to the resurrection hymn of immortality, which encapsulates the essence of the central sacrament of the Christian church ritual, the victory of life over death¹⁴⁵.

In regards to the style and tone, the poet brilliantly merges centuries of lyrical and literary traditions to create a poem authentically Greek. In an interview with Ivar Ivask (1975), Elytis explains how he and the Generation of the 1930s, “including Seferis, struggled to find the true face of Greece in their works” mainly because up until then “the face of Greece was presented in the way the Europeans saw the country”. And he goes on to add that “the western world perceived Greece through the image created for it by the Renaissance. But this depiction is not real”¹⁴⁶. In another interview in 1979, Elytis discusses the term “poetry of the Aegean” and elaborates on the three-thousand-year tradition that surrounds it, referencing to Sappho¹⁴⁷, Archilochus and Simonides, “this tradition passes through the Aegean, where I was born, in Lesbos, and where Sappho's lyrical poetry was born. Having lived on the islands, for example in Paros (Archilochus), in Amorgos (Simonides), I am directly related to its continuity”¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁴ Savvides, G.P. “‘Axion Esti’ the poem of Elytis” Introduction to *Elytis’ Poetry*, edited by Mario Vitti, Crete University Editions, 2009, 141

¹⁴⁵ Lignadēs, Tasos. *To Axion Esti Tou Elytē: Introduction, Criticism, Analysis*. Poreia, Athens. 1999. 29-31

¹⁴⁶ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 112-113

¹⁴⁷ Sappho lyrical poet, Archilochus and Simonides iambic poets

¹⁴⁸ Elytes, Odysseus. *Syn Tois Allois / Among Other Things: 37 Interviews 1942-1992*. Athens, Ypsilon / Books, 2011. 202

Axion Esti incorporates elements from lyrical poetry (Sappho, Pindar, Simonides¹⁴⁹) to folk traditional forms. In particular, Genesis begins with free verse and lyrical style. The Passion consists of the Psalms, which follow the homonymous style of the Old Testament, the Readings with prosaic and folk style of events/chronicles, and the Odes, with a strict musical and orchestral form of intent. The Gloria completes the poem with created hymnographic models from the point of view of lyrical appearance¹⁵⁰.

Correlation between the poets

What dominates the theology of Eliot's poetry (*The Waste Land*, *Four Quartets*) is western dominant religious tradition, and its dogmatic beliefs. Sherrard calls this a 'system of ethics'¹⁵¹. These beliefs attempt to 'save the soul' or at least relief from the consequences of sins. Throughout the *Waste Land*, Eliot associates certain behavior patterns with sinful convictions, which question faith and diminish humanity, resulting in a spiritual void. Unlike Eliot, Seferis and Elytis use their poetic subjects to illustrate another superior system, that of the natural world and its interaction with humanity. They both perceived, through poetry, the organic relation between nature and language¹⁵², and the extent to which feelings and emotions are inspired by the surrounding landscape and its history. While Eliot's subjects seek purgation, illumination and union, through prayer and "reform-minded pietism"¹⁵³, Seferis & Elytis

¹⁴⁹ More on that: Easterling, P. E., and Bernard M. W. Knox. *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: Volume 1, Greek Literature, Part 3, Philosophy, History and Oratory*. Cambridge UP, 1989.

¹⁵⁰ Lignadēs, Tasos. *To Axion Esti Tou Elytē: Introduction, Criticism, Analysis*. Poreia, Athens. 1999. 29-31

¹⁵¹ Sherrard, Philip. "The poetry of T.S. Eliot and G. Seferis; A contradiction" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 49

¹⁵² Elytēs, Odysseas. *The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 18,

Sherrard, Philip. "The poetry of T.S. Eliot and G. Seferis; A contradiction" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 43, and

Keeley, Edmund. "Seferis and the Mythical Method" *Introduction to Seferis' Poetry*, edited by Demetres Daskalopoulos, Crete University Editions, 2007, 425

¹⁵³ Kim, Dal-Yong. "T. S. Eliot's "Still Point" and New England Puritanism." *Mystical Themes and Occult Symbolism in Modern Poetry: Wordsworth, Whitman, Hopkins, Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and Plath*. 2009. 161

suggest that nature is a way to cleanse your soul by becoming harmonized with the trees, the flowers, the rivers and mountains that surround them, and play a pivotal role for their vitality. In fact, Elytis describes how ‘at the beginning’ there was ‘light’ and ‘green blood’ – green symbolizing life, instead of the color red that has negative connotations – , ‘clay’, ‘gold bulbs’, ‘gauzes of sky’ and the ‘sea’, which could also refer to the four elements (green blood – water, gold – fire, gauzes of sky – air, and clay – earth) symbolizing the creation of the world, according to the Genesis creation narrative of Christianity. More specifically, according to the Christian myth, on the first day of creation, God said ‘Let there be light’, and here is how Elytis begins this poem, that alludes to his own re-birth, as well as the rest of the world’s through his eyes.

IN THE BEGINNING the light
And the first hour
when the lips still in clay
taste the things of the world
Green blood and bulbs golden in the earth
And the sea so exquisite in its sleep spread
unbleached gauzes of sky¹⁵⁴

(The Genesis, 123)

Similarly, in The Gloria (which refers to the glorification or honoring chants of the Byzantine Rite¹⁵⁵) the ‘light’ follows, as do the Leading Winds, the Islands and the Flowers

Maistros, Levantes, Garbis

¹⁵⁴ Elytēs, *Odysseas. The Collected Poems of Odysseus Elytis*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Carson and Nikos Sarris, London, The John Hopkins UP, 1997. 123

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* “Introduction” xxii

Pounentes, Graigos, Sirocco

*Tramountana, Ostria*¹⁵⁶

(The Gloria, 181)

Siphnos, Amorgos, Alonnesos Thasos, Ithaca, Santorini

*Kos, Ios, Sikinos*¹⁵⁷

(The Gloria, 182)

The Lily, the Rose, the Jasmine the Campion, the Lilac, the Hyacinth

*the Violet, the Daffodil, the Aster*¹⁵⁸

(The Gloria, 184)

The victory ‘chants of praise’ of The Gloria echo the byzantine liturgy¹⁵⁹ and celebrate the suffers, agonies and battles overcame in The Passion and the Readings.

HAIL to thee Burning and hail Verdant

Hail Unrepentant with the prow’s sword

Hail who steppest and the footprints vanish

Hail who wakest and miracles happen¹⁶⁰

(The Gloria, 183)

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 181

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 182

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 184

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. “Introduction” xxii

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 183

Conclusion

This thesis set out to discover the influential path between Thomas Stearns. Eliot, Georgios Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, and locate its instances in, admittedly, their most recognized works; *the Waste Land* (1922), *Mythistorema* (1935), *The Four Quartets* (1935-1942) and *Axion Esti* (1959). The thesis focused on further examination of three certain thematic areas, upon which each collection of poems uniquely touches, both explicitly and implicitly. The first chapter explores the concept of the mythical method, as was first coined by T.S. Eliot. It illustrated how each poet incorporates elements of myths, and figures in order to symbolize the ubiquitous ‘spell’ of the past, the interdependence of mythical narratives in Europe, and the significance of memory, in the perseverance of tradition and culture, during war times. It established that for the two Greek poets, the employment of mythologies, feels and comes more natural than for Western European poets, who are not that familiar with the Greek landscape, that plays an active role in the unfolding of the myth.

The second chapter proceeds on the topic of landscape, while it adds to the analysis the elements of light and darkness, as symbols of the vulnerability, alienation and disorientation of the individual (having experienced two World Wars). Inevitably, both *The Waste Land* and *The Four Quartets* explore imagery of sterility and darkness derived from British landscapes, and US landmarks that relate to the poet’s origins. Similarly, *Mythistorema* and *Axion Esti*, heavily reflect the poets’ psychosynthesis upon the Greek environment, whose lasting presence witnesses the hardships of the Greek nation from the Trojan Wars to the German occupation. *The Waste Land* accurately depicts the distraction of the human condition, as individuals are gradually losing touch with their surroundings, fail to acknowledge their historical past, and, thus, engage with the present. Particularly, *Mythistorema* and *Axion Esti* raise the issue of historical memory through intricate interplay with nature, and its value in shaping the individual and collective conscience of a nation, as Greece. Overall, the detrimental

consequences of the world wars, and the civil conflicts in Greece cannot be disregarded in the way the poets consciously choose to comment on the human condition and interact with the social stimuli that perpetuates the contemporary individuals' disorientation.

The third and final chapter delves into the works of *Axion Esti* and *The Four Quartets* to explore the common theme of religion, as well as secondary themes of holiness, sanctification and the senses. Eliot addresses the acknowledged loss of the individual with the spiritual self, and emphasizes on the ephemeral nature of life. Along the same lines, Elytis endorses byzantine ecclesiastical rhythms, Christian orthodox imagery and divine figures to illustrate the symbolic victory of life over death. Both poets assimilate some religious doctrines in order to illustrate the ascend and descend of individuals, namely towards God and their spiritual resurrection. As a result, their works employ several mystical figures, events and elements which alter the morphology and structure of the poem, suggesting new ways they can be understood by the reader, and consequently shaping up a new relationship between man and God.

All things considered, in the attempt to associate between T.S. Eliot, Georgios Seferis and Odysseus Elytis, it can be, admittedly, observed that with further examination upon the three thematic areas of the mythical method (chapter 1), landscape and light (chapter 2), and mysticism (chapter 3), the works discussed were considered a milestone moment for the poets, the works they would go on to produce in the future, and for the future generations of writers and poets, in Europe and beyond. The thesis attempts to contribute another factor to the profound recognition of these poetic collections, and that is no other than the turbulent historical, social, and political background between the years 1922 to 1959, in Europe and particularly in Greece. Therefore, it became evident that as much as the poets were preoccupied with questioning traditional values and attempting to abolish most established rules and archaic conventions through radical experimentation, they managed, as well, to approach the matter of

identity, memory and human condition, while paying particular attention to the subjective consciousness of the individual and its alienation to the current events.

It is interesting to consider other forms of art and how they have been influenced by wars and conflicts. For instance, bear in mind Picasso's *Guernica*, a powerful political statement as a reaction to the German bombing during the second World War. There are several more instances that prove how the 'vulnerable' psyche seeks refuge in art during war times. But, what these three poets accomplished, was to rejuvenate poetry and redefine it as an 'influx' of senses that can ascend both body and mind to spiritual levels. They achieved that by posing critical questions, regarding faith, historical memory, identity and ephemerality. They struggled to adjust their own poetic voice to "contemporary sensibility". Nevertheless, their work remains relevant during volatile times like the ones we currently experience, when human values are 'under attack' by intolerance, hate, xenophobia, nativism and discrimination. And it is this timelessness that renders their poetry essentially readable, in order for future generations to understand their contribution to modern literature and how they helped shape the opinion of the public, within the societies they engaged with.

Appendix

1. Katharevousa

Katharevousa is a form of the Greek language which began to take shape in the 18th century and was used extensively during the 19th and 20th centuries in Greece and Cyprus as the official form of written and spoken communication.

Katharevousa has many elements from ancient Greek and is an intermediate link with the demotic language. In katharevousa the polytonic system is used exclusively.

Katharevousa was used as the official language of the Greek state until 1976. The term 'Katharevousa' denotes a pure form of Greek, as it would presumably have evolved from ancient Greek without external influences.

In later years, Katharevousa was used for official purposes (such as politics, letters, official documents), while Demotic was the everyday language. This created the so-called Language issue. In 1976, Demotic became the official language and in 1982 the polytonic writing system was abandoned.¹⁶¹

2. Demotic Greek

The demotic language is the modern idiomatic form of the Greek language. The term has been used since 1818. It refers in particular to the form of the language that came naturally from the ancient Greek language, as opposed to the archaic form of the language called katharevousa, which was the official language of the Greek state until 1976. Both complemented each other in a typical example of bilingualism until the final resolution of the language issue in Greece in favour of demotic.

In 1910, the Educational Society, an association with the aim of trying to reform Greek education, supported the teaching of the demotic language. In 1917, the Venizelos government introduced the demotic language in primary schools.¹⁶²

3. Venizelist Party

The modernists rallied around the Cretan leader Eleftherios Venizelos, who was elected without participating in the election. Venizelos' first public appearance as a Greek politician was on 5 September 1910 with a speech in Syntagma Square in which he made statements in support of moderate reforms.

He aimed at a modernization of the political system by balancing the interests of all social strata. The basic positions of his program were social peace, the relief of the lower social strata, the reform of the state apparatus in order to make it more efficient, and military armaments for the fulfilment of national demands. Also, despite pressure

¹⁶¹ Delveroudi, Rea. "From 'Mixture-Barbarian' to Katharevousa: The Formation of a Term," in: M. Theodoropoulou (ed.), *Thermē kai phōs: A Tribute Volume to the Memory of A.-F. Christidis*. Thessaloniki, Center for the Greek Language, 2008, pp. 353-363.

¹⁶² Triantafyllidis, Manolis. *Neohellenic Grammar Part A: Historical Introduction*. Athens: Dimitrakos, 1938.

from his supporters, he supported the revision of the existing constitution rather than the enactment of a new one. He did not raise a constitutional issue. He announced the establishment of a principled party, which would be a vehicle for reforms. The party was formally established on August 22, 1910, by members of the National Assembly¹⁶³.

4. National Defense Coup

Venizelos proceeded in March 1935 with an unsuccessful military movement, again aiming to purge the army and the police of the royals. It was precisely this failed movement that gave the government, under pressure from officers on the other side, the incentive to harden its position: it dissolved Parliament, in violation of the constitution, and called elections for a National Assembly. The Liberals abstained from the elections of 9 June 1935¹⁶⁴.

5. Generation of 1930s characteristics

By the term 'Generation of the Thirties' in literature we mean, in a general and conventional way, the young writers who appeared in the 1930s and 1940s. I say 'in a general and conventional way', because if we look closely at the registered age of some writers who are considered not only representatives of this generation, but also somewhat leading figures of it, we will find that they violate the original chronological framework, since in 1930 they had already begun to formulate their work. This is the case, for example, with Myrivilis, who, born in 1892, presents a personality already formed during the Balkan Wars; or with Seferis, who, born in 1900, a little younger than Karyotakis, begins around the time when Karyotakis' activity abruptly closes down. By a stricter chronological criterion, mechanically applied, personalities like the two great writers I have mentioned by way of illustration should be left out of the generation of our concern. For the impossibility of establishing a secure chronology, consider the case of Elytis, born in 1911 and presented in the middle of the decade, in 1935. With regard to the group of the truly young within the generation, this is also the case: there is the case, for example, of Terzakis who, despite being one of the first consciences to announce the renewal of the 1930s in a mature and militant way, remained organically tied to the half-dark atmosphere of the Karyotakian space. However, and despite the lack of a coordinated appearance of the Thirty generation, it is undeniable that there around 1930 a change, a break with the past, is felt, while at the same time reflections appear that document the birth of a new consciousness, based on educational resources and a mental disposition different from those known before¹⁶⁵. With 1935, we arrive at the most important time of the new poetry. It is a year of creativity, a year of foundations. In January 1935, the magazine *Nea Grammata* // New

¹⁶³ Kordatos, Giannis. *History of Modern Greece*, Vol. 5, ch. 210-215.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Vitti, Mario. "The 'Generation of the Thirties': Ideology and Form." *With a new introduction*. Hermes, Athens, 2006, pp. 21-22.

Letters was first published, which would soon become the main instrument of the new poetry, the mirror of all new trends, the critical apologist and the amplifier of every truly new poetic effort. In March of the same year, two of the most basic works of modern poetry were published, George Seferis' *Mythistorema*, with which the poet of the Strophe will be presented to us, walking steadily along the new poetic paths, and Andreas Embiricos' now classic *Hypsicaminos*, the book with which surrealism made its official and responsible appearance in Greece. And in November 1935, from the pages of the New Letters, Odysseas Elytis, one of the most powerful engines of the new poetry, the most important poetic figure after and along with Seferis, will make his first appearance. What would later form the body of the new poetry is first manifested within the time frame of 1935. This year is one of the most historic in modern Greek poetry, because from then on, above all, the form of our poetic discourse changed completely; from then on, the modern current is separated from tradition, no longer with works that are precursory and uncertain, but with genuine poetic fruits.¹⁶⁶

Characteristics of Generation of 1930s poetry¹⁶⁷:

- Transcending "karyotacticism" and traditional lyricism.
- Modern poetic language along with elements of tradition
- Absolute purity of image
- Musical poetic language
- Allusions to the ancient past
- Emphasis on light and landscape (Seferis, Elytis)
- Remembrance of the past - search for authentic life
- Liberation of individuality
- Associative function of memory
- Hermeticism, darkness, drama. Poetry of allusions, dense, not analytical, cryptic, not abundantly illuminated
- Tragic view of history
- Morphic freedoms

6. Greek Civil War 1946-1949

The Greek civil war, refers to a two-stage conflict (December 1944 to January 1945, and 1946–49) during which Greek communists unsuccessfully tried to gain control of Greece. The first stage of the civil war began before Nazi Germany's occupation of Greece ended in October 1944. The German occupation had been resisted by two principal Greek guerrilla forces, the communist-controlled EAM-ELAS ("National Liberation Front–National Popular Liberation Army") and the EDES ("Greek Democratic National Army"), which occasionally cooperated in action. After eliminating all of its political and guerrilla rivals except the EDES in early 1944, EAM-ELAS set up a provisional government in the Greek mountains that by implication disowned both the Greek king and his government-in-exile. Upon the

¹⁶⁶ Karantonis, Andreas. "Introduction to Modern Poetry." Difros, Athens, 1958, pp. 164-165.

¹⁶⁷ Georgiadou, Agathi. *The Poetic Adventure*. Metaichmio, 2005.

German troops' withdrawal from Greece in October, the communists and royalist Greek guerrillas were brought together under British auspices in an uneasy coalition government in Athens. But this government disintegrated a few weeks later when the communist members of the coalition refused to disband their guerrilla force. A bitter civil war broke out in Athens on December 3, which the British military forces managed to suppress with great difficulty, after EAM-ELAS had overrun virtually all of Greece except Athens and Thessaloniki.

The communists accepted defeat and the disbandment of their forces at a conference in February 1945, and a general election was held in Greece in March 1946. The communists and their followers abstained from the voting, however, and a royalist majority was returned. A plebiscite was then held in September 1946 which restored the Greek king to the throne. During 1946 a full-scale guerrilla war was reopened by the communists, who had gone underground. The commitment of defending Greece became too much for Great Britain, and it was taken on by the U.S. government, with the announcement of the Truman Doctrine. Massive military and economic aid from the United States was much needed, for by the end of 1947 the communists had proclaimed a provisional government in the northern mountains. This second communist rebellion lasted until 1949, when the U.S.-supplied and strengthened Greek army managed to clear the rebel centers from the mountainous Greek interior. On Oct. 16, 1949, the Greek communist broadcasting station announced the end of open hostilities, and many of the remaining communist fighters fled the country into neighboring Albania. It is estimated that more than 50,000 combatants died in the conflict, and more than 500,000 Greeks were temporarily displaced from their homes by the fighting. The internecine strife and fierce brutality that characterized the civil war left a lasting legacy of bitterness between segments of the Greek population.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "*Greek Civil War*". Encyclopedia Britannica, 28 May. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Greek-Civil-War>.

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