

On Fire, Light, and Volcanoes: Tracing a ‘Forgotten Ethics’ in Elytis and Camus

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Abstract

My paper documents the textual dialogue between Elytis and Camus and analyses their common literary, philosophical, and ethical preoccupations. Although they shared a number of literary motifs and interests, including the space of the Mediterranean and the modernist attraction to ancient Hellenic philosophical traditions, I argue that they approached these interests from fundamentally different perspectives: while Camus’ knowledge of ancient Greek thought was based on second-hand scholastic interpretations, Elytis’ reading of ancient philosophical texts provided him with an original, intimate understanding of their literary and discursive qualities. I have also included original archival material which shows that Elytis was in an immediate literary dialogue with Camus during his writing of *The Axion Esti*.

Keywords

Elytis, Camus, ethics, Empedocles, *Émpedocle* (periodical)

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Introduction

A study of the dialogue between two Nobel Prize winners – Odysseus Elytis and Albert Camus – has long been a desideratum of literary scholarship, although their creative affinity was noted as far back as 1960.¹ Elytis himself spoke on this kinship and the need of its further study.² However, except from several brief notes, this topic has not been systematically analyzed.³ In this paper I will follow the textual dialogue between Elytis and Camus and attempt a close-reading of the relevant passages. My discussion will also include Elytis' unpublished notes pertaining to Camus in the manuscripts of *The Axion Esti*.

Camus had an ambiguous relationship with Greece: while he had a pronounced admiration for the history of the Greek culture, his knowledge of it was not exactly adequate. He intended to visit Greece as early as 1939, but the trip was cancelled because of the world war. Eventually, he visited Greece several times, many years later, including a month-long visit in spring 1955 and another several weeks in the summer of 1958.⁴ Although the limitations of space do not allow me to enter into greater detail here, it is important to stress the Neoplatonic substratum in Camus' thought, and especially Plotinus, who made a profound impression on Camus.⁵

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- 1 By the Swiss writer and publicist Hans Hilty (English translation: Hilty 1975, with a note that "Hilty's article was especially liked and recommended by Elytis himself," 674, fn.), first published in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of 17 July 1960, "Odysseas Elytis: Ein griechischer Lyriker unserer Tage". Parts were published in the *Kathimerini* of 17 December 1960, per Elytis' commendation (Nikoretzos 2006: 182, fn. 9). While insightful, Hilty's notes are rather laconic, due to the limitations of space in the original edition.
 - 2 "Dr [Hans Rudolf] Hilty [wrote about the] extraordinary affinity that exists between the *Noces* of Camus and my poems, which as I realized afterwards is true and which no Greek critic has observed so far. Only René Char told me once in Paris that if Camus could read my writings he would be certainly very interested." (Nikoretzos 2006: 171–172, my translation.)
 - 3 Pourgouris (2011: 37–63). See also Saltapidas (1990) and Baila (2013). Mario Vitti (2000: 228–229) mentioned Camus in passing in the chapter on *The Axion Esti*. Elena Koutrianou in her monumental study also briefly acknowledged the affinities between the two (Koutrianou 2002: 155). Rania Mousouli (Mousouli: 2014) recently submitted a doctoral dissertation on this topic. Thanks are due to Rania Mousouli and Tesy Baila for sending me their work.
 - 4 In the summer of 1958, Camus' cruise ship crossed path with Elytis, on the island of Chios, who vacationed there with Tzina and Kostas Politis; but they were unaware of each other's presence on the island. See Camus (2003: 167; 184; 247, fn. 1; 210, fn. 5; 251–252, fn. 1); details of the trip in Lottman (1997: 574–575; 661–662); also B, *sub anno*.
 - 5 In his college thesis, *Neo-Platonism and Christian Thought*, Camus dealt intensively with the work of Neoplatonic philosophers, especially Plotinus. The English

Elytis had a comparably ambiguous relationship with Camus' writings. He discerned between Camus' philosophy and his language, claiming that Camus wrote "the most transparent and integral prose of contemporary French literature,"⁶ although this might also be a tongue-in-cheek way of saying that Camus was a mediocre philosopher. Elytis also suggested that young readers should overlook Camus' *Plague* and turn instead to his *Nuptials* or the *Summer* (now generally known as 'lyrical essays'):

*I've heard many young people admire André Breton, and even more Albert Camus; but, just as I was about to feel happy about it, I understood my mistake: they were attracted by theory, the problems, or this or that instance of the absurd in life. About the rest – most of all, about that thing which most gave the nuance of the unspeakable to their words, about the fact that the former had achieved the smoothest and the latter the most transparent and integral prose of contemporary French literature – not a word. Peste, but not Noces or Été; automatic writing, but not Point du Jour or Amour Fou. Voilà où nous en sommes, as they would say themselves.*⁷

Elytis and Camus operated with similar literary means, the sun, the sea, sensory and sensual pleasure. They had treated similar topics – the absurd and the human condition – although they approached them from fundamentally different perspectives, as I will show further below. They also carefully negotiated their cultural identities and were far from confident about their position within the European cultural domain. They positioned themselves in what they constructed as a world of the Mediterranean and developed it into a heterotopic space bursting with imaginative and transformative powers.⁸ They also shared their

translator of the work, Ronald Srigley, argues that Camus "only ever wrote one book" and that "at [its] heart [...] are the fundamental questions about human life that he first explored in *Christian Metaphysics*" (Camus 2007: 1–2). Plotinus was instrumental in forming the central tenet of Camus' philosophy, the absurd: according to Herbert Hochberg, who studied Camus' reading of Plotinus, "[By absurdity, Camus] basically, simply means that there is no Plotinian absolute – no ultimate unity, divine or secular, which explains all" (1965: 89). On Camus' Greek sources see Archambault (1972). Neither Hochberg nor Archambault were exactly impressed by Camus' cognizance of Greek literature.

6 Elytis (1987: 23–24).

7 Ibid., my translation.

8 Here one should also not forget another Elytis' literary companion, Ungaretti, who also shared many of those characteristics. For references and discussion see Boskovic (2014: 147ff.).

cultural epicenter in Paris: they belonged to the same literary circles around René Char and Jean Jouve, and they even met in person in 1950.

Lastly and most importantly, Elytis and Camus had a particular obsession with ethics, a somewhat unexpected preoccupation for writers who are commonly perceived as sensual and physiolatric.⁹ After clarifying their understanding of ethics by closely reading relevant passages, I will show that this preoccupation reached deeply into the classical literary heritage, and more specifically, to Presocratic and Platonic ethical theories, for which they developed their own modes of understanding.

Nuptials

As early as 1939, in the *Nuptials*, Camus described a paradisiacal Mediterranean landscape of Algeria. This space, where the life of culture is suspended and the human existence is overtaken by nature, is dominated by the sun and sea:

*We stride to the meeting-place of love and desire. We are not seeking lessons or the bitter philosophy required from greatness. Nothing matters here but the sun, kisses and the wild scents of the earth... The great free love of nature and the sea absorbs me completely.*¹⁰

This landscape, inhabited by gods who speak “in the sun and the scent of absinthe leaves” is profoundly mythogenic; its imagery takes the narrator to Classical Hellenic myth (despite the fact that the scene is taking place in Tipasa): a Mediterranean Eros facilitates the movement between the noetic and the earthly realms, the sky and the sea. Nature unveils the “difficult knowledge of how to live”.¹¹

Camus’ Algeria is, in many respects, a “nature without men,”¹² devoid of ethical purpose. Despite its Neoplatonic resonance, Camus’ program in these

9 Vangelis Athanasopoulos was among the first to recognize the importance of ethics for Elytis, in his scholia on Elytis’ unpublished commentary to *The Axion Esti* (Athanasopoulos 2001: 383ff.). Koutrianou also addressed the issue several times (Koutrianou 2002: 103–109; 146–150). On Camus’ ethics see Hochberg (1965); Archambault (1972); Walker (1982); Blanchard (1997); Sessler (2008); Bronner (2009).

10 Camus (1979: 70).

11 *Ibid.*, 72.

12 *Ibid.*, 100. Camus’ “orientalist and Francocentric” perception of Algeria has already been noted (Pourgouris 2011: 45, with references; cf. also Zaretsky 2013). Camus’ perspective of Algeria is colonial – the narrator is not there working, but enjoying himself around ancient ruins and cafés and tasting local fruit. On the other hand,

brief essays is essentially anti-Platonic: the nuptials are between man and the earth, “us” and “the world”. In a spectacular case of ‘misinterpretation and distortion’, Camus invoked Plotinus as the figure who symbolizes yearning for such a union, which is found “in terms of sun and sea”. In Plotinus’ system, finding unity (that is, the One) in the material realm would be a grave contradiction in terms. As though aware of this discrepancy, Camus admits that he has “not enough soul” to accept the transcendental truths; all that can move him is inside the “curve of the days” (*la courbe des journées*, by which we should perhaps understand αἰών). His “land of the soul” is transcribed onto the Mediterranean landscape and thus it became a tangible, physical reality of the Algerian summer. Camus’ description of the Mediterranean is in effect a *natura naturans*: the life under the sun that serves its own purpose.

Elytis translated a passage from the *Nuptials at Tipasa* into Greek and included it in his *Small Epsilon*, a collection of brief texts from various periods of his career.¹³ Here is the entire passage found in Elytis’ book:

Embracing a woman’s body also means holding in your arms this strange joy which descends from sky to sea. In a moment, when I throw myself down among the absinthe plants to bring their scent into my body, I shall know, whatever prejudice may say, that I am fulfilling a truth which is that of the sun and which will also be that of my death. In a sense, it is indeed my life that I am playing out here, a life which tastes of warm stone, is full of the sighs of the sea and the rising song of the crickets. The breeze is cool and the sky blue. I love life with abandon and wish to speak of it with freedom: it makes me proud of my human condition. Yet people have often told me: there’s nothing to be proud of. Yes, there is: this sun, this sea, my heart leaping with youth, the salt taste of my body, and the vast landscape where tenderness and glory merge in blue and yellow. It is this conquest that requires my strength and my resources. Everything here leaves me intact, I give up nothing of myself, I put on no mask: it is enough for me patiently to acquire the difficult knowledge of how to live which is worth all their arts of living.¹⁴

Elytis’ Mediterranean landscape is sometimes criticized on the basis of class: Peter Mackridge has remarked that Elytis characteristically “does not depict the labor by which [the elements of the Aegean landscape – white marble fountains, windmills, little pink domes, tall perforated dovecotes] are produced.” Mackridge (1997: 117).

- 13 First published in 1996 under the title 2×7ε. The passage there bears a title *Mediterranean Man According to Albert Camus* but, like in other similar cases in the collection, does not indicate that the text is a translation.
- 14 Elytis (1999: 245–246), English translation from Camus (1979: 71–72).

Camus’ nature here explicitly rejects ethics (“the art of living”) and his “knowledge of how to live” postulates unmediated, sensual experience. In Elytis’ poetry, on the contrary, the image of the Mediterranean landscape, sun, and sea is defined as a philosophical image – a *reflection* of the sun on the surface of the water (*speculation, speculum*) – and should be understood in the framework of Elytis’ metaphysical preoccupations. In *Little Nautilus*, Elytis wrote characteristically:

*For whomever sea in sun is ‘landscape’ – life seems easy and death too. But for whomever it is a mirror of immortality, it is ‘duration’. A duration whose blinding light alone does not let you conceive it.*¹⁵

This apparently simple, even trivial image carries a disproportionate philosophical weight in Elytis’ poetry. It is a reference to Rimbaud’s poem *L’Éternité*, which Elytis quoted at least three times in his writings:¹⁶

*Elle est retrouvée!
Quoi? l’éternité.
C’est la mer mêlée
Au soleil.*¹⁷

Here the two natural elements stand as a sensory, analogical representation of the Neoplatonic One (the sun) and the limit which divides the immanent and the noetic domains (the sea). This image is related to, or one might say founded on, another Platonic textual link, quoted in Elytis’ essay *The Chronicle of a Decade*: it is the metaphor of the “true earth” from the *Phaedo*, in which fish jump out of the water and take a glance of the earth, similar to humans who are only able to take a partial and limited intuitive perception of the domain of forms.¹⁸

15 Elytis (2004: 502). Although published in 1984, the collection was written over many decades, starting at the time of Elytis’ return from France.

16 Once in the essay *First Things First*, Elytis (1987: 31); once in his *Stockholm address*, Elytis (1999: 359); and another time in his unpublished commentary on *The Axion Esti*, Kechagioglou (1995: 51). The image was also inscribed in the form of anagrams among those “strange, enigmatic words” in the *Genesis of The Axion Esti*, Elytis (2004: 128).

17 *It is found again! / What? Eternity. / It is a sea mixed / With sun.* Some editions have *al-lée*, “gone” or “fled away” in the third verse, instead of the original *mêlée*. Rimbaud (1873: 34).

18 Elytis (1987: 446). The quote is from *Phaed.* 109e: ‘Ἐπεὶ, εἴ τις αὐτοῦ ἐπ’ ἄκρα ἔλθοι ἢ πτηνὸς γενόμενος ἀνάπτοιτο, κατιδεῖν <ἄν> ἀνακύψαντα ὡσπερ ἐνθάδε οἱ ἐκ τῆς θαλάττης ἰθυχῆς ἀνακίπτονες ὀρώσι τὰ ἐνθάδε οὕτως ἄν τινα καὶ τὰ ἐκεῖ κατιδεῖν, καὶ εἰ

In an old Platonic metaphor,¹⁹ the physical reflection of the sun on the surface of the sea acts as a mirror which reflects the higher reality, but also a path towards the image of the One. This, I believe, is one of the crucial hermeneutical keys for understanding Camus' and Elytis' "knowledge of the joy that descends from sky to sea". At the same time, it indicates the basic differences in their treatment of the relation between nature and ethics.

Summer

Camus' *Summer*, published in 1954, comprises lyrical essays written between 1939 and 1953 and chronologically coinciding with the most important formative years of Elytis' poetry.²⁰ The collection bears a motto from Hölderlin's *Death of Empedocles*:

*But you are born
For a limpid day.*²¹

The Rebel, which was published in 1951, also has a motto from the German poet:

*And openly I pledged my heart to the grave and suffering land, and often in the consecrated night, I promised to love her faithfully until death, unafraid, with her heavy burden of fatality, and never to despise a single one of her enigmas. Thus did I join myself to her with a mortal cord.*²²

These paratextual markers are not to be passed unnoticed, as they open an intertextual channel which runs deep into the European philosophical tradition.²³ The limitations of space do not allow me an excursus into Hölderlin's poetry here,²⁴ but it should be noted that Elytis held the German poet in no lower

ἡ φύσις ἱκανῆ εἶη ἀνασχέσθαι θεωροῦσα, γυνῶναι ἂν ὅτι ἐκεῖνός ἐστιν ὁ ἀληθῶς οὐρανός και τὸ ἀληθινὸν φῶς και ἡ ὥς ἀληθῶς γῆ.

19 *Rep.* 596c–e, cf. *Cor.* 13:12, and the well-known Klopstock's ode *Der Zürchersee*.

20 For periodization of Elytis' poetry, cf. Koutrianou (2002).

21 Camus (1979: 104). The quote is from the *Death of Empedocles*, First Version, v. 1680; Hölderlin (2008: 95). For Elytis' reading of Hölderlin's play, see Boskovic (2014: 26ff.).

22 Camus (1991: 2). From the same text, First Version, v. 384–389; Hölderlin (2008: 50). See also Krell (1995: xvi ff.).

23 "In an epigraph, very often the main thing is not what it says but who its author is, plus the sense of indirect backing that its presence at the edge of a text gives rise to." Genette (1997: 159).

24 Maurice Benn (1979) states that "Camus had indeed much in common with Hölderlin: the striving for measure and moderation, the sense of loyalty to the earth, the enthusiasm for Greece, and 'la pensée solaire' (pp. 2–3).

esteem than “perhaps greater than [all] the poets of modern times”.²⁵ I hope to prove, in the lines to follow, how these links to Hölderlin’s play might be more important than they might seem at first glance.

Camus’ *Almond-Trees*, written in 1940, bursts with solar imagery as an apotropaic act amidst the atrocities of the European war, similar to Elytis’ *Sun the First* (1942). It is worth noting that almond is an important mystical and gnostic symbol,²⁶ and as such appears in Elytis’ 1982 poem *The Almond of the World*.²⁷ The solar epiphany – almond-trees blooming all at once – is equivalent to Elytis’ mood in the *Mad Pomegranate Tree*, and especially, the titular poem of his collection *The Light-Tree and the Fourteenth Beauty*.²⁸

Decades later, Elytis quoted a passage from Camus’ text in an interview:

*‘Do you know,’ Napoleon once said to Fontanes, ‘what fills me most with wonder? The powerlessness of force to establish anything. **There are only two powers in the world: the sword and the mind. In the end the sword is always conquered by the mind.***’²⁹

This time it was Elytis’ turn to distort Camus’ words: later in the text, Camus goes on to state, not without sarcasm, that this ancient precedence of the idea over object has been brought to an end with the modern invention of tanks. In the end, the epiphany of the blooming almond trees does not appear to bring any true revelation and it only signifies itself: it stands there almost as a fetish. In another spectacular *non sequitur*, Camus postulated virtue ethics but deprived it of its metaphysical anchoring, closing his essay with a deplorably banal and almost comical exhortation: “Virtues, more than ever, are necessary today.” This rejection of the transcendental frame of virtue ethics was not

25 Elytis (2011: 88; also 314). Ioulita Iliopoulou confirmed to me that in the last decades of his life Elytis frequently returned to the poems of Hölderlin (unlike, for example, those of Eluard). Cf. also Iakov (1981; 1993); Boskovic (2014); Lernout (1994: 111–112). For affinities between Camus and Hölderlin see Stucky (1980) and Mattei (2007).

26 Cf. Kopidakis (1986: 459), who refers to a gnostic myth on the “ἀμύγδαλον, δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα ἐγένετο”, with a reference to Pausanias, v.1.9.

27 Elytis (2004: 379–385). Elytis’ Gnosticism remains to be studied; cf. Xavier Bordes in his French translation of *The Axion Esti*, Elytis (1996: 24–25); Camus (2007: 67–87); Calinescu (1987: 64).

28 Elytis (2004: 71–72; 225–227). The theme of creative epiphany in Elytis is closely linked with Breton’s *point d’esprit* and Bachelard’s and Bergson’s philosophy; for details see Koutrianou (2002: 188ff.).

29 Camus (1979: 125). Elytis (2011, originally published in 1983) quoted the part in my emphasis.

without nostalgia on Camus' part, and it left a discernably empty space, which would be readdressed in the *Sisyphus*.³⁰

That the *Summer* and *The Almond-Trees* had a particular importance for Elytis can be seen from the fact that he quoted the text two times in his manuscripts of *The Axion Esti*. On the back cover of the Notebook XII,³¹ now kept in the *Archive of the Department of Medieval and Modern Greek Literature of the Aristotle University* in Thessaloniki, Elytis wrote in capital letters:

ALBERT CAMUS

On page 56, he also wrote in big letters on the side of the page:³²

L'ÉTÉ

In Notebook XI,³³ he wrote in French:

Trop de gens confondent le tragique et le désespoir.
Le tragique, disait Lawrence, devrait être comme
un grand coup de pied donné au malheur. CAMUS

This is a quote from *The Almond-Trees*, referring to Camus' 'absurdist' views on ethics:

Let us then know our aims [...]. The first thing is not to despair. Let us not listen too much to those who proclaim that the world is ending. Civilizations do not die so easily, and even if this world were to collapse, it will not have been

30 "What indeed we want is never again to bow down before the sword, never more to declare force to be in the right when it is not serving the mind. This, it is true is an endless task. But we are here to pursue it." Camus (1979: *ibid.*).

31 AE 12.backcover. In the lack of conventions regarding references to Elytis' archives, I have created my own; see Bibliography.

32 AE 12.56.

33 AE 11.53.

*the first. It is indeed true that we live in tragic times. But **too many people confuse tragedy and despair. 'Tragedy,' Lawrence said, 'ought to be a great kick at misery.'** This is a healthy and immediately applicable idea. There are many things today that deserve that kick.*³⁴

There should be little doubt that what appealed to Elytis here was the trust in the power of words – a trust that he shared with Camus and that was a central part of his poetics, leaning on his literary precedents, particularly Symbolists and Romantics.³⁵ The tragic element points to the narrator's encounter with history in *Passions*, the central part of *The Axion Esti*. Elytis' purpose was to transform these personal and collective tragic experiences, through an act of ritualistic, performative literary pragmatics, into one of the primary ethical forces of his poetry.³⁶

Elytis' poetic effort, as Camus' suggested *qua* Lawrence, focused on a metaphysical transcendence of history and its transformation into a personal spiritual and philosophical journey. The narrator's encounter with history works as a cathartic point in an existential tragedy: but while for Camus this catharsis leads to a paradoxical (and rather ill-conceived) state of his absurdist ethics in the *Sisyphus*,³⁷ Elytis' protagonist reaches the blissful state of ritual purity in the final part of the poem (*Gloria*), in which an entire new world is re-created from the elements of the old solely, as in a magical practice, with the act of *naming*. It appears then that in Camus' essay Elytis found an affinity for his own poetic purposes, and attempted to shape his writing of the time as a "coup au malheur".

Empédocle

Before I proceed to the second part of this dialogue, I should address Camus' and Elytis' undestined literary collaboration, which nevertheless introduced a network of intertextual connections that might be worth exploring. In 1949 Camus worked intensely on the founding of a literary magazine, called *Empédocle*. The

34 Camus (1979: 126), my emphasis.

35 Cf. Poggioli (1968: 196–199). This quality of Elytis' poetry is widely recognized, although the critical reactions vary from condemnation to appreciation. Cf. Lorentzatos (2009: 232; 337; esp. 582–583), in my translation: "Elytis [appears, contrary to Seferis,] linguistically artificial... You cannot fool the language," and Karantonis (1992: 175), who praised Elytis for "another Greek" which he created. Cf. also Bampiniotis (1991).

36 See Elytis (1999: 371–372), and Koutrianou (2002: passim).

37 See Hochberg (1965).

periodical circulated for a little more than a year, from April 1949 to August 1950. Already in June 1949 their mutual friend René Char made an offer to Elytis to write for the periodical.³⁸ Char, ironically enough, predicted that the periodical was assured “a certain longevity”.³⁹

Camus met Elytis in January 1950,⁴⁰ and it is reasonable to assume that their collaboration on *Empédocle* was the main pretext for their meeting. An essay Elytis planned to write, titled *Pour un lyrisme d’inventions architecturales et de métaphysique solaire*, was never written, or never finished.⁴¹ Instead of guessing what Elytis would have written, I would rather for a while focus my attention on the ancient philosopher, whose figure lurks in the background of Elytis’ and Camus’ collaboration.

Camus’ reference to Empedocles is indirect and comes through Nietzsche,⁴² who, in turn, discovered the Sicilian magus with the mediation of Hölderlin.⁴³ In a certain sense, Empedocles was the opposite of Plotinus: his path is downwards, like Nietzsche’s Zarathustra’s – towards the world, towards the grotto of Etna – in an attempt to regress to the lost unity.⁴⁴ In Bachelard’s interpretation, which had been known to both Elytis and Camus, Empedocles, like Hölderlin’s Hyperion, is the type of a hero who “eliminated morbid sentimentality in his striving for a unity with nature”, a prototype of the tragic hero who, in his own way, gives a kick at the misery of the human condition.⁴⁵

The ancient sources describe Empedocles as a natural philosopher, a physician, and more intriguingly, as a seer and a master of the forces of nature. According to some, he was a miraculous healer who knew of all the *phármaka* (Gorgias was his student), who was able to raise humans from the dead, and considered himself equal to the gods.⁴⁶ The most famous account of his death

38 Elytis (1987: 448–449), cf. B 25.

39 Char’s letter is now in G 8.1 and it was likely written on the 14 June (dated only “Mardi” with a stamp of 18 June 1949). Cf. Elytis (1987: *ibid.*); Koutrianou (2002: 450, fn. 63); Vitti (2000: 229).

40 B 27.

41 Cf. Koutrianou (2002: 155–156); Pourgouris (2011: 42ff.).

42 Archambault (1972: 170); Camus (2003: 129); Camus (1977: 30–155, esp. 138–146). Camus literary dialogue with Nietzsche has been studied thoroughly: Hanna (1959); Pieper (2002); Sarocchi (2014).

43 Babich (2011).

44 Cf. also Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*: “I recalled the great Sicilian of old who, when he’d had enough of ticking off the hours, having become intimate with the soul of the world, in his bold lust for life plunged into the terrific flames.” Hölderlin (2008: 9).

45 Bachelard (1964: 19).

46 In the *Sophist*, Fr. 65, according to Diogenes Laertius, 8.57.

included Empedocles throwing himself in the fiery crater of Etna in order to prove that he indeed had become a god.⁴⁷

The affinity between Camus and Empedocles begins here: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem,” Camus famously wrote at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, “and that is suicide.”⁴⁸ For Camus, Empedocles is primarily a lonely, resigned figure, despite the complexities of his social and ethical thought to which both Hölderlin and Nietzsche were particularly sensitive.⁴⁹ According to Aristotle, Empedocles was the first to introduce the principles of Good and Evil (or Love and Strife, *philia* and *neikos*) as pertinent to nature.⁵⁰ This unity of physical and metaphysical was the likely source of attraction of Empedocles to the modernists: in the inaugural issue of the *Empédocle*, Yves Battistini explained how “en vrai poète, Empédocle restaure le mythe, le symbole, dans une explication scientifique de monde [...] Empédocle projette sur le réel les constructions de sa pensée”.⁵¹ Battistini associated Empedocles with the Romantics and other writers – Hölderlin and Nietzsche among them – who were trying to explain the world without stripping it of its mysterious and divine content.

For Empedocles, everything that exists has *phrónēsis*, an element of the universal mind, and partakes in the ethical domain: “For you must know that everything has consciousness [*φρόνησιν ἔχειν*] and participates in thinking [*νώματος αἴσαν*].”⁵² This aspect of Empedocles’ doctrine, understanding ethics as immanent to sensory reality, was certainly far more appealing to Elytis than it was to Camus.⁵³ In the unpublished commentary of *The Axion Esti*, Elytis made several references to a “physical metaphysics” of this kind; this state of existence/imagination, with its elusive nature, can be identified with Light, which is identical to Beauty or true Justice.⁵⁴ Through this unity, nature generates an ethics by and in itself: in a Hölderlinian turn, both science and art collapse into an ethics, entangling both the subject and the object in a set of

47 Diogenes Laertius, 8.69.

48 Camus (1955: 3).

49 Cf. Archambault (1972: 170): “Not a single one of his opinions on the Presocratics would indicate that Camus knew anything about the diversity of their systems.”

50 Aristot. *Met.* I, 985a. Cf. also Caygill (1999: 30), and also Wilkerson (2006: 114–115), with references. I find the common translation ‘Love and Strife’ somewhat misleading, as it ignores the ethical content of Empedocles’ teaching.

51 Battistini (1949: 57; 60).

52 Fr. B 110 DK.

53 Cf. *Statement of '51*, Elytis (1999: 206). Elytis wrote this passage in 1951, upon his return to Greece, and soon after his meeting with Camus.

54 Kechagioglou (1995: 33–34).

correspondences. This system is not unlike Elytis' "theory of analogies", which formed the central axis of his poetics.⁵⁵ It should not come as much of a surprise, then, that Elytis quoted this whole fragment by Empedocles in his essay *The Magic of Papadiamantis*, without additional comments.⁵⁶ While Elytis was in a continuous dialogue with the Presocratics,⁵⁷ it should not be precluded that his reading of Empedocles was at least partially influenced by the literary activity of Camus' magazine.

A "Forgotten Ethics"

Nothing, I think, better suits MacIntyre's argument about the loss of ethical language in modernity and its replacement with a series of fragmentary bits and pieces⁵⁸ than the breakdown of a literary work into series of fragments, which appeared at the time of the Romantics and continued with Mallarmé. The Platonic doctrine of the 'chain of being', which has its equivalents in some Eastern teachings,⁵⁹ came to be generally discredited and abandoned. Elytis and his Romantic and Symbolist predecessors took upon themselves a role of gathering the 'floating signs' of that forgotten system – or, in the case of Camus, struggled in vain to reconcile it with the modern, post-metaphysical worldview.

Much in this spirit, in *Helen's Exile*, Camus deals with the differences between the ancient Greek notions of ethics and the "renegade sons" of "our Europe."⁶⁰ He juxtaposes the Greek sense of limits to the excess of Europe. The whole passage breathes with a reference to Heraclitus: ἥλιος γὰρ οὐχ ὑπερβήσεται μέτρα· εἰ δὲ μή, Ἐρινύες μιν Δίκης ἐπίκουροι ἐξευρήσουσιν ("The Sun will not go beyond its bounds, for otherwise the Furies, which watch over justice will find out.")⁶¹ Camus then bids farewell to the teachings of the Hellenes and replaces them with the world in which God is dead, and the reason is now used as a "murderous" instrument of the will.

55 In a nutshell, this theory, derived from various Neoplatonic, mystical, and contemporary French philosophical currents, connects the various levels of being (inanimate, animate, divine, transcendental) into a series of mutual correspondences, leading from the sensory, through the emotional and the intellectual, to the ethical, in an upward motion. Cf. Ivask (1975: 632); Koutrianou (2002); Pourgouris (2011).

56 Elytis (1999: 85); fr. B 110 DK. For a detailed discussion, see Boskovic (2014: 41–48).

57 Iakov (1983: 61ff.).

58 MacIntyre (2007: 1ff.).

59 Cf. Lovejoy (2009); Tempridou (2013); Bechsgaard (2013).

60 Camus (1979: 136).

61 Fr. B 94 DK.

Elytis appears to have been particularly sensitive to this nuance of Camus' writing, while at the same time consistently ignoring Camus' nihilist impulses. In one of the manuscripts of *The Axion Esti*,⁶² he wrote a quote from *Helen's Exile*:

Tous ceux qui dépassent la limite
sont, par elle, impitoyablement châtiés

*[Nemesis is watching, goddess of moderation, not of vengeance.]
All those who go beyond the limit are by her pitilessly chastised.*⁶³

It should also be noted that Camus' essay first appeared in a 1948 issue of the *Cahiers du Sud* which also included several of Elytis' early poems.⁶⁴ Elytis used Heraclitus' fragments as a cornerstone of his poetics.⁶⁵ Elytis expanded the Heraclitean sense of measure and incorporated it into his understanding of reality in which language, ethics, and nature function in an interconnected system of analogical references.⁶⁶ In that sense, it can be argued that Elytis' poetry attempts at reconstruction of a 'forgotten language' of ethics, 'spoken' by Plotinus or Heraclitus.

Curiously enough, in the *Enigma*, Camus defended himself from his image in the French press of the time and closed his essay with a frank declaration of his own Platonism:

*What we are, what we have to be, are enough to fill our lives and occupy our strength. Paris is a marvelous cave, and its men, seeing their own shadows reflected on the far wall, take them for the only reality there is. [...] But we have learned, far from Paris, that there is a light behind us, and that we must turn round and cast off our chains if we are to look at it directly; that our task is, before we die, to seek all the words we can to name it.*⁶⁷

62 AE 12.18.

63 Camus (1979: 136).

64 *Permanence de la Grèce*, a special issue of *Les Cahiers du Sud*, ed. Paul Lemerle, trans. Robert Levesque. Marseille: Ligugé, 1948.

65 Iakov (1983: 61ff.); Koutrianou (2002).

66 Cf. *Creation paying for the works of the ancient Rulers shall shudder*, Elytis (2004: 173), using the ecclesiastical word *ktisis* "created world, visible nature"; *One day these seas shall take revenge*, Elytis (2004: 208). Cf. also Elytis (1999: 351) and Eluard's *Les phénomènes de la nature sont aussi les phénomènes de l'esprit*, Elytis (1987: 379); Koutrianou (2002: 160–166).

67 Camus (1979: 146).

Elytis seems to have been among the few who recognized this contradiction in Camus' beliefs and who therefore occasionally saw Camus as something of a kindred spirit and a fellow Platonist, if a lapsed one. Mario Vitti wrote that Camus was the "only one who won the confidence of Elytis (in France during his visit 1948–1951), who holds a more independent stance against existentialism, and has inside him a restless longing for the Mediterranean".⁶⁸

Camus' text bears the date of 1950⁶⁹ and it coincides with the time he worked on *Empédocle* and *The Rebel*. The early part of 1950 was a vexing period for Camus, with episodes of "black mood" and worsening of his health.⁷⁰ It also coincides with the time of Elytis' visit to Camus, which took place on 7 January 1950.⁷¹ But despite Vitti's claim, it appears that Elytis' and Camus' dialogue has not born much fruit. Camus' obscure reference to

*the unworthy but nevertheless stubborn sons of Greece who still survive in this emaciated century may still find this history too scalding hot, and yet they bear the pain because they want to understand it*⁷²

can be understood both generally, as the heirs to Greek culture and Platonic heritage – but just for the sake of imagination, one may also assume that it refers to Elytis' visit. Elytis, already an established poet in Greece and intensely admired by Char, must have made some impression on Camus. On the other hand, many years later, Elytis published a text titled *Milta or the Archetype* in *The Small Epsilon*, where he wrote about ethics in poetry and compared it to the human inability to perceive the mythical truth. Among those unable to "dream fully", as it seems, was Camus: "Maybe with this I am continuing a self-deception. But maybe I am continuing a dialogue with Albert Camus, which had been cut off in the middle."⁷³

Camus' nostalgia for the 'lost ethics' is nowhere more visible than in the *Return to Tipasa* (1953), where the narrator longs for visiting the ancient ruins that once were accessible to him, but are now surrounded by barbed wire. Elytis' texts, on the other hand, contain a number of references to the narrator strolling through the ruins of a lost Atlantis, a Romantic *Wanderung* through the bare Aegean landscape of imaginary islands.⁷⁴ But Camus' loss of the ethical

68 Vitti (2000: 228).

69 Camus (1979: 300, fn.). The text was originally dedicated to René Char.

70 Camus (2003: 141); Mijuskovic (1976).

71 B 27. We have no first-hand accounts of this visit.

72 Camus (1979: 146).

73 Elytis (1999: 264). Cf. also Mousouli (2014: 273, fn. 1076), with references.

74 Cf. the poem *Elytonesos: Commonly Elytisisle*, Elytis (2004: 283–285).

order descends into a fully Romantic key worthy of the best passages from the *Hyperion*:

*After being innocent in ignorance, we were now unintentionally guilty: the more we knew, the greater grew the mystery. This is why we busied ourselves, Oh! Mockery of mockeries, with morality. [...] In the days of innocence, I did not know that morality existed. I now knew that it did, and could not live up to it. On the promontory that I loved in former days, between the drenched pillars of the ruined temple, I seemed to be walking behind someone whose footsteps I could still hear on the tombstones and mosaics, but whom I should never catch up with again.*⁷⁵

The narrator eventually crosses the barbed wire and stands among the ruins, taking some effort to clarify his nostalgia: if the exclusive focus would lie on the metaphysical, that would involve “giv[ing] up living or loving except by proxy”, which was apparently his way of interpreting Platonic forms, and he gives in to the “servitudes of our time”. Thus his moral crisis ends in a final resignation, right at the time Elytis was in the most intense phase of writing *The Axion Esti*. The *apokatástasis* – which is to be understood both in its modern meaning of ‘restoration’ and as a religious doctrine of an ‘unconditioned redemption’ – became one of the main preoccupations of his poetry.⁷⁶

Conclusions

In his study on the philosophy of language, Dimitris Gounelas brought forth Elytis’ revolutionary ideas about poetry and language as the ‘free act’ in Bergsonian sense.⁷⁷ According to this view, poetry, as a protest against all forms

75 Camus (1979: 149).

76 Cf. Kechagioglou (1995).

77 Gounelas (1995: 178ff.). For an overview of Bergson’s concept, see Lutzow (1977): “Bergson’s problem in large part is modern scientific philosophy. One aspect, the metaphysical, derives from Descartes; the other, the phenomenological, stems from Kant. In the first case the difficulty rests with the nature of materiality. In the Cartesian mode of thought, matter is identified with extension and is subject to a complete and consistent set of mechanical laws. As a result, the possibility of a free act by a material being is precluded. Since all future movement is theoretically determined, the free act is at best an illusion. In the second case the problem rests with the understanding. In the Kantian analysis an act will always occur within the temporal frame and be schematized according to the categories of the understanding. The act can be understood, then, in no other way than as causally determined. Man cannot

of determinism, serves as a refuge from the utilitarian logic of the fragmented system of knowledge. Poetic language, as an incantation, has the power to restore the state of fragmentation into primordial unity, the utopian transcendence of the opposites.

While Camus had a continuous interest in Greece and constructed 'the Greeks' as the carriers of an alternative tradition, his knowledge of that tradition was fundamentally scholastic and often superficial. Elytis, on the contrary, was one of the most important carriers of a modern reinvention and reinterpretation of Hellenic heritage. Camus' dialogue with the 'sons of Greece' was really a dialogue with 'sons of France': had he had access to Elytis' writings, there is no doubt that they would greatly enrich his understanding of Hellenic culture, just as Elytis' reading of Camus enhanced his image of the 'Mediterranean man'.

Elytis' poetry, like Camus' prose, surely was part of the Modernist response to the "crisis of Man in the modern desacralized world."⁷⁸ But while Elytis' 'revolution' should be understood as a desire for a paradigm shift and, even further, as a challenge for new and different philosophical and poetical exploration of existence,⁷⁹ Camus' ethics remained strained between his ethical and his nihilist impulses, largely due to his inadequate understanding of the ancient philosophical concepts of which he made use.

I am therefore reluctant to classify Elytis' project as another case of 'invention-of-tradition' or a Modernist 'private past'.⁸⁰ Instead of an 'invented

experience himself as free. Freedom on an empirical level is incomprehensible. To dismiss both problems, Bergson simply begins with freedom as a fact of immediate experience. 'Freedom is therefore a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is none clearer' (*Time and Free Will*, 221)."

78 Calinescu (1987: 125ff.).

79 This inclination also clearly follows the vein of contemporary French philosophical thought, primarily Bergson and Bachelard who greatly influenced him, and can be understood as a call for an 'epistemological rupture', to use Bachelard's term. See Bachelard (1986); Lutzow (1977); also footnote 28.

80 Calinescu (1987: 3): "From the point of view of modernity, an artist - whether he likes it or not - is cut off from the normative past with its fixed criteria, and tradition has no legitimate claim to offer him examples to imitate or directions to follow. At best, he invents a private and essentially modifiable past. [...] What we have to deal with here is a major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty." I am especially reserved about Calinescu's "time-honored aesthetics of permanence", which can be criticized both ways: neither was the pre-Modernist art lacking its own "aesthetics of transitoriness and immanence" (the final scenes of *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* immediately come to mind here) nor is Modernist art deprived of the belief in

tradition’, in the case of Elytis, one can equally make a case for a ‘genuine tradition’, inasmuch as Greek intellectuals have an uninterrupted access to the commentaries of ancient texts since antiquity.⁸¹ The critical academic meta-language is, after all, also an invention into which the works of the ancients are being continuously translated. The ancient mode of philosophical inquiry, on the other hand, involved more than the intellect, and often took the form of poetry.⁸² It is, perhaps, in this tradition that Elytis should be also included.

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- B [page] = Unpublished typewritten biography of Odysseus Elytis. *Archive of the Department of Medieval and Modern Greek Studies, Faculty of Philosophy, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.*
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an “transcendent ideal of beauty”: to not go any further, it is often extremely difficult to decide whether the post-war Elytis can be placed among the *classici* or the *moderni*.

81 Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012: 8), who introduced the notion of the invention of tradition, wrote: “The strength and adaptability of genuine traditions is not to be confused with the ‘invention of tradition’. Where the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented.”

82 Hadot (1990: 489ff.); Hadot (1993). Cf. also Gounelas (1995: 185); Virvidakis (2003); Nehamas (1998); Nehamas (1999).

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