

THE PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY OF ODYSSEUS ELYTIS: AN
ANALYSIS OF HIS POETIC CONCEPTS AND THEIR
DEVELOPMENT IN HIS WORK FROM 1935 TO 1985

Ruth Machalias

B.A. (Hons.) University of New England
Dip.Ed. University of New England

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts with Honours of the
University of New England
Division of Modern Greek

February 1988

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the author.

Signature

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Lynda Garland, for her invaluable criticisms and advice in the preparation of this thesis. I am also grateful to my colleague, Miss Patricia Kokori, for drawing my attention to, and supplying me with, much useful material.

Special thanks must go to Mrs Barbara Rochester for her cheerful perseverance and skill in typing the final draft of the thesis. I would also like to thank Miss Gloria Model for her assistance with the typing.

Finally, I am indebted to my husband Nick and my parents for their support and encouragement, and for proof reading the typed copy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
INTRODUCTION	iii
A DEFINITION OF ELYTIS' PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY	1
CHAPTER ONE	
Recurring Elements in Elytis' Poetry (1935-85)	6
CHAPTER TWO	
Part One: The Theme of Personification in Elytis' Poetry of His First Period (1935-43)	34
Part Two: The Theme of Metamorphosis in Elytis' Poetry of His First Period (1935-43)	67
CHAPTER THREE	
Introduction: The Transition between Elytis' First and Second Periods	83
Part One: The Influence of the Historical Tradition of Greece on Elytis' Poetry of His Second Period (1945-60)	86
Part Two: The Influence of the Literary Tradition of Greece on Elytis' Poetry of His Second Period (1945-60)	99
Part Three: The Influence of the Religious Tradition of Greece on Elytis' Poetry of His Second Period (1945-60)	122
CHAPTER FOUR	
Introduction: The Transition between Elytis' Second and Third Periods	133
Elytis' Personal Mythology of His Third Period (1971-85)	135
CONCLUSION	154
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: Works by Odysseus Elytis	163
Appendix B: Biography of Odysseus Elytis	165
BIBLIOGRAPHY	168

INTRODUCTION

Odysseus Elytis is considered one of Greece's foremost modern poets. A prolific writer, and one of the best exponents of the surrealist genre in his country, his work has been translated into many languages, and he is only the second Greek poet to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Not surprisingly, considerable research has been done on various aspects of his work. Many critics allude to Elytis' "personal mythology", yet there has never been any detailed discussion of this term in all the critical literature.

This thesis will attempt to rectify this situation; that is, it will endeavour to provide a detailed analysis of Elytis' personal mythology, and the role it plays in his poetry. Indeed it will be shown that it is an integral part of his work, and furthermore, that an understanding of it is essential to a better appreciation of Elytis' poetry.

More specifically, the term "personal mythology" will be defined, and it will be demonstrated that it is a system of theories, themes, and motifs - in short, a poetic credo - which dictates the focus of each of the three periods of Elytis' work. As well as this, it provides the poet with a means of portraying those elements which represent the real Greece, rather than any conventional stereotype influenced by Western ideas.

It will also be proven that there are two aspects to Elytis' personal mythology representing the constant, and the changing elements. The first refers to a set of theories whose expression permeates all of Elytis' work, and thus acts as a framework for the second changing aspect. The latter is linked to the fact that there are three separate periods in Elytis' work, and that these three periods correspond to three stages of personal mythology, each of which provides

a different focus, and new sources of imagery and expression. The emphasis is thus on the changes in his personal mythology between periods. Both these aspects, that is, the constant and the changing elements, will be examined through an analysis of Elytis' poetry from 1935-1985.

This period covers the years from the date of Elytis' first appearance in Τα Νέα Γράμματα to the publication of his last poetical work, Ο μικρός ναυτίλος. Thus all the following collections will be studied: Προσανατολισμοί; 'Ηλιος ο πρώτος; 'Άσμα ηρωϊκό και πένθιμο για τον χαμένο ανθυπολοχαγό της Αλβανίας; Η καλοσύνη στις λυκοποριές; Το 'Άξιλον Εστί; 'Εξη και μια τύψεις για τον ουρανό; Το φωτόδεντρο; Ο ήλιος ο ηλιότορας; Το μονόγραμμα; Τα ρω του έρωτα; Τα ετεροθαλή; Μαρία Νεφέλη; Τρία ποιήματα; Ημερολόγιο ενός αθέατου Απριλίου; and Ο μικρός ναυτίλος.¹ Elytis' personal mythology is a concept associated only with his poetry, and therefore a detailed examination of his prose works and translations is outside the confines of this thesis, although reference will be made to them.

Furthermore, as his personal mythology is a system of theories, themes, and motifs, the thesis will concentrate on those poetic concepts in the analysis of Elytis' work, rather than other features such as his style, language, or tone.

The thesis is structured as follows:

The brief section, "A definition of Elytis' personal mythology", provides a definition of the term, as well as a general introduction

1. The only works to which this thesis will not make extensive reference are Σηματολόγιον and Αλβανιάδα. The former is simply a collection that reproduces the proverb-like sayings that occur at the end of each "parallel monologue" in Μαρία Νεφέλη. As regards the latter, I have unfortunately been unable to obtain a copy of this work; the couple of references to Αλβανιάδα contained in this thesis are based on sections of the work reproduced in M. Vitti's, Κριτική μελέτη.

to the topic, and the content of the thesis.

Chapter One examines the constant aspect of Elytis' personal mythology; that is, the elements that recur throughout all three periods of his poetry (1935-85). In particular, the chapter will analyse Elytis' concept of the union of opposites; his theory of the instantaneous impression; meteorism; the importance of a poem's structure in Elytis' poetry, and the related significance of the number seven; and the concept of "the sanctity of the senses". Through a detailed study of each of these elements, illustrated with examples from each period of his poetry, it will be proven that the continuity of this aspect provides a framework, and gives greater cohesion to Elytis' work.

Chapters Two to Four examine the second aspect of Elytis' personal mythology, the changing emphasis between periods. Each chapter is devoted to a single period of his poetry and demonstrates the different focus of each stage of the personal mythology, with particular reference to the way in which it dictates the content, themes, imagery and expression of the poetry of each period.

Chapter Two examines the poetry of Elytis' first period (1935-43). It will be shown that in his desire to avoid the usual allusions to Classical mythical figures, the poet has turned instead to two themes, personification and metamorphosis, for the basis of his personal mythology. A detailed analysis of Elytis' treatment of these two themes will reveal the important role that Nature plays in the poetry of this period. In particular, it will be shown that Elytis personifies the four elements of Nature - the sun, the sea, the earth, and the wind - as well as various trees and plants, and that the theme of metamorphosis takes three forms: the transformation of man into Nature, nature into man, and abstract ideas into nature.

Chapter Three examines the poetry of Elytis' second period (1945-60) in relation to the new focus in his personal mythology: a new awareness of Greece's cultural tradition. It will be proven

that this change in emphasis is due both to the poet's experiences in the Albanian Campaign and a desire to change his expression. There are three aspects to Elytis' treatment of the theme of Greece's cultural tradition, namely Greece's historical, literary, and religious traditions, and each will be analysed in detail.

Chapter Four examines the poetry of Elytis' third period (1971-85), in which his personal mythology undergoes a further change in focus, stressing the personal aspect of that mythology; that is, there is a greater emphasis on the private theories and experiences of the poet himself. In particular, the chapter will analyse Elytis' theory of solar metaphysics; his notion of, and search for, Paradise; his heightened interest in language; and the emphasis on Greece's Eastern heritage.

The Conclusion will draw together all the important points of the previous chapters, summarizing the development of Elytis' personal mythology throughout the three periods, and at the same time will prove that it is a unique personal poetic credo that shapes his work.