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“Cross to the other bank.” The postmodern turn in Elytis’ *Maria Nephele*

Summary

This article investigates the ways 1979 Nobel laureate poet Odysseus Elytis struggles with the forces of postmodernity and seeks how to identify the new global space in his poetic collection *Maria Nephele* (1978). Through two parallel monologues between Maria Nephele, a modern radical young woman, and the Antiphonist, the voice of the poet, Elytis is trying to perceive the cultural turn from modernity to postmodernity and to perform it in a dialogic process. The dialogic interplay of Maria Nephele and the poet is diminished at the end of the poem when the timeless ethical vision of the poet is projected through contemplation on psychic grandeur and cultural order. Maria Nephele as a *flâneuse* in the postmodern city lives in the constant transformation of the now and opens the way to conceptualizing an international culture. In the paper that follows I will read Elytis’ poetic choices in *Maria Nephele* through the perspective of postmodern theory and also through Benjamin’s philosophy of history.

By the way of an introduction

In a 1974 essay with the title “First Things First”, Odysseus Elytis refers to the counterculture of the new generation, presumably meaning the youth of the 1960s, which reached its peak in May 1968. His positive attitude and

endeavor to praise this generation in its anarchist and revolutionary context are obviously stated:

I also feel obliged to seriously consider some typical symptoms of “rage”, “rebellion” and “anarchy” characteristic of today’s youth in order to understand them and applaud them as they deserve while they are still in their disinterested phase, that is, not yet channeled into camps seeking advantage (*Open Papers* 19-20).

Furthermore, in one of the interviews Elytis gave to Pilichos he agreed that in the verses of *Axion Esti* one can find the “substitution of the flower for the gun” and he was happy to hear that if the students of May 1968 knew Greek they would use his verses (*Συν τοις άλλοις* 96). This endeavor to deeply understand and approach the new generation found its best poetical form in *Maria Nephelē* (*Μαρία Νεφέλη*), which was first published in 1978, though the idea for this collection had been conceived when Elytis finished *The Axion Esti* (*Άξιον Εστί*, 1959) and met a “young woman in real life” (Odysseus Elytis 640)¹. *Maria Nephelē*, as the poet points out in his interview to Ivar Ivask in 1975 “constitutes an exception” in his work as he turns from the Mediterranean nature to the urban environment and especially as he moves away from his elevated poetic tone, employing the language of the street (638). In this interview Elytis defined three periods of his poetry. In the first period nature and metamorphosis along with surrealist influence predominate in his inspiration (639). The elevated tone of his poetic language kept his texts “far removed from the everyday usage of words” (638). Elytis’ natural vision during this period asks the audience to consider a world where the Aegean sunlight and the beauty of nature give a spiritual force which transforms “negation into affirmation of life” (Dekavalles, “Time versus Eternity”, 22). Eros, youthfulness, innocence and bodily sensation tangled with nature and sun form his poetic ideas. In the second period which includes *The Axion Esti* the poet proceeds to a “historical and moral awareness” without losing his natural vision (Elytis, 639). According to Koutrianou (33), this is the beginning of the crystallization period which reflects the decisive impact of historical events on his poetic development. Henceforth, his poetic thought becomes more theoretical and methodical. This theoretical and analytical thinking leads him to the third period, as the poet has termed it, in which he engages a “lyricism of architectural invention and solar metaphysics” (Elytis, 639). This period is represented by the collection *The Light Tree and the Fourteenth Beauty* (1971). *Maria Nephelē* also belongs in

this third period in which Elytis' poetics takes on a different tone which reflects his gradually shift from "romantic aestheticism to the stoic minimalism of contemporary post-modernists" (Bien, 346). Maronitis (246) associates this collection with the context and ideology of the "Generation of the '70s" due to its questioning tone and its social criticism.

Maria Nephelē has been defined as a hippie girl who represents the "new wave and leftist intelligentsia" (Karandonis 258) and reflects the "global, modern consumer society" (Karandonis 243). Ioannou (193, 198), has considered the political aspect of the collection, suggesting that Elytis absorbs the ideas of anti-colonial movements and displays the universal aspect of oppression of both groups and individuals. According to Vitti (50), Elytis saw in the students of May 1968 and in hippies a rebellion without allegiance to political parties and institutions.

Actually, what Elytis perceives in the 1960s and 1970s is the new intellectual landscape formed by post-industrial and consumer society, multinational capitalism and the contemporary media which drove literature, as Jameson argues, to a radical break with high modernism (*Cultural Turn* 19-20). The 1960s is a decade identified with the emergence of a counterculture that formed an early politicized aspect of postmodernism (Bertens 5)².

Hence, this paper seeks to clarify several aspects of postmodernism that are very important to understand the poems of *Maria Nephelē* and have not previously been related to Elytis' work³. Previous studies have reported the international aspects of the collection but have not dealt with the concept of postmodernism. My aim in this article is to discuss the way in which Elytis perceives the postmodern and post-colonial condition of his era. Elytis opens a dialogue with the new cultural present which is dominated by the turn to postmodernism. Maria Nephelē is a representative figure of the new era, who transmits the new ethical vision of a radical cultural change. Clearly, what Elytis sees in postmodernity is the emergence of late consumer and multinational capitalism. He moves from the world of nature to urban culture and from the utopian pursuits of modernism to the "fetishism" of commodities and the collapse of values⁴.

In this collection, Elytis, although he feels the loss of the grand narrative (Lyotard 37), which was identified with modernism, seeks to "cross to the other bank" to understand the new era in its ethical and aesthetical aspects. He redefines the relationship between past and present and perceives the

crisis of the old narrative and ancient tradition. Finally, although he ends up strengthening his Greek national identity, he creates an authentic perspective of the other side in the person of Maria Nephele, who holds the ideology of postmodernity. Maria Nephele's ideological stance can be described as the questioning of authority which is the main postmodernist attitude beginning in the 1960s.

The dialectics of seeing

Susan Buck-Morss, in her book *The Dialectics of Seeing. Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (1989), claims that Benjamin's philosophical method in the Arcades Project can best be described as a dialectics of seeing (6). This argument is based mostly on the way Benjamin makes conceptual points concrete through the power of dialectical images. The dialectic way of seeing provides the proper axes to align antithetical elements (210). Benjamin's dialectical thinking aims at a "synthesis" grounding itself at the point at which the different "axes intersect" (210). The antithetical concepts maintain their contradictory positions but they cross each other revealing a "dialectical image" (210). Adorno (240), who has typified Benjamin as the "dialectician of the imagination", argues that the dialectical images can be thought of as "objective crystallizations of the historical dynamic" (238). As I will try to argue in the following pages, Benjamin's dialectical conception of modernity can promote our understanding of Elytis' thought in *Maria Nephele* and of how he conceptualizes the new issues of postmodernity.

The initial title of the Arcades Project was "A Dialectical Fairy Scene" (Buck-Morss 34, 49) and in the first edition of *Maria Nephele*, Elytis had given the subtitle "A Stage Poem" (Ένα σκηνικό ποίημα); both titles directly state the dialogical "optics" of their authors and their intention to present their views as a scene. *Maria Nephele* is a collection framed by two parallel monologues spoken by a modern radical young woman, Maria Nephele, and the Antiphonist who conveys the voice of the poet. It is divided into three sections, including an introductory and a closing poem and two intermediary songs. In every section, seven of the poems are spoken by Maria Nephele and seven by the Antiphonist. Every poem ends in a short, striking and memorable phrase that mirrors the deeper thoughts of the characters (Politi 84) or otherwise could be read like revolutionary slogans on the city walls which imply a call for action or subversion. The setting of the poem is an unnamed city and the

poet makes a concession to his rules of language by using street language. It is not a real dialogue “but two monologues side by side” as Elytis explains in his interview (Odysseus Elytis 638), where the poet’s words are often a reaction to the girl’s words creating a type of indirect dialogue as the two characters are trying to establish a communication and understand each other. Actually, there is a clear correspondence between their views on similar issues (Pourgouris 188), but from different angles. Maria Nephele and the Antiphonist are the two individuals or actors in a scene, who represent the two different axes and construct a dialectical image. Indeed, in the 1975 interview with Ivar Ivask, Elytis (Odysseus Elytis 631-645) points out that the girl Maria Nephele is the other half of himself: “it is as if you would see the reverse of me” (640), thus substantiating the divergent but also congruent character of his binary synthesis. In *Maria Nephele* this joining of opposites is manifested by the opening line of the book: “On the other side I am the same” (Elytis, *Collected Poems* 49, 289), which is drawn from *Orientalisms* (*Προσανατολισμοί*, 1940) and indicates an earlier but continuing view of Elytis as possible different aspects of the same identity.

But what indeed is the “reverse” or better of his opposite side? Which is the one side and which is the other? In the same interview, Elytis (Odysseus Elytis 632) identifies himself with the fundamentals of “purity and sanctity.” Therefore, if the one side is the union of purity and sanctity, the other side could be the fusion of impurity and profanity.

The intentional joining of opposites in the characterization of an identity becomes clear in the poem “The Map-Fix” («Το στίγμα»), where the Antiphonist links two opposing concepts, “Hubris” and “Star”, in order to create a visible sign to guide him while following Maria Nephele:

The moment came. Maria Nephele
 take my hand – I shall follow you;
 and the other hand I raise – look – with palm
 turned up fingers opened
 a heavenly flower:
 “Hubris” as we’d say or even “Star”

 Hubris-Star Hubris-Star
 that’s the map-fix friends
 we must keep the connection.

(Elytis, *Collected Poems* 299)⁵

In the above verses, the Antiphonist/Poet attributes to a “heavenly flower” the potentially opposite concepts of hubris and star. Hubris, in ancient Greek thought, alludes to overweening pride and it is connected to extravagance, to a transgression of limits. According to Cairns (32), hubris in its broad sense should be conceived as “a way of going wrong about the honour of self and others.” On the contrary, star as part of a constellation represents the light in a dark scene, and a navigation light for voyagers.⁶ If hubris refers to dishonor and injustice then star can be associated allegorically with honor and justice. But mostly I think this junction of “Hubris-Star” denotes the need of the poet at that specific historical moment to go beyond his limits, to venture an overreach in order to follow Maria Nephele who on the other side has decided to overstep the mortal limits stating at the end of her poem: “The law I am will not subdue me” (“The Forest of Men” 298). For that reason, he insists on the connection between these opposing concepts: “Hubris-Star Hubris-Star / that’s the map-fix friends / we must keep the connection” (299). The coexistence of these cultural attitudes in conflict is provided as a map-fix, or as the specific position to precede and guide him in the future. In other words, he is drawing a star-map that presupposes a dialectical view for the process of cultural history.

A similar view of a dialectical cultural history (Caygill 73) has been crystallized by Benjamin (*Illuminations* 256) in his famous phrase that “there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Benjamin’s concept of history embraces the negative aspects of culture (Caygill 85) and defines history not as a triumphal procession by the ruling class (Buck-Morss 288) but through the consciousness of the “eternal entanglement of barbarism with civilization” (Wieseltier x). Both Elytis and Benjamin ground their ideas in the dialectical coexistence of positive and negative aspects of history. And both counter the negative, hubris or barbarism, with a positive perspective. In “Experience and Poverty” (1933) Benjamin developed a positive aspect of barbarism compared to the impoverishment of experience which results from the “tremendous development of technology” and the new economic hegemony. This poverty of experience is not personal, it is general; it is, as Benjamin argues, a “new kind of barbarism”. But this barbarism has a positive aspect as well because it forces the individual “to make a new start, to make a little go a long way” (*Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 732). The use of poverty can lead, as Benjamin explains, to something respectable (*Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 733) but it presupposes “an unlimited commitment” to the new epoch even if

it forces the individual, cultural producer or author, to incorporate “capitalism’s alienating ‘barbarism’” (Leslie 86).

This aspect of barbarism can illuminate Elytis’ decision to overstep his ethical limits in following Maria Nephele who represents the new primitiveness or barbarism that postmodernity brought about by reducing everything to its lowest aspect, which is the value of the commodity. Elytis has commented on the perception of primitivism as cultural alienation by the young generation in his critical writings, *Open Papers* (*Ανοιχτά χαρτιά*, 1982), where he argues:

I have no nostalgia for the primitive but, on the other hand, I oppose every sadomasochistic deviation and, even more so, every cultivation of artificial bliss (*Open Papers* 19-20).

This perception of primitiveness is also introduced in the poem “The Forest of Men” («Το δάσος των ανθρώπων»). In this poem, the girl Maria Nephele who represents the inhabitants of the great urban centers “reverts to a state of savagery”⁷ and invites the poet to a primitive and irrational human space:

The Forest of Men
 Poet my abandoned cicada
 no one has noon anymore;
 extinguish Attica and come near me.
 I’ll take you to the forest of men
 and I’ll dance naked for you with tom-tom and masks
 and give myself to you amid roarings and howlings.
 I’ll show you the man Baobab
 and the man Phagus Carnamenti
 the old woman Cimmulius and all her breed
 gnawed at by parasites;
 I’ll give you the man Bumbacaroo Uncarabo
 his wife Ibou-Ibou
 and their deformed children,
 the mushroom dogs
 Cingua Banga and Iguana Brescus.
 Don’t be afraid
 with one hand out front like a storm lantern
 I shall guide you
 and rush upon you;

....
 Forward! Ahead! Scram!
 With no club and no cave,
 among enraged brontosauri,
 see you manage things by yourself
 and invent a language maybe shrieking:
 e e e e e

(*Collected Poems* 296-8)

The forest described above is obviously an African forest in which Maria Nephele with her *danse sauvage* is inviting the poet to leave the culture of Attica and invent a new primitive tongue-tied language. This primitive encounter implies the loss of the order of civilization and brings degeneracy, fragmentation and annihilation.⁸ The poet's emotions towards African culture are corrupting, and underwritten to colonial discourse: scenes of fear and desire, lust and anarchy, disease and other stereotypes of savagery depict Africa as a backward and irrational place. However, the poet responds to this savage performance tethered to stereotypes of African primitivism and cultural alienation (see "deformed children") with an agonizing acceptance to follow Maria Nephele—a need "to cross to the other bank" (297) in order to escape his "slow assassination by the past" (297). Elytis obviously crosses his boundaries, overtakes his limits, in order to reach the new threatening sensitivity of the new generation. As Pourgouris (193) states, Elytis in this collection "challenges himself as he has never done before." He defies his role as a national poet and goes beyond the literary canon of his generation to meet the new ethics of the radical new age.

In brief, *Maria Nephele* is a collection through which Elytis exposes his political and historical understanding of postmodern culture moving around the polar concepts of civilization and barbarism, hubris and star, sanctity and profanity. Maria Nephele and the Antiphonist, are the "fundamental coordinates" through which the poet will reenact the condition of the postmodern world in its historical, political and mythical perspective. The opposed concepts in the collection provide a dialectical presentation of postmodernity formed in a way that applies Benjamin's dialectic.⁹

A flâneuse in the global culture

Benjamin based his social theory of modernity on Baudelaire's poetry and in the way he perceived the phantasmagoria of the urban metropolis. The central

figure in the environment of a big city is the *flâneur*, an uprooted individual who “seeks refuge in the crowd” (Benjamin, *The Writer* 40). As Jennings argues the *flâneur* is the modern individual who has “been stripped of the possessions and security of bourgeois life and forced to take refuge in the street”. Baudelaire’s heroism, in Benjamin’s interpretation, assumes his willingness to live and be marked by the shocks of modern life (16).

Elytis identified Baudelaire with the literary current which had combined worship of evil with narcissism, a current that struggled within his own poetry, which always sought the ethics of the light/sun, at least before the composition of the *Maria Nephele*. However, he cites in his essays and poems many verses from *Le Fleurs du mal* of Baudelaire and certainly had drawn much from Baudelaire’s “Correspondences” to form his idea of analogies (Pourgouris 75-76). But, in my view, he had never been closer to Baudelairean concepts, certainly in a dialectical way, than when creating the girl Maria Nephele who as a *flâneuse* in the postmodern world strolls through the urban crowd disputing every authority (“I have raised my hand against the black mountains and the demons of this world ... Judges, priests, policemen, what is your country?” 293) and re-defining her own roots (“The present is nonexistent and half/ my hair already waves/ somewhere else in other epochs” 360. Or “my hand is descended from the ancient Incas” 333).

If Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du mal* represented modern, capitalist society, Elytis turns to postmodern, late capitalist society and reflects on the new forms of urban life. In contrast to the modernist city of Baudelaire, the postmodern city in Elytis’ *Maria Nephele* is unlimited, fluctuating and in its anonymity becomes a “signless place of directionless nomads” (Parsons 8-9), an image that can easily be found in the collection’s verses: “What a buffalo earth has become of late!” (words spoken by the Antiphonist, 324) and “Ah this is not a planet/ all chickens and sheep/ and other stooped stupid beings” (words spoken by Maria Nephele, 325). These images confirm the presence of a place which has no real signs and is “just a plain mistake that leads far back” (325). People are naught but “stupid beings” like animals and with no intellectual direction.

Elytis in *Maria Nephele*, like Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du mal*, intends to reveal the living monstrosities of his own age and “the savagery that lurks in the midst of civilization” (Frisby 19). Maria Nephele is a revolutionary with the gaze of the alienated individual, she is a *flâneuse* who confronts the shocks of modern life with feelings of exile (“mid-men I’ve gone into self-exile”, 293).

In the open postmodern city, she appears as a woman wandering without aim while she is “walking down the street in wide pants and an old trenchcoat,” she walks “through thistles through obscurity” (291) and she looks like a “puma of public streets” (363). She is part of the crowd but at the same time detached from it: “holding a glass and gazing into the void” (291). Moreover, she is hypersensitive and nervous in front of the stores which are part of the urban landscape: “In front of the windows of children’s stores. Sadder then. And in record shops, more nervous, biting her fingernails” (291).

Baudelaire’s *flânerie* is closely related to the prostitute “who he characterizes as a person-become commodity” (Shields 66). Maria Nephele is not a prostitute but has an assumed sexual availability and a sexuality that goes beyond the concept of bourgeois morality and is manifested by the freedom of sexual relationships: “and when I tumble on the lawn / of anyone when it is night / it’s as if I joust till dawn / *droom droom droom* I fight” (321). But what distinguishes her mostly is a holy prostitution of the soul that Baudelaire (22) has described in *Paris Spleen*: “The thing that people call love is so small, so restrained, so weak compared to this ineffable orgy, to this holy prostitution of the soul that gives itself entirely, all its poetry and charity, to the unexpected as it arises, to the unknown that turns up.” In a similar sense, Maria Nephele offers her body as sacred: “Only my body remains to me and I give it. Those who know cultivate in it sacred things” (293).

The “final alienation of the intelligentsia” which is one of the central motifs that Benjamin finds in Baudelaire’s poetry (Jennings 9) can also be identified in *Maria Nephele*. For instance, in the poem “Pax San Tropezana” (324) this alienation is one of the poem’s subjects: in the modern city the “so-called writers / actors for twenty-four hours / they piss in the sea and emit small cries” (324). In art as in other social areas “everything gets said / happens unhappens / on easy terms in installments” (324). Consumption and commercialization replace the experience of the sublime in a “Time of spare parts” (324).¹⁰

In Benjamin’s terms, the *flâneur* is identified as a consumer (“Desert Spectacular” 146) and Maria Nephele, in contrast to the Antiphonist, who establishes “his own white seashore / without money” (301), accepts the necessity of consumerism while with her “one hand crumples the money up” and with “the other smoothes it over” (300). This contrast is not accidental but a clue to show the turn from the modern to the postmodern. If modernism was “the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself,” postmodernism

can be defined as “the consumption of sheer commodification as a process” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, x). There is no “quest for the Absolute” (Jameson, *Cultural Turn* 86) as in the modern period but an attempt to think the present in its historical reality. The Antiphonist represents the necessity of the Absolute and the girl Maria Nephele the new experience of the postmodern sensibility.

In the global space of the collection, far from the known Mediterranean space of Elytis’ previous collections, Maria Nephele emerges as an image of the (post)modern artistic consciousness. With her heightened sensibility, she appears as a figure of female *flânerie*.¹¹ She is a wandering woman, rootless and expatriate, has a life in fragments and struggles to survive in the postmodern morality of the urban environment.¹²

Pay close attention to the frag-
mentation of my daily life
and its apparent incoherence.
[...]
It is impossible to see myself
other than
as an antinarrative synthesis
with no historical consciousness

The discontents of globalization: a “chess game for crows trained”

To borrow Bauman’s words “it is the modern world which is the original flâneur, the Baudelaire/Benjamin human flâneur is but its mirror image, its imitation” (139). In our case, Maria Nephele is the mirror image, the imitation of the real *flânerie* which is the postmodern world. The process of globalization as the central concept of the postmodern world is being criticized in the collection and shown as a process of undoing culture in its ordered form.

In the dyad of poems “Pax San Tropezana” and “The Planet Earth” («Ο πλανήτης Γη») the earth has been dehumanized and looks like a buffalo cow, peace comes through the repression of “the establishment fathers” (324). The intellectuals, writers, actors or philosophers, are all committed politically and socially to the capitalist economy and the world management system which is a “chess game for crows trained” (325). In these two poems, we encounter a “planetary” description of the phenomenon of postmodernity, experienced as shock. The new age of fashion, technology, and consumerism is described as

a new Stone Age (“The Planet Earth”), and life under these conditions is portrayed as irredeemably savage amid the “enraged brontosauri” (325). What prevails is the nostalgia for a “Patek Phillipe watch” (327), in other words, the fetishism of commodities. In this new world, love affairs appear in the very flux of exchange: “Time of spare parts: blow a tire-change a tire / lose Jimmy-find Bob” (Elytis, *Collected Poems* 324-326). Global trade and transnational exchange are crucial to imagine the character of contemporary culture: “forever fighting over altars and hearths / over oil wells and other productive regions” (“The Planet Earth” 325).

The mix of cultures that “leads far back / to Zeus to Christ to Buddha to Mohammed” may drive the planet to a “total extinction” (325). In other words, in this dialectical poem, Elytis emphasizes options in the new international culture in his endeavor to confront the passing of modernity into postmodernity. Thus, he critiques the postmodern culture, in which “‘culture’ has become a product in its own right” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* x).

Moreover, Elytis perceives the narratives of postcolonial migration in this new internationalism:

C’est très pratique, as Annette would say,
the beautiful waitress of the Tahiti.
Nineteen lovers signed her breasts
with their places of origin
a small tender geography.

But I think at bottom she was gay.

(*Collected Poems* 326)

According to Bhabha (5), “the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora ... the poetics of exile.” In the above extract from the poem “Pax San Tropezana,” Elytis illustrates an image of the exile of the migrant Annette. The imaginary gathering of foreign cultures on the breasts of the Tahitian woman transmits the historical fact of the loss of the meaning of belonging. So many places of origin on the woman’s body have been written on the migrant’s silence and her inner disavowal voids the international space inscribed on her breasts. At this point, there is probably an underlying question concerning the ethics of global culture and of the new world system. This questioning is probably also indicated by the verse: “In Europeanese everything gets said,” indicating a pseu-

do-imitation of European style, a mimicry expressed with the exclamations “in Europeanese/ oo-oo-oo-oo!” (324). This loss of ideological weight is projected as the fruit of a false juncture of European globalization and centralization within the world-system. The allusion of the wording “Europeanese” refers to the shortcomings of the universalism of European thought or European cultural imperialism.¹³

One other aspect of globalization in *Maria Nephele* also appears in the poem “Ich Sehe Dich” (*Collected Poems* 361). The poem is constructed on the basis of the trademarks and brands of multinational companies which form a modern heraldry:

I see mythical fish go by
 Above my head burns the air
 BEA TWA SWISSAIR
 I'll never O my Nereids oh
 Get to see my name in print just so
 DIE WELT TIMES FIGARO
 but behind death with his mane swept back
 PHILIPS OLIVETTIKODAK
 A steed awaits me in gleaming magnificence
 to jump the fence to jump the fence
 I of oblivion's sound and echo
 JAGUAR CHEVROLET PEUGEOT

(*Collected Poems* 361)

In the above verses, myth is interwoven with the consumer culture of the market. The commonality of myths confronts the commonality of the world market. The growing pressures of the marketplace affect and transform the intellectual product. This interweaving of myth and the market creates a “dreamlike space of the urban phantasmagoria” (Jennings 14) that contrasts the ephemerality of contemporary life with the eternity of the myth.¹⁴

The interplay of past and present or the unbearable presence of a lost past

The interplay between past and present which to some extent takes on the meaning of the contrast between antiquity and modernity is crucial to the creation of the present poetic work and brings to the forefront identity issues

such as the relationship with tradition or the idealization of the cultural past. If the position vis-à-vis commodity culture is almost identical or corresponds to a great extent with that between Maria Nephele and the poet, the perception of the cultural past and its signification in modern cultural configurations is totally different for each them.

We can note this differentiation initially at their encounter in the garden of a museum where the poet is constantly asking Maria Nephele if she remembers (“He was always saying to me ‘remember?’ Remember what? I only remember dreams because I have them at night.” “The Presence” 291). If we take into account that museums are sites of remembrance and can be considered as “key cultural loci of our times” (MacDonald), then this meeting in a museum can raise questions about the cultural representation and reflection of how past and present correlate.

The girl Maria Nephele and the Antiphonist are looking at each other through a grave stele: “We both were looking at the same stone. We were looking at each other through the stone” (291). The Antiphonist sees a maiden in relief holding in her palm a little bird that Maria Nephele will never be worthy to hold – according to his perception (“She was sitting and held in her hand a little bird. As for you you’ll never hold a bird – you’re not worthy” 292). Maria Nephele sees a maiden who is dead (“She was sitting. And she was dead” 292). In other words, the poet indicates the symbolic meaning of the museum cultural piece while Maria Nephele stresses the real dimension of the depicted person: “she was dead”. In this way, insisting on the material and not the spiritual aspect of the maiden on the relief, she demystifies a supposed idealized and authentic past. Moreover, she emphasizes the impossibility of communicating with the past: “Oh, if they’d only allow me, if they’d only allow me” (292). There is a sense of deprivation, of being kept from taking a benefit from a privileged past by “The one who allows nothing” (292). There is an obvious ambivalence in the relationship with the past, a questioning of the ability to get acquainted with it.

As we can assume from reading other poems of the collection, for Maria Nephele there is no immediate access to a cultural identity received from the past. This link to the past is emphasized even more in the poem “Thunderbolt Steers” («Κεραυνός οιακίζει» 314) where she states that she has no relatives but “a stony youth” (314), for her “time / is trapped like an insect in despair” (314). More explicitly, in the poem “Paper Kite” («Ο χαρταετός») she speaks of “fragments of incredible times”:

Paper Kite

I am of porcelain and magnolia,
my hand is descended from the ancient Incas

....

deontologically I must be a monster

....

Sometimes

the bugle's voice from distant barracks
unraveled me like a streamer and everyone around me
applauded – fragments of incredible times
in mid-air.

Open faucets in the bath next door
prone on my pillow

I watched fountains sprinkle me with immaculate white;
how beautiful my God how beautiful

trampled on the ground
still keeping in my eyes

so distant a mourning for the past (333).

According to the above verses, Maria's genealogical filiation is traced back to the Incas and ancient Greek tragedy as the verses concerning the bath and the "distant mourning of the past" imply.¹⁵ In this cultural synthesis, we can add the verses from the poem "Stalin" («Ο Στάλιν»): "and I start off from the Mongols / I arrive like the trans-Siberian train" (364). Therefore, there is a variety of ethnic traditions available to her reading of cultural identity.

The ancient Greek cultural tradition does not support a hegemonic reading of her national identity, as can be seen very clearly in the poem "Electra Bar" (356). Maria Nephele in this poem is identified with Euripides' *Electra*, "shorn and ugly" (356), she is waiting for the message of her redemption. Elytis probably chose this play for its provocative views about society and society's values (Arnott 179), so it can fit with the persona of Maria Nephele. Elytis did not employ ancient mythology or tragic myth for his creations as Seferis or Ritsos did, but he tried to apply a "mechanism of myth-making" in his poetry (Odysseus Elytis 639). However, in *Maria Nephele* he transcends this idea by reflecting on how classical antiquity can influence the modern present as a burden or as deepening the understanding of existence. Thus we find mythical references in the poems "The Trojan War" («Ο Τρωικός πόλεμος»), "Helen" («Ελένη»),

“Electra Bar”, or minor references to the ancient heritage in the poems “The Waterdrop” («Η νεροσταγόνα»), “Aegeis” («Η Αιγής»), and certainly Nephelē is a mythical name.¹⁶ But in most of the poems and particularly in those spoken by Maria Nephelē, the mythical material does not detract from their psychological realism. Thus, in “Electra Bar” the tragic hero has been placed in an underground bar searching for the “paradis artificiel”¹⁷ and reflecting on her fate: “you see your Luck (but always with her back turned) / a Megaera who wronged you and whom you never avenged ...” (356).

Drawing from Euripides, Elytis does not abandon his aesthetic principle to “deglamorize the myth” by presenting the characters as if they were contemporary figures “and not distanced heroes” (Arnott 181). Euripides in *Electra* “challenged the values on which the myth tradition was founded and with which its rationale seemed to cohere” (Arnott 181). Elytis accomplishes this aim in “Electra Bar” by the reference to the false heroes of the cinema: “It’s so lovely when the mind muddies – there Heroes kill / in make-believe as in the movies” (356). A question is implied of what is false and what is real in the heroes in cinema or tragedy. Moreover Electra, as a real figure of the present, questions her ancestry from Agamemnon’s blood: “if I can ever be worthy (which I doubt) of / that vein in which Agamemnon’s blood still flows” (356). Furthermore, there is no redemption for her because she lives without “some unknown brother –” (356). The past exists but our ability to establish our identity through it is totally disputed. In other words, we could claim that the feeling that is transmitted is the unbearable presence of a lost past.

Finally, Maria Nephelē challenges our sense of cultural ancestry and the “identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past” (Bhabha 37). This ambivalence in the perception of identity follows a process that brings together the self and the Other, what Homi Bhabha (38) has termed the Third Space, a space which is accompanied by the assimilation of opposites whose enunciation may “open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of culture, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity”. In this Third Space, Maria Nephelē extends our senses towards the new transnational world which Elytis treats both as contrast and as compliance.

While Maria Nephelē displaced the meaning of culture to a space without primordial fixity (Bhabha 37) the Antiphonist, who is the poet, seeks an archaic affirmation of wholeness in an ancestral paradise (*Collected Poems* 330) and in

the lost mythical Aegean island of Atlantis in the poem “Aegeis” (311) or in a “Pelasgian masonry” (309) which he walked alongside his “whole life’s length” (in the poem “The Waterdrop” 309). In contrast to Maria Nephele, for the poet, there is a primordial, archaic past, replete with meaning and fulfillment.¹⁸ The poet exhibits some nostalgia for certain aspects of the past lost to postmodernity, and thus he has recourse to a mythical archaic and ideal past. His longing for a lost past is expressed clearly in the poem “Ancestral Paradise” («Ο προπατορικός παράδεισος»): “But truly far away / in the first days’ dew / before our mother’s hut was there / how beautiful it was!” (330).

And in the last poem, “The Eternal Wager” («Το αιώνιο στοίχημα»), which is a key poem for his view of culture as ideological struggle, he envisages that a new harmonious order will come where “a foliage of words will clothe” Maria Nephele “in Greek so” she will “seem invincible” (367). With a messianic tone, the poet substitutes the ephemerality of modern life with the “grandeur of sunrise and sunset” (367). In visualizing the cultural construction of nationhood as a source of power, he projects the idea of a homogeneous community in modern society. The “eternal wager” is a utopian promise of redemption. Maria Nephele, endowed with the moral forces of the sun (“That one day you will bite into the new lemon/ and release/ huge amounts of sun from it”) will link the national past with her own present and hence to the future which is figured here messianically. The role of Messiah in the poem is represented here by regenerated nature in a type of revelation of concealed truths:

1

THAT one day you will bite into the new lemon
and release
huge amounts of sun from it

2

THAT all currents of the sea
suddenly illumined will reveal you

...

The power of the new nature will be so strong as to defeat even death:

3

THAT even in death you will again

be like water in the sun
turning chill by instinct

But mostly, it is the blend of cultural and natural forces that will make her “invincible”: “and a foliage of words will clothe you/ in Greek so you will seem invincible” (367). At this moment in the future she will be able to attain what she could not in the past – to hold a bird in her palm:

6
THAT all the world’s unsympathy will turn to stone
on which you can sit like a prince
with a docile bird in your palm.

The above images of revelation allude to the concept of the “Angel Novus” of Klee that Benjamin (*Illuminations* 257-8) interpreted in the ninth thesis of his Philosophy of History. Benjamin calls him the angel of history and he describes him as follows: “His face is turned toward the past. ... But a storm is blowing from Paradise; ... This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.” In *Maria Nephele* there is no angel, but her existence takes on a metaphysical transcendence that surpasses the storm and transforms it to an “ethical level”: “THAT all currents of the sea/ suddenly will reveal you/ raising the tempest to the ethical level” (367).

The “Angel Novus” in Benjamin and Maria Nephele in Elytis make the storm the founding of progress. The hope for the coming of a Messianic age which will end “exile” and restore nature to its paradisiacal state (Buck-Morss 234) is a concept identical in both thinkers, Benjamin and Elytis. According to Benjamin, the “authentic concept of universal history is a Messianic one” (Buck-Morss 244) and in *Maria Nephele*, Elytis transforms his poetics fusing the historical and the metaphysical aspects of experience.

Finally, the poet’s idealization of both poetry and the cultural past, on the one hand, contrasts with the cannibalism of capitalist markets and on the other “conforms to a certain vision of aesthetic modernity” (Leontis 181-2). In the last poem, “The Eternal Wager,” Elytis returns to the first half of himself, the bright one; through his redemptive narrative, he seeks an *apokatastasis* of the fragmented Maria Nephele placed in his “transcendental *topos* of Hellas” (Leontis 174). Far from cosmopolitan urbanism, the poet seeks the

reintegration “of what once was a mighty unity” (Calinescu 266) and revisits the grand narrative of high modernism in his attempt to reconstitute the loss of his country by an encounter with the new face of modernity and globalization.¹⁹ His utopian vision resonates with a certain messianic finality and an apocalyptic attitude which allude to Benjamin’s concept of Messianism. Moreover, it seems that Elytis, like Benjamin, sees and accepts the “eternal recurrence of the new as sameness” (Rabinbach 123). That is the meaning of his phrase “Guess, toil, feel: On the other side I am the same” (*Collected Poems* 49, 289).

Conclusion

But how far did Elytis move to the “other bank”? Did he really transgress his Mediterranean poetics based on “solar metaphysics” and did he really touch his reverse side, his otherness? The poet’s utopian vision in the last poem of the collection sought finally to transcend the contradictions of postmodern civilization and its social conflicts and to acquire a wholeness, ethical and national, reconstituting the fragments of the epoch. Nevertheless, *Maria Nephele* on the other side, as a radical woman, has a dominant presence in the collection contributing to the creation of a perspective which cannot otherwise be described than as a “dialectics of seeing”, that is a different way of thinking about the meaning of history. *Maria Nephele*, in my view, escapes the transcendent view of her creator and stands as the medium of historical awakening, reveals the political conditions of the present moment and draws attention to the politics of cultural production and cultural domination.

As Elytis states in one of his interviews *Maria Nephele* inaugurates his displacement from the natural Mediterranean world to the cosmopolitan city²⁰. Thus, the poetic collections he published after *Maria Nephele* such as the *Three Poems Under a Flag of Convenience* (1982), the *Diary of an Invisible April* (1984) and *The Little Seafarer* (1985) show his reflection of the new world order and the new postmodern sensibility. In the *Three Poems Under a Flag of Convenience* the postmodern experience lies in the conflict between the production of the ephemeral (“flag of convenience”) in postmodern society and the eternal aspect of life in which Elytis is gradually becoming more absorbed in his later period through Plato’s and Plotinus’ philosophy. The poem “The Garden Sees” posits the existence of a void in the new technological age “when inventions put themselves out of action” (*Completed Poems*, 372). Contrary to this sense of void,

the poet looks through the garden and “speaks philosophy” (375)²¹. Arseniou (35) commenting on this poem refers to a “postmodern idealist imagery”. This term could be considered true for many of Elytis’ poems after *Maria Nephele* while images of the new world order of globalization²² are intertwined with philosophical insights and natural images of beauty and light. It can therefore be assumed that Elytis does not really move far away from Mediterranean imagery but natural landscape is now re-inscribed in his poetics, echoed by questioning thoughts and feelings of spiritual emptiness.

Comparing the collections of the 1980s with *Maria Nephele* it is interesting to note that although *Maria Nephele* closes with the poet’s vision for regaining the lost wholeness of life by the alienated globalized individual, the collections that followed end in doubt as to whether poetic forces can transcend darkness and turmoil²³. The messianic message of the end of *Maria Nephele* will not be voiced again in Elytis’ poems, at least not in the same tone. In *The Little Seafarer* which was being written at the same time as *Maria Nephele*, the poet reveals the dark aspect of Greek history, injustices and murders that were committed from the ancient past to contemporary historical moments with political hints of the military junta’s acts of violence. Abandoning his messianic role, the poet now foregrounds the “adventure of the soul” (Loulakaki, 74) and the politics of historical representation. This notion of re-presenting the past is also made overt in the *Diary of an Invisible April* where the poet states that “Dawn found me having run through the history of the death of History, or rather the history of the History of Death” (Elytis, *Completed Poems*, 405). The idea of an “end of history” is bound up with the postmodern sense of history and denotes that the way the past has previously been represented and historicized has come to an end (Simon Malpas, 89). With his game of words Elytis probably critiques the debates about the politics of representation in history-writing which characterize postmodern thinking (Hutcheon, 7).

Returning to the hypothesis posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that *Maria Nephele*, real or imaginary, broadened Elytis’ awareness of the present and especially of the cultural shift to postmodernity. Carrying the artistic and moral aspects of a counterculture which in the 1960s was closely linked with postmodernism, *Maria Nephele* forced Elytis to confront and espouse aspects of the new historical and philosophical face of modernity, that is of postmodernity.

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Notes

1 Chatzigiakoumi (100) refers to Maria Nephela as a real person: "the first hippie woman of Athens." Koutrianou (412) points out that: «Η σύνθεση της *Μαρίας Νεφέλης* ξεκίνησε στα τέλη της δεκαετίας του 1950 ή στις αρχές της δεκαετίας του 1960 ... ωστόσο συνεχίστηκε μέχρι και στη δεκαετία του 1970» ("The composition of *Maria Nephela* began in the late 1950s or early 1960s ... however, it continued until the 1970s"). Boskovic (65) provides a different view about the time of the conception of the poem: "The work on *Maria Nephela* started in France in late 1940s and initially had the title *H Αυδία λέει*, 'Lydia says'."

2 For the idea that postmodernism is "one significant framework in which to describe what happened to culture in the 60's" see also Jameson 178-209.

3 Loulakaki-Moore in her article "The Dark Philosopher and the Postmodern Turn: Heraclitus in the Poetry of Seferis, Elytis and Fostieris" (2014) associates only Fostieris' poetry with postmodernism. Seferis and Elytis, according to Loulakaki-Moore, "exploit the Heraclitian doctrines" in a modernist manner (91). Elytis' poems of the late 1960s are presented in *Boundary 2* as postmodern poems. For this special issue of *Boundary 2* on Greece as a postmodern example see Papanikolaou (127-145). Papanikolaou argues that "*Boundary 2* reminds us that the 'scandal of postmodernism' has happened in Greece. What remains is to find the scene of the crime." (144).

4 For the conception of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism, see Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

5 All translations are from Jeffrey Carson and Nikos Sarris' 1997 translation. References to the translation are made by page.

6 The symbol of the star is fundamental to Benjamin's theory of knowledge. It is interesting to see the differentiation he makes between the light of the sun and the light of the star: "... the ideas are stars, in contrast to the sun of revelation. They do not appear in the daylight of history; they are at work in history only invisibly. They shine only into the night of nature. Works of art, then, may be defined as the models of a nature that awaits no day, and thus no judgment Day; they are the models of a nature that is neither the theater of history nor the dwelling place of mankind. The redeemed night." (Benjamin *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, 389)

7 See Benjamin (*Illuminations* 174) who refers to emotions of "fear, revulsion, and horror ... which the big city crowd aroused in those who first observed it." According to Benjamin, this image "for Poe has something barbaric." Benjamin quotes Valéry who claims that "The inhabitant of the great urban centers ... reverts to a state of savagery – that is, of isolation".

8 cf. Politi (91): «Ερπετά, πτηνά, πθηκάνθρωποι, σαρκοβόρα και ανθρωποφάγοι εικονίζουν μία φύση ά-γλωσση, προ-κοινωνική όπου η μόνη άμυνα του ποιητή είναι η γλώσσα που κι αυτή έχει καταντήσει μία άναρθρη κραυγή "ιιιιι"» ("Reptiles, birds, ape-men, carnivores, and cannibals depict a non-verbal, pre-social nature, where the only defense of the poet is language and this has become an inarticulate cry of eeeee").

9 For the dialectical image in Benjamin's thought see Tiedemann (943), "Benjamin's thinking was invariably in dialectical images. As opposed to the Marxist dialectic, which "regards every ... developed social form as in fluid movement", Benjamin's dialectic tried to halt the flow of the movement, to grasp its becoming as being."

- 10 The central motifs Benjamin uses in his critique of modernity, according to Jennings (9), are the following: “the flâneur who strolls through the urban crowd as prosthetic vehicle of a new vision; the department store as phantasmagoric space of display and consumption; the commercialization and final alienation of the intelligentsia; the prostitute as concatenated image-of-death and woman, ‘seller and sold in one’; the gradual denaturing of art as it is subsumed by commodification and fashion; and the replacement of experience by the new concept of information.”
- 11 For the female *flâneur* or *flâneuse* see Wolff (124-126) and Gotsi (126-129).
- 12 For postmodern morality see Bauman, *Life in Fragments*.
- 13 See also the way Ioannou (195) interprets the exclamation “‘Europeanese/ oo-oo-oo-oo’”: «Η τέχνη δεν είναι παρά μια άγλωσση εφήμερη ψυχαγωγία, που τραυλίζει σ’ ένα ισοπεδωμένο ευρωπαϊκό γλωσσάριο» (“Art is nothing more than a non-verbal ephemeral entertainment that stutters within a flattened European glossary”). cf. Elytis (*Open Papers*, 14): “Ohyes, I think the age of the literature of independent countries is over; we’re entering the age of the *illiterature* of European provinces: something readable but not exactly language, concerning thought but not occupying it, and proffering imagination in a package, prefab as in the movies, requiring no alliance with our own.”
- 14 According to Dekavalles (152) the poem is a sham hymn with irony and bitterness.
- 15 The reference to the bath in conjunction with the “mourning of the past” alludes to the killing of Agamemnon in the bath by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (1385-1390). There is one more allusion to the death of Agamemnon in the poem “Each Moon Confesses” («Κάθε φεγγάρι ομολογεί»): “You’re the man on whom they threw the net in his bath but who’s still/ reigning in his kingdom there”: 329). Elytis sheds a different light on the tragedy stressing Agamemnon’s power in his kingdom that still exists.
- 16 Elytis in his interview with Ivar Ivask notes that Maria Nephele means “‘Maria Cloud.’ Both names have a mythological connotation. But in my poem, Maria is a young woman, a modern radical of our age” (“Odysseus Elytis” 640). See also Pourgouris (193-198) who examines *Maria Nephele* through Jungian psychoanalysis and Elytis’ identification with the anima archetype. For the mythological dimension of Maria Nephele see also Politi (86) and for the religious aspect see Dekavalles (122-123).
- 17 Antonis Dekavalles (150) associates the scene of a bar in the poem with the escape to the “*paradis artificiels* of Baudelaire.”
- 18 For the archetypal perception of the past in the Generation of the Thirties see Tziovas (*Reconfiguring*, 291-293 and *Ο μύθος της Γενιάς του Τριάντα*, 321-340).
- 19 For the view that postmodernism is a “new face of modernity” see Calinescu (265-269). See also Mackridge (119) who critiques Elytis’s aspect of modernism: “Elytis’s modernism consists in the assertion of traditional values by means of innovative techniques. It attempts ... a reintegration of what had been fragmented by his country’s encounter with modernity and its internationalization.”
- 20 Elytis (*Συν τοις άλλοις*, 266) clearly states in his interview this shift from the natural world to the cosmopolitan city («μετατοπίζομαι από τη φύση στην πολιτεία και μάλιστα στη σύγχρονη ‘κοσμοπολίτικη πολιτεία’»).
- 21 For the mystical and philosophical aspects of Elytis’ thought, see Alexandra Samouil, “*Πάντα αριθμώ διέταξας*”. *Αναλογία, αριθμολογία και ποίηση*, Μελάνι, 2018, pp. 186-216.
- 22 See for example the verses of the poem “Ad libitum”: “after the bell you hear in a sweet soft-toned voice/ ‘Panamerican flight no. 330 departing for/ Riyadh Karachi New Delhi Hong Kong’” (Elytis, *Collected Poems* 387).
- 23 According to Dekavalles (“Time versus Eternity”, 23), Elytis’ *The Little Seafarer* and *Three Poems under a Flag of Convenience* “both end in doubt as to whether the poet has succeeded through his lifelong message in becoming the enlightener and savior he aspired to be”. About the *Diary of an Invisible April*, Dekavalles (“Time versus Eternity”, 23) argues that “Death is met face to face as ‘imminent’ and inescapable”.