

Odysseus Elytis on poetic expression: *Carte blanche*

David Connolly

...I am neither a critic nor a prose-writer
Odysseus Elytis

Though more than twenty years have passed since Theofanis G. Stavrou, writing in his "Notes on the *Open book* of Odysseus Elytis", stated that: "Odysseus Elytis' national and international reputation as a poet has, until recently, obscured the fact that he is also an accomplished prose writer and a sensitive critic..." (Stavrou 1975: 701), it is doubtful whether anything has changed either in Greece or abroad. Stavrou was referring to Elytis's prose works prior to 1974 when these works were published collectively in a single volume comprising some 516 pages and entitled *Ανοιχτά χαρτιά* (translated into English as the "Open book" or "Open papers", though hereafter referred to as "Cards on the table"¹). His observation is even more striking today, following the publication in 1992 of a second volume of collected essays and critical writings comprising 428 pages and entitled *Εν λευκώ* [translated into English as "Carte blanche"]. Since then, two further prose works have appeared, *Ο κήπος με τις αυταπάτες* [The garden of delusions] (1995) and *2 x 7 E* [2 x 7 Epsilons] (1996), bringing the corpus of his prose works to a total of over 1,000 pages.

Nevertheless, despite the volume of his prose writings, very little critical attention has been given to them.² In the standard bibliography of Elytis's works by Dimitris Daskalopoulos, there are only four entries listed relating to reviews of *Cards on the table* and three for *Carte blanche*. This has to be seen in comparison with the numerous entries listed for each of his

¹ See my "Introduction" to *Carte blanche* (Elytis 1999: 2).

² A recent exception is the work by Koutrianou (1999a; 1999b).

collections of poetry. As an essayist, Elytis has in fact largely been ignored by critics and scholars, who perhaps consider his prose writings as simply exercises in style that bring to prose a sense of the lyricism and expressive boldness that characterise his poetry. It is true that they are clearly poetical texts, yet their philosophical and critical nature cannot be denied. They develop theoretical and critical arguments in their own original way, conveying ideas using techniques similar to those in poetry, while revealing at the same time an acute and sensitive critical mind.³

The lack of scholarly attention may also owe something to Elytis's own reservations as to his ability as a prose writer and critic, which he expressed quite openly at the beginning of *Cards on the table* (see Elytis 1974: 13). Despite his reservations, however, the writings contained in *Cards on the table* and *Carte blanche* are of particular importance for any aspiring interpreters of his work, in that they offer invaluable help in better understanding his poetics and, consequently, his poetry. As Vayenas (1993) notes: "Elytis is 'autobiographical' even in his most objective essays (see, for example, his admirable essay "Romanos the Melodist"), which are invaluable precisely for this reason, that they help us to better understand his own poetic expression...". My discussion of his essays, particularly those in *Carte blanche*, has as its aim to contribute to a better understanding of Elytis's views concerning poetic expression in general and, consequently, of his own poetics. More specifically, I will examine Elytis's views concerning prismatic poetry, which he develops mainly in his essay entitled "Ρωμανός ο Μελωδός" [Romanos the Melodist], though also in earlier and later writings, particularly those collected in *Carte blanche*.

In an essay of his entitled "Μουσική και ποίηση" [Music and poetry], published in 1964 (but not included in either *Cards on the table* or *Carte blanche*), Elytis says with reference to the *Axion esti* that "as a poetic work, it has the peculiarity of being 'prismatic', of presenting, that is, numerous facets" (see Elytis 1964: 339). As far as I know, this is the first time that Elytis uses the term "prismatic" and, moreover, to describe one of his own poetic works. He offers an explanation of the term by simply

³ For a fuller discussion, see Pascalis 1993: 98.

saying that the work “presents numerous facets”. It is only much later, in his essay “Romanos the Melodist” (written in 1975, but first published in 1986), that he again uses the term, distinguishing and contrasting two forms of poetic expression that he terms “prismatic” (πρισματική) and “plane” (επίπεδη).⁴ What is of chief interest in this contrast, as Nikos Dimou (1986: 424) notes, is “its importance for understanding Elytis’s poetics and for the way in which he perceives the poetry of others”.

Though Elytis’s views concerning prismatic and plane poetic expression are outlined for the first time in “Romanos the Melodist” (see Elytis 1992: 33-56), nevertheless he expresses similar views relating to poetic expression in earlier⁵ as well as later essays so that they may, therefore, be regarded as a constant feature of his poetic outlook. If then, we wish to get an overall picture concerning Elytis’s views on poetic expression, as these are outlined in “Romanos the Melodist”, we have to read this essay in conjunction with his earlier and, more so, with his later writings on poetic expression, which are collected in *Carte blanche*. I will limit myself in the discussion which follows to these later writings: namely to the essays, “Αναφορά στον Ανδρέα Εμπειρίκο” [Report to Andreas Embiricos] (written in 1977 and first published in 1979), “Η μέθοδος του ‘άρα’” [The method of “therefore”] (written in 1976 and first published in 1986), “Λόγος στην Ακαδημία της Στοκχόλμης” [Address to the Swedish Academy] (written in 1979 and first published in 1991) and “Από το ‘Σημειωματάριο ενός λυρικού’. Για μια κωδικοποίηση της ποιητικής εκφραστικής (δοκιμαστική δειγματοληψία)” [Notebook of a lyric poet. Towards a codification of poetic expression (tentative sample)] (first published in 1992 in *Carte blanche*) as it is in these essays that he further develops and qualifies the views outlined in “Romanos the Melodist”.

⁴ To be precise, Elytis never uses the terms “prismatic poetry” or “plane poetry”, but talks of the “prismatic form of discourse” and of “plane expression” (see Elytis 1992: 50).

⁵ See, for example, “Η αληθινή φυσιογνωμία και η λυρική τόλμη του Ανδρέα Κάλβου” [The true physiognomy and the lyrical boldness of Andreas Kalvos], written in 1941/42 (in Elytis 1974: 81), “Τα κορίτσια” [The girls], written in 1944/72 (in Elytis 1974: 150), and “Το χρονικό μιας δεκαετίας” [The chronicle of a decade] (in Elytis 1974: 353-4).

In “Romanos the Melodist”, the terms “prismatic” and “plane” as characteristics of poetic expression are novel, as is the classification of Greek poetry that is put forward. The features of these two types of poetic expression may be summarised – using Elytis’s own words as much as possible – as follows. In the prismatic form of poetic expression, words are never on the same plane but *undulate*. The poetic text is organised around certain “nuclei” which stand out like peaks within the poem and which, in retrospect, can be seen to hold the poem together. According to Elytis, they are to the poetic organism what red corpuscles are to the human organism. These “nuclei” are not necessarily images, but are rather phrasal units with a self-generating radiance, in which the combination of the word’s image and sound coincides with the cognitive meaning to such a degree that it is impossible to decide whether the poetic effect comes from *what* the poet says or the *way* he says it. The repetition of this feature gives a prismatic form to the poetic expression. Poems containing this characteristic feature affect the reader not only as a whole, but also in their fragmented parts, precisely because of these peaks, these concentrated and laconic crystallisations of the poetic spirit. They are utterances, Elytis maintains, in which the metal of the language and the images produced are fused and in which the formulation of a truth gives rise to another perception of the world, apprehended through the imagination. The test for this type of poetry is to imagine that 90 per cent of the poetic text has been lost and to examine whether the remaining fragments still function as poetry, as, for example, is the case with Sappho’s poetry. Prismatic poetry, according to Elytis, is that particular feature which characterises the true Greek poetic tradition, and is a feature of Homer, Pindar, Sappho and the ancient lyric poets, Romanos, Kalvos and, by inference, Elytis himself.

Plane poetry, on the other hand, is characterised by a flat, linear form of expression. It made its appearance in the Greek tradition, according to Elytis, either as a reaction to the excess of the prismatic tradition or simply through the influence of foreign, particularly Anglo-Saxon, models. It is narrative in style and has a poetic value not in its parts but only when taken as a whole. If such poetry is fragmented, all that remains, says Elytis, are “plain statements” (σκέτες κουβέντες). As an example, Elytis quotes verses by Cavafy, who, together with Seferis, is

referred to as an exponent of this plane, linear poetic form. The two isolated verses by Cavafy that he cites as examples are: “από το παράθυρο φαίνονταν το σοκάκι” [the street could be seen from the window] and “Βαρέθηκεν εφημερίδες να διαβάζει” [he grew tired of reading newspapers]. This “test”, according to Elytis, sets one thinking (βάζει σε πολλές σκέψεις). Elytis does not reject this poetry but considers it as being outside the true Greek tradition.⁶ Without explicitly saying so, Elytis makes it clear that he favours the tradition of prismatic expression, his description of which, as Nikos Dimou (1986: 420) remarks, “corresponds entirely to the features of his own poetry. In this contrast [between prismatic and plane poetry], we find the clearest expression of his own poetics.”

It is interesting to compare what Elytis says in “Romanos the Melodist” with what he says in a later essay “Notebook of a lyric poet. Towards a codification of poetic expression (tentative sample)” and contained in *Carte blanche* (Elytis 1992: 231-44). In this “Notebook”, Elytis lists types of poetic expression that he divides into fourteen categories.⁷ As examples of these types of poetic expression, he cites verses from Aeschylus, Apollinaire, Archilochus, Baudelaire, Bertrand Aloysius, Gatsos, Engonopoulos, T.S. Eliot,⁸ Eluard, Góngora, Hölderlin, Jouve, Cavafy, Calas, Kalvos, Karyotakis, Lautréamont, Lorca, Mallarmé, Nerval, Novalis, Palamas, Papatsonis, Reverdy, Rilke, Rimbaud, Romanos, Sarandaris, Seferis, Sikelianos, Solomos, Dylan Thomas, Ungaretti, Valéry, Whitman and Yates.

⁶ Elytis asserts that such poetry can be translated almost as easily as prose in contrast to the insurmountable translation problems in prismatic poetry. This is in keeping with many other statements by him as to the virtual untranslatability of poets in this tradition, such as Solomos (see Elytis 1974: 29), and of his own poetry in particular (see Elytis 1992: 329).

⁷ These categories are: περιγραφή ευθεία, περιγραφή πλαγία, συγκινησιακός αρμός, στοχασμός απλός, στοχασμός λυρικός, αναπαρθενευτική σύνταξη, πλέγματα γλωσσικής γοητείας, παρομοίωση πρώτου βαθμού, παρομοίωση δευτέρου βαθμού, παρομοίωση τρίτου βαθμού, εικόνα πρώτου βαθμού, εικόνα δευτέρου βαθμού, εικόνα τρίτου βαθμού, οργανικοί τίτλοι.

⁸ The only verse attributed to T.S. Eliot is, in actual fact, by W.B. Yeats.

We might quite reasonably assume that the verses he cites in his lyric poet's "Notebook" are taken from poets with whom Elytis feels some lyrical affinity, even though he does not go so far as to characterise them as "prismatic" poets. We are not surprised, for example, to find verses by Romanos, Solomos and Kalvos, who Elytis places firmly within the prismatic poetic tradition in various other essays. Nor are we surprised to find verses by, for example, Dylan Thomas, about whom Elytis says: "...I feel a great affinity with Dylan Thomas, particularly regarding lyrical expression and iconic imagination" (see Elytis 1981b) or by Hölderlin,⁹ who is referred to by Elytis as the poet who, together with Solomos, observes him "with a watchful eye" (see Elytis 1992: 408). Similarly, we would expect to find verses by Rimbaud, who Elytis asserts was "undoubtedly the most gifted poet ever seen in European literature" (see Elytis 1976: 10). What is surprising, however, is that we also find verses by Cavafy and Seferis as examples of lyric expression after his explicit reference to their poetry in "Romanos the Melodist" as examples of the plane form of poetic expression. It is also of interest that in an earlier essay ("The girls", 1944-72), Elytis once again cites verses by various poets in order to clarify his views concerning poetic expression. Among the verses by poets that one would expect (Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Lorca, Eluard, Apollinaire, Ungaretti, Engonopoulos, Embiricos, Gatsos), there

⁹ In his essay on "Friedrich Hölderlin – Odysseus Elytis", Daskarolis (1991: 885) notes that "Hölderlin doesn't simply *write* poetry, he *is* poetry. His every word appears cut off from everyday vocabulary; it is reborn in a primordial clarity. Each phrase is a drop of freshness. Each word is charged with the inseparable force of its meaning. [...] Isolated verses, just as much as long elegies, piece by piece compose a scintillating work that extends in perpetuity and has access to eternity" (which is a good description of what Elytis is trying to achieve through his poetry). Daskarolis cites several verses by Hölderlin as examples: *Nah ist / und schwer zu fassen der Gott. / Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / des Rettende auch* (from "Patmos") and *Denn schwer ist zu tragen das Unglück, aber schwerer das Glück* (from "Der Rhein"). And discussing Elytis's description of prismatic poetry, Daskarolis tests the prismatic nature of Hölderlin's "Der Rhein" by isolating a verse (*Ein Rätsel ist reinentsprungenes*) and examining whether it still functions as poetry. In his view, the test proves positive.

are also two by Seferis (see Elytis 1974: 148-9). I think what this shows is that, when talking of prismatic and plane forms of poetic expression, Elytis does not consider that these two forms are mutually exclusive, that we are dealing, that is, with two different *kinds* of poetry, but rather that they represent two different degrees of lyrical expression.

The contrast between Kalvos and Cavafy in their form of lyrical expression, which we find in "Romanos the Melodist", had already been made in his essay "The true physiognomy and lyrical boldness of Andreas Kalvos", written as early as 1942 (see Elytis 1974: 81). In this earlier essay, at least, Elytis does not seem to regard the prismatic and plane modes of poetic expression as being mutually exclusive, but more as a question of degree. "We can imagine," he says, "the field of lyrical creation as a notional expanse, with two extreme points and a central area; or as a sphere with two poles and a circumferential zone in the middle" (ibid.: 81). Using this schematic representation in the sphere of Greek poetry, he places Kalvos and Cavafy at opposite ends and places the folk songs, Solomos, Palamas and Sikelianos at unspecified points between the two. He then does the same for European poetry, placing Rimbaud and Lautréamont at one end and Pound and Eliot at the other, with Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Valéry somewhere between the two extremes. In this text, Eliot and Pound are placed at the same end as Cavafy in terms of their mode of poetic expression and are contrasted with the mode of expression employed by Kalvos (while, in "Romanos the Melodist", Pound and Eliot are not specifically referred to but are implied under the general reference to "Anglo-Saxon poetry"). Elytis admits that such a view of lyrical expression is purely schematic, but that he simply wishes to reveal the difference and relationship between these poets in terms of the way imagination functions in these types of poetry.¹⁰

¹⁰ A similar schematic representation of Greek poetry is put forward by Elytis in his address to the Swedish Academy on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature (see Elytis 1992: 327-8). Here, however, Solomos takes the place of Kalvos at the one extreme, while Cavafy is again compared to Eliot in terms of their mode of poetic expression.

The list of poets with whom Elytis aligns himself – Sappho, Romanos, Solomos and Kalvos from the Greek poetic tradition and Hölderlin, Rimbaud and Mallarmé from the European – is instructive in the analysis of his poetics, as it is indicative of how he sees poetic expression. When asked in an interview about poets who might have influenced him or with whom he feels some kind of affinity, Elytis answers:

...In the matter of expression, I came under various influences, particularly in my first steps. The iconicity, for example, and the juxtapositional syntax of Eluard gave me support. As did the ellipticalness of Ungaretti and the intellectual clarity of Yorgos Sarandaris. Later, Lorca and his popular myth-making, [...] Personally speaking, my major teachers [...] were Hölderlin, Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Solomos.

(Elytis 1981: 243-4)

As to Sappho, he refers to her as “a distant cousin”; each of them, he says, was working “with the same concepts... not to say the same words” (Elytis 1992: 216). In talking of Sappho’s poetry, Elytis describes it in a way that clearly recalls his description of prismatic expression in poetry:

A better example of the power of poetic discourse doesn’t exist. Mutilated stanzas, half-lines, fragmented words, a nothing; yet from that nothing comes a miracle [...]. The magnetism unloosed by the words is so great, you could say, that they become detached from the axis of their servile usage.

(*ibid.*: 217)

His views concerning a particular poetic mode of expression are, of course, linked with his views concerning poetry’s deeper function. Poetry, for Elytis, is not just an art; it also constitutes a mission. Poetry, he says, “rises up at the point where rationalism lays down its arms for poetry to take them up and advance into the forbidden zone...” (1992: 321). In his essay entitled “The method of ‘therefore’” (1992: 165-83), Elytis maintains that we live in a world governed by calculation and expectation of some ready answer of the type “plus, minus, divided by, times – therefore” (*ibid.*: 165). Yet, where is the “therefore” in a poetic phrase (he asks)? And it is perhaps not without significance

that, here too, in terms of poetry's deeper function, he takes issue with the Western conception of poetry, just as he does with Anglo-Saxon poetry in terms of poetic expression. He sees poetry as having come about "to correct God's mistakes; or, if not, then to show how mistakenly we perceive His gift" (ibid.: 116) and asserts that the pile of materials that constitute this world could, with a different method of assembly, dictated by our sentiments, produce a more inhabitable dwelling. Yet, in trying through poetry to reassemble the elements of the world, to make a Heaven out of a Hell, "we came up," he says, "against an unbreachable wall: the Western perception of art, that because of its inability to move on a mythical level, has come to confine itself to observation and analysis, transferring the area of a poem from a nucleus of mysterious radiances to a simple melancholic confessional" (ibid.: 116).¹¹

Again it can be seen that Elytis is aware that the deeper function of poetry (as he understands it) can also be achieved in other ways. In his essay "The method of 'therefore'", first published in 1986, the same year as his essay "Romanos the Melodist", he says with reference to Eliot's *The Four Quartets*:

...the poet arouses and reveals our very own sentiments in a state of suspension, transmuted into crystals whose brilliance revolves and determines like clockwork the elements of the world around us with such plausibility, that you don't have time to consider that most probably everything was premeditated. And I'm speaking of only one particular, extreme case. You can turn to another one, to the T.S. Eliot of *The Four Quartets*, for example, in order to be convinced that there are as many ways to give

¹¹ Again, on the level of function, just as with its mode of expression, Elytis contrasts two types of poetry, stating in an earlier essay (see Elytis 1974: 147): "So for many years, poets have made themselves comical through their persistent endeavour to reveal things that even the most stupid reader knows. Of course pearls are white, leaves green in spring. What else could they be? So honey is sweet? Fine, thanks for the information. The true poet does not stoop to use more words than he needs, to paint a scene, to remind. He makes the invisible visible, the notional a sensation, the non-real real. In place of a simple series of words, he puts another, appropriate not for recalling things already known, but for inspiring unknown visions."

existence to the second, real world, transcending the current one, as there are fingerprints.

(1992: 173)

It is also interesting to note here that although Elytis places Eliot and Pound at the other extreme of poetic expression, nevertheless he elsewhere cites both Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Pound's *Cantos* among a list of works that, in his opinion, are works for all eternity.¹²

Behind this contrast between the prismatic and plane modes of poetic expression, I think that what Elytis wishes to emphasise is the difference between what we might term a "poetry of language", in which words are enlisted in an incantatory way in order to open the doors of perception to another reality, and a "poetry of ideas", in which ideas and sentiments are expressed using poetic diction. In his "Report to Andreas Embiricos", he says that:

the heralds of ideas in poetry aim at a truth which, as a rule, contradicts them the next day, just as the concept of beauty contradicts the lovers of beauty the day after the next day. "Beauty" and "truth" are able to last and remain unchanged only through magic, which is the art of transformation. (1992: 137)

He goes on to explain that to transfuse accepted knowledge into verses is at best an achievement; to reveal, however, a hitherto unknown feeling is a miracle. As an example of what he means, he cites and comments on two verses by Embiricos:

"Κρυφή μου ελπίδα στα βουνά, καλημερίζω την ηχώ σου" [My secret hope in the mountains, I bid good day to your echo], says the poet, and at the same time we feel the sound striking us in the breast. "Ο άνεμος όταν φυσά, οι καλαμιές γεμίζουν αυλητρίδες"

¹² This list includes: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *The Pythian Odes*, *The Metamorphoses*, *The Song of Songs*, the "Kontakia", *The Divine Comedy*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, "Der Rhein" and "Patmos", *Hymnen an die Nacht*, *Erotokritos*, *Les Illuminations*, *The Free Besieged*, *Les Fleurs du mal*, *Leaves of Grass*, *The Duino Elegies*, "L'Après-midi d'un faune", "Le Cimetière marin", *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías*, *The Cantos*, *The Four Quartets* (see Elytis 1992: 183).

[When the wind blows, the reeds fill with flute girls]; it also fills our hearing and, you might say, our eyes too, because the second vision comes into operation, which, in its turn, carries out the work of our other senses.

(ibid.: 138)

This contrast between a “poetry of language” and a “poetry of ideas” is particularly well expressed by Ioulita Iliopoulou, who writes:

A little this way or that and poetry doesn't exist; only thought, sometimes wise, sometimes commonplace, but still thought, or even more commonly, confession. No amount of noise is the same as a note of music. And a written statement of words cut asymmetrically in various lengths of line does not constitute poetry. Why should it? Certain poets know, however, that “One single word is sufficient to become a spark to an incombustible thought.”

(1994: 15)

Just as, according to Elytis, the poetic nuclei in prismatic poetry are like blood corpuscles to the human organism, so too the basic cell of prismatic poetry is the spark that flies out when two words are appropriately placed. “Two words are sufficient [...],” writes Elytis, “where all the factors – linguistic, iconic, cognitive and phonic – co-function in the fusion of an integral poetic unit” (1992: 48) and, elsewhere, he says:

The poet *points*. And the visibility increases, intensifies, becomes more refined, shines the more each element finds its exact place in a whole that makes its levels converge and result in a single, lasting radiance.

(1992: 181).

This is the goal of (prismatic) poetry for Elytis, yet the spark created by two words appropriately placed is not an end in itself; the ultimate aim of this poetry is to change the way we see the world, as he explains when he says: “... not that this element – surprise – constitutes actual poetry [...]; what I mean is that the revelation, thanks to this, of another way of seeing things most certainly constitutes poetry...” (1992: 143). And in talking of poetry's mission, he remarks: “For over thirty centuries, man has

striven to place one word next to another in such a way that his thought is obliged to take new, untried turns" (1992: 113-14).

In conclusion, we can say, firstly, that Elytis's views on poetic expression and the contrast he makes between the prismatic and plane modes of poetic expression in "Romanos the Melodist" should be examined in connection with his earlier and, above all, with his later writings collected in *Carte blanche*. Secondly, such an examination reveals that the two forms of poetic expression contrasted in "Romanos the Melodist" are not mutually exclusive, but rather represent the two extremes of a single axis of poetic expression. Their difference, therefore, is more one of degree than essence. Thirdly, Elytis's concern with different modes of poetic expression is inseparably linked to his understanding of the deeper function of poetry, which is not simply to express ideas and sentiments using a poetic diction, but, by means of language, to bring about a new vision of the world, given that poetry is, for Elytis, "the art of transformation". And finally, an examination of his views concerning poetic expression and function, as these are outlined in his later essays collected in *Carte blanche*, helps us, I believe, to achieve a better understanding of his own poetic work.

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St Cross College, Oxford