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“Ap-eikonizō”: Odysseas Elytīs, painting and the Platonic reconfiguration of Greek aesthetic continuity

Abstract

This article examines Odysseas Elytīs’s aesthetic thought through the lens of the reception of antiquity, arguing that his reflections on painting can be read as articulating a counter-genealogy of Western aesthetics. Against modern European accounts that construe ancient Greek art as either a historical origin or a lost normative paradigm, Elytīs reconceives Greece as a living mode of perception, defined by a specific sensory-expressive configuration that persists across epochs. The article first reconstructs Elytīs’s notion of “Greekness” as a non-Western perceptual modality irreducible to iconographic transmission. It then analyzes his theory of pictorial representation, centered on the distinction between apeikonizō and eikonizō, and suggests that this pair can be read as reactivating Plato’s distinction between mimēsis phantastikē and mimēsis eikastikē in the Sophist. Through this Platonic framework, Elytīs challenges the dominance of perspectival and chiaroscuro-based representation in Western aesthetics, proposing instead a mode of figuration that resists illusionism and subjectivism. Finally, through Elytīs’s reading of modern Greek painting – especially Theophilos Chatzīmichaīl’s and Nikos Ghika’s – the article argues that the rejection of momentariness and sensible contingency in pictorial representation does not simply resolve into pure idealism, but that his “solar metaphysics” can be understood as pointing beyond Platonic idealism by reconciling the ideal with the intensification of sensibility.

Keywords

Greekness, Chiaroscuro, Light

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1. Introduction

Although philosophical aesthetics was formally established as a discipline in the mid-eighteenth century and it is therefore problematic to speak of “ancient aesthetics”, as Kristeller (Kristeller 1990: 174) famously argued, it remains beyond doubt that the seeds of Western contemporary aesthetic concerns and enduring questions were sown in the field of ancient thought – Halliwell offers *mimēsis* as a paradigmatic example (Halliwell 2002: viii). The recovery of antiquity is thus not merely a matter of style, thematic content, or subject matter. Rather, it concerns the formation of those very theoretical cores that have continued to shape Western aesthetic reflection up to the present.

In this view, it is striking that the dynamics of this reception have rarely been examined from the perspective of Greece itself. While the reception of ancient thought in modern and contemporary Western philosophy – in Italian, German, French, and Anglophone traditions – has been extensively studied, less attention has been paid to how this reception has unfolded at its point of origin. This article seeks to address that gap by examining, in particular, the aesthetic reflection of the twentieth-century Greek poet Odysseas Elytis.

Elytis is primarily known for his literary achievements, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1979. Less widely recognized, however, is his sustained engagement with the visual arts. He pursued this interest both in practice – producing numerous paintings and collages – and on a theoretical level, through a substantial body of writings devoted to aesthetics and to contemporary Greek and European art.

At first glance, focusing on this often-overlooked dimension of Elytis’s oeuvre might appear to be motivated by little more than antiquarian curiosity. Yet his thought proves decisive insofar as it challenges several foundational assumptions shaping the Western appropriation of its Hellenic heritage. Elytis interrogates entrenched prejudices in Western philosophical receptions of Greek artistic experience, contests their problematic modes of appropriation, and, above all, advances a reconfiguration of its conceptual status. This broader critical gesture finds one of its most concrete and philosophically articulated expressions in Elytis’s reflections on perspectival and representational canons, which provide a privileged site for examining his reconfiguration of aesthetic inheritance.

In what follows, I argue that these reflections involve a precise reactivation of Plato's distinction between *mimēsis phantastikē* and *mimēsis eikastikē*, as articulated in the *Sophist*. These categories reappear with striking consistency in Elytis's own distinction between two representational gestures, designated by the verbs *apeikonizō* and *eikonizō*¹. Through this conceptual pair, Elytis redraws the boundary between Greece and Europe. In doing so, he destabilizes the established horizon of aesthetic reception in both contexts and articulates what may be described – this paper finally proposes – as an aesthetic counter-genealogy, through which an unexpected continuity between antiquity and the present is disclosed. As will be shown, Elytis carries out this operation through a selective reinterpretation of diverse ancient, modern, and contemporary artistic practices and phenomena. By this means, he seeks to bring to light their underlying common ground and to arrange them within a reconstructive framework that, however, remains marked – at least to some extent – by a degree of arbitrariness and anachronism.

For this reason, a first preliminary methodological note is required: by "counter-genealogy" one should not intend a historical line of filiation of representational principles, pointing to an effective, direct, and philologically verifiable transmission of artistic doctrines, techniques or practices. Rather, it should be understood as an attempt to articulate, through this very selectivity, a model of self-understanding and self-narration of an artisticity that he defines as authentically Greek and seeks to legitimize as such.

In this regard, a second fundamental point emerges: such a counter-genealogy has as its condition of possibility the identification of an Other, which is posited and recognized – albeit in equally general terms – in the so-called "West." It unfolds in relation to this Other and to what are perceived as its attempts to reclaim a Greek origin from an aesthetic standpoint – an operation that, in the poet's view, ultimately constitutes a dan-

¹ Ancient Greek is transliterated using a quantitative system that marks vowel length (ē, ō) without indicating accentuation, in accordance with the conventions adopted in this issue of the journal. Modern Greek transliteration is based on the ISO 843 (Type 1) standard established by the International Organization for Standardization. Exceptions are made for proper names that have acquired conventional English transliterations markedly diverging from the ISO system (notably Seferis, Babiniotis, and Ghika). Only lexical items are transliterated, while syntagmatic expressions and longer phrases are retained in the original Greek script.

gerous betrayal and concealment of those very principles. From this perspective, Elytis appears inclined toward a form of cultural and art-historical essentialism, a tendency that must be unsparingly acknowledged.

At the same time, however, it is equally important to stress that, through this articulation, Elytis is in fact appropriating and reworking a conceptual opposition that is not only present within Greek modernism – which, as S. Jollivet has shown (see Jollivet 2016: 336-7), has its roots in the efforts of 19th- and early 20th-century Greek historiography to define a diachronic identity for the newly established Greek State – but also derives from German idealist and historicist philosophy, which constructs Greece as an "elsewhere" (Jollivet 2016: 341) from which to reshape its own origins.

In Elytis, as will be shown, this conceptual, philosophical, and historical legacy is fully mobilized and originally reinterpreted. In this sense, if one is to speak of essentialism, it should nevertheless be understood as the speculative maturation of a critical engagement embedded in a sedimented tradition. Therefore, while it is important to acknowledge and temper the rigidity of overly strict categorizations, it would be equally wrong to overlook the extent to which these categorizations have actively shaped the reciprocal gazes exchanged between these two horizons, at times even influencing their very character in the pursuit of reciprocal differentiation.

It is this principle – a kind of consciously assumed prejudicial stance, prudently redeployed as a heuristic device – that underlies the analysis of this text. And it is from the investigation of this interplay of gazes, then, that the present analysis must begin.

2. *Greece as a non-Western perceptual modality*

For these reasons, before turning to Elytis's remarks explicitly devoted to painting, it is useful to step back and outline one of the most persistent loci of reflection in his work: his homeland – Greece. Its poetic and philosophical conceptualization constitutes a central motif of the so-called Generation of the Thirties, bringing Elytis into dialogue with figures such as Theotokas, Empeirikos, Ritsos, and Seferis. This orientation is expressed above all in his poetry, which frequently takes the Greek landscape as its object, and, more radically, inhabits it – from the "Corinthian sun" (Elytis 1997: 78) and the "olive groves of Lesbos" (Elytis 1997: 92) in *Sun the First* to the rocky Patmos of *Maria Nephele* (see Elytis 1981: 12).

The prominence of this theme in Elytis’s work – both poetic and in prose – is not merely ornamental, but fulfills a profound historical and identity-forming function. Among the contexts in which he articulates this position, a particularly revealing one is an interview broadcast on Greek national television (ERT) and conducted within the framework of the documentary *Here Europe was born* (Εδώ γεννηθήκε η Ευρώπη), produced between 1980 and 1981 by Giōrgos and Irōs Sgourakis. In that context, he states:

At some point, Europe will have to come to terms with its roots. It cannot go on believing that it is an autonomous entity without theoretical foundations. There will also come a time when Greece will have to decide whether it wishes to remain isolated and adhere to its own values, or whether it will enter a broader collective – with the risk of distorting its true character [...]. From this point of view, I admit that I am an isolationist. Throughout my life, I have fought for what we call Greekness (Ελληνικότητα), which is nothing other than a way of seeing and feeling things (ένας τρόπος να βλέπεις και να αισθάνεσαι τα πράγματα), on both a grand and a humble scale – that is, in a Parthenon as much as in an oil lamp. [...] An inner courtyard of a house on an island or in a monastery is far closer to the spirit that created the Parthenons and the icons of the Mother of God than all the columns and metopes of European palaces².

Seemingly simple, these brief remarks contain two key, mutually co-determining clarifications: on the one hand, the specific position of Greece *vis-à-vis* the West; on the other, the peculiarity of its historical-temporal status.

At a general level, this stance aligns with the modernist movement’s broader rejection of European realism and academicism, a rejection that also shaped its Greek inflection. More specifically, as reconstructed in Pantelis Voutouris’s careful analysis (see Voutouris 2010: 253-65), the claim to a distinct Greek artistic identity in opposition to its European appropriation took shape through Elytis’s close relationship with Periklis Giannopoulos. Already in the early twentieth century, Giannopoulos had theorized the existence of a “Greek line” and a “Greek color”, conceived as emerging from an *analogical* transposition of the Greek landscape and

² The interview, which has not been published in written form and is available only in audiovisual format, is available for consultation via the link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoNlcsiuUdk&t=6s> [last accessed on April 4, 2026]. The full episode, no longer hosted on the ERT website, can be accessed at: <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xtudak> [last accessed on April 4, 2026].

soil into the artists' manual practice – a conception that closely anticipates Elytis's later "theory of analogy" (on which, see Pourgouris 2011: 65-109).

As Voutouris further notes, from the 1950s onward Elytis distanced himself from Giannopoulos's aesthetic program, whose theses had become closely associated with the far-right nationalism of the Metaxas regime (see Voutouris 2010: 262-4). Accordingly, contemporary criticism has increasingly interpreted Elytis's position as a form of "resistance to Western colonial and postcolonial homogenizing influence" (García Marín 2014: 32).

Nonetheless, throughout his work Elytis remains broadly aligned with the conceptual framework through which Giannopoulos articulated the profound divide between Greece and Europe. In Giannopoulos's account, European art – even in its Italian and Renaissance manifestations (see Giannopoulos 2006: 39) – is essentially "Germanic" and, like the landscape in which it is forged, wild: belonging to the horizon of forested wildernesses and thus formless, material, dark, and shadow-laden (see Giannopoulos 2006: 73-4, 81). By contrast, both authors attribute to Greek art a persistent luminosity and transparency inherited from the splendor of the Mediterranean landscape.

What is particularly striking, however, is that in his reflection on these issues Elytis attributes the clearest apprehension of this difference to a European – and, moreover, a German – figure: Friedrich Hölderlin, a poet for whom Elytis expressed a sustained admiration. In his *Draft for an introduction to the Aegean World*, Hölderlin is presented as one who, although "journeying [only] in his mind's eye [...] from the distant reaches of Swabia", nonetheless grasped the *luminosity* of Greece more vividly "than the modern passenger in a jet at a height of 11,000 feet" (Elytis 2021: 6). The imaginal voyage to which Elytis refers is that narrated in Hölderlin's *Patmos*, cited immediately thereafter: transported aloft from the "*shadowy wood*" and the "*longing rivers*" (StA II: 165) of Mitteleuropa, the poet passes through dazzling "*shadowless roads*" toward a Greece lying at "the doors of Asia" (StA II: 166, italics are mine).

By foregrounding distance and estrangement, this description figures Greece as a liminal space, radically other with respect to Hölderlin's own regions. Hölderlin was, in fact, among the first – prior even to Nietzsche – to articulate such an awareness. Little more than a year before composing *Patmos* (first drafted in 1803), he wrote his well-known letter to Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff, in which he reflects on the relation and reciprocal in-

fluence between Greece and the West: the latter is neither the continuation, development, or maturation of the former, nor its degeneration or vulgarization, but rather its *constitutive Other*.

Moreover, in Hölderlin’s account of the aesthetic mastery that distinguishes these two horizons, the aesthetic-paideutic function Greece may exercise *vis-à-vis* the West derives precisely from its radical and originary alterity. As the poet suggests, what is foreign is more readily appropriated than what is one’s own; accordingly, Greece can function as an aesthetic model for the West only insofar as it is approached as a displacing mirror and contemplated in the awareness that “we [Westerners] can have nothing in common with them” (StA VI: 426).

Yet, although Elytis himself does not fully recognize it, his assessment already moves beyond Hölderlin’s position. In *Chronicles of a Decade*, where he recounts his first discovery of the poet during the war years, Elytis once again underscores – referring to *Die Griechenland* – that the German poet indeed allows Greece to appear as a “golden vision” and a “divine fleece” (Elytis 1995: 96); however, as the hymn’s conclusion makes clear, this vision belongs to a horizon irreversibly consigned to the past. The Attica for which the poet yearns has already “fallen” (*gefallen*), and the poet’s heart, which in the final stanza mourns Alcaeus, Anacreon, and the saints of Marathon, “belongs to the dead” (StA I: 180). As F. Cattaneo observes, Hölderlin’s West and Greece are to be understood “as historical entities rather than geographical ones” (Cattaneo 2024: 43): if the West names modernity, Greece figures the ancient – an absolute past entrusted to nostalgic remembrance, for which one may at best hope for a resurrection.

Let us now return to Elytis’s interview. Although the poet never articulates this point explicitly, the passage cited above makes clear that his position diverges sharply from Hölderlin’s, precisely with regard to the temporal register of Greece. *Contra* Mecacci, who maintains that for both authors Greece functions as an “obsession” and a “necessary flight into the past” (Mecacci 2006: 39), mobilized as a critical lens for the present, it is difficult to sustain that view in Elytis’s case: for him, Greece – however obscured and humble – belongs to an emphatically present horizon.

This brings us to the second fundamental point that emerges from Elytis’s conception of Greekness. He states it unequivocally: on this side of Europe’s borders, far removed from its classicizing palaces, there unfolds a radical artistic continuity extending from the Parthenon, through the small Byzantine monasteries with their icons, to the courtyards of humble dwellings in contemporary Greece, with their oil lamps. The “flight

of the gods", so recurrent a motif in Hölderlin's poetry, has, from Elytis's perspective, simply never occurred. From an artistic-aesthetic standpoint, Greece has remained – beneath the layers of obscurity imposed by Ottoman domination and beyond the loss of political centrality – uncannily continuous.

This repositioning is decisive and marks a clear caesura with post-Hölderlinian reflection on Greece. One need only recall the journey undertaken in 1962 by another major interpreter of Hölderlin, Martin Heidegger, who invoked the verses of *Bread and wine* to name the difficulty of retrieving, in contemporary metropolitan and popular Greece, an authentic echo of the ancients: the sense that "that which determined the world of Greece in its proper character remains concealed", and the growing disappointment whereby "every visit to every place of its dwelling, work, and feast renders us more perplexed" (Heidegger 2005: 22)³.

This alleged decline of popular Greece, this rupture and this disappearance, are in no way perceived by Elytis, who, on the contrary, in the interview already cited, emphasizes that it is precisely popular tradition that has ensured the continuity of Greek sensibility. No process of deterioration is articulated between the splendor of antiquity and Greek modernity; rather, it is the latter that guarantees the former's continuation – subterranean yet inexorable.

These themes and this lexicon are taken up once more in another text, the introductory note to one of Elytis's major poetic works, *Axion esti*, which reads:

Is Greece merely a racial unit destined to vanish once absorbed into the fusion of other related units? Is it the bearer of values taught to us in schools and appropriated by the West (without possessing analogous sensory organs [χωρίς να

³ As is well known, Heidegger's journey is punctuated by a number of epiphanic moments in which he believes he can discern an authentic form of Greekness – most notably during his visits to Delos, the Parthenon, the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion, and, finally, in his contemplation of the Phaedriades and the valley of the river Pleistos in the landscape surrounding Delphi. Yet these moments of radiance do not negate a more fundamental experience: they emerge against the persistent awareness of the proximity of a departed divinity, which can only be approached in its absence and in the irrevocable distance of the first beginning. Indeed, it is precisely in the experience of this absence that Heidegger locates the deeper meaning of his journey: "What had arrived and brought the assurance of its stay was the sojourn of the flown gods that opens itself to recollective thinking. The sojourn lies in the endurance to the question that Hölderlin poses" (Heidegger 2005: 56).

διαθέτει τα ανάλογα αισθητήρια])? Or is it, beyond all this, a specific and unique sensation, living and ever-present (μια ειδική και μοναδική αίσθηση, ζωντανή και πάντοτε παρούσα) [...]? (Kechagioglou 1995: 33)

Not only does Greece not belong to the West and its improper appropriations; it is absolutely alive, current, and present.

There is more: this continuity is, above all, perceptual in nature. Greece, the poet tells us, is a sensation – *aisthīsī*. The term must be grasped in its semantic doubleness: it may designate both the outcome of perception – the perceived or sensible impression – and, as in its ancient cognate, the faculties through which perception is produced and the perceptual act itself. It is precisely for lack of adequate perceptual organs that the West has betrayed, distorted, and denatured what is Greek, transforming it in reception and failing to recognize it as still living in contemporary Greece.

In other words, Greece is transfigured into an aesthetic category, becoming in every respect a *modality of sensibility*. This point of arrival allows us to bring two considerations into focus.

First, it is precisely this shift that enables Elytis to salvage Greece from its past: if Greece is, first and foremost, a mode of sensibility, then its identity does not pertain to any historically determined content or thematic object. It is neither past nor can it ever become past, since, as such, it remains operative independently of the objects upon which it is exercised.

Hence the second point: if Greece is not a historically determined thematic cluster, its reception in the artistic domain does not take place through the transmission, appropriation, reproduction, and transformation of iconographic motifs, but through the articulation of a specific perceptual-expressive complex or style, whose constancy manifests itself beyond and across the objects it takes as its representational targets.

Having now been delineated with sufficient clarity, these conclusions can be put to the test through a confrontation with painting, in which this continuity will be examined by analyzing Elytis's reactivation of two specific aesthetic-representational categories drawn from Platonism.

3. *The paradigm of continuity: "apeikonizō"/"phantastikē" and "eikonizō"/"eikastikē"*

3.a. *Elytis's aesthetics as counter-genealogy*

As noted above, the signature of Elytis's aesthetic-perceptual-expressive continuity will be investigated through the reflections he offers on its realization in pictorial practice. The question, then, is: how does such a mode of sensing manifest itself in visual expression? In other words, what allows us to recognize, across different epochs and in a trans-historical sense, a manner of translating distinctively Greek perception into image and painting?

In *Open papers*, Elytis explores the present dimension of Greek *aisthīsī* through a series of essays on modern Greek painting: Nikos Ghika (1906-2004), Giannīs Moralīs (1916-2009), Giorgio de Chirico, and Nikos Nikolaou (1909-1986) are only a few of the painters whose work appears in the poet's aesthetic reflections. Yet the figure that acquires the most emblematic role in his writings is undoubtedly the enigmatic Theophilos Chatzīmichaīl, the poor and uncultivated 19th-20th-century naïve painter from Mytilene, whose work Elytis ought to valorize along with the writer and art critic Tériade.

At first glance, it might seem that the aesthetic persistence of Greekness "safeguarded" in Theophilos's canvases is primarily thematic: in their bright colors and sharply outlined forms, figures from myth and ancient history (the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Alexander the Great) coexist with epic and popular culture (Erōtokritos and Aretousa, baglamas players, shepherds in fustanella), alongside modern landscapes, such as the rock of Panagia Glykophilousa Church against the Lesbos sky crossed by airplanes. A Greek painting, one might conclude, because it depicts Greece.

Yet, the picture becomes more complex when attention is paid to Elytis's interpretation: not only is Theophilos's art, in his eyes, a "courageous pagan metamorphosis of Byzantine hagiography" (Elytis 1971: 413), but, in a sort of "small imaginary museum" (Elytis 2011: 194-200), it is inscribed in full continuity with other manifestations of Hellenic art (Minoan art, Severe Style, and the modern Greek artists mentioned above), while excluding others, equally Greek (such as the 16th-century painter Doxaras). Moreover, in some cases, the aesthetic signature of the first category is, for Elytis, more closely related to "non-classical" artistic manifestations not necessarily produced in Greece or by Greeks. In this network of correspondences, he

cites not only examples of ancient art – such as Egyptian and Etruscan works (see Elytis 2011: 211) – but surprisingly also instances drawn from European avant-gardes: from Cézanne's Post-Impressionism to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, passing through Matisse's Fauves – "revolutionaries of the West", who were, not by chance, compelled to look elsewhere to escape the "asphyxiation" of the "official principles of the Renaissance" (Elytis 1971: 221).

Certainly, the definition of this succession confronts undeniable simplifications on the poet's part, who appears little concerned with defending himself against accusations of anachronism or technical-artistic flattening that a rigorous art historian might rightly raise. But it is precisely in this associative freedom and in this disregard for temporal and spatial boundaries that Elytis's theoretical operation becomes productive. The aim is not to present Elytis as a faithful historian of the evolution of Greek visual arts, but rather to understand his categorization as a dynamic and creative deployment of certain aesthetic-representational constants, through which he seeks to challenge some of the received ideas of art history, reclaiming certain aesthetic principles while stripping them of interpretations he regards as misunderstandings.

Elytis's reconstruction, in fact, makes no claim to philological exactitude; it functions rather as a polemical device capable of constructing a counter-genealogy and dismantling, by deconstructing it, the history of effects that he sees in Classicism – understood in its broadest sense – as the flowering of the classical. While – again – these simplifications are neither hidden nor justified, it is possible to understand their rationale.

3.b. *Recovering the classical: against shadow-painting*

In order to lend coherence to this genealogy, Elytis advances a resemanticization of the term "classical", seeking to endow it with the kind of incontrovertibility proper to mathematics. In a text from – he introduces an "aesthetic constant", designated as *k* – standing for *klassikos* (classical) or *katharotita* (purity) (Elytis 2011: 188 – intended to gauge the presence or absence of Greekness as a perceptual-expressive style across different times and places. What this constant is meant to register, in Elytis's account, is a form of "purity" marked by clarity of form, sharpness of contour, and, above all, volumetric geometrism. Indeed, from a technical standpoint,

such works display compact forms, materially dense color, and sharply delineated outlines.

More decisively, as Elytis repeatedly insists (Elytis 1971: 355), Greek artistic expressions exhibit a pronounced resistance to *chiaroscuro*: shadows are minimized, foreshortened perspective is avoided, and, as a consequence, any form of what might be termed “impressionistic mimicry” is rejected. *The “K” divisor in contemporary painting* already invokes Plato – specifically the doctrine of ideal numbers as a possible support for pictorial practice. As N. Stylianou (2020: 162-3) points out, Elytis finds in Plato the possibility of articulating that plastic and eternizing geometrism which constitutes the fundamental hallmark of his aesthetic reflection.

Although less explicit, this theoretical background acquires heightened theoretical salience in an essay devoted precisely to the problematic of representation: *Ap- kai eikonizō*. As Mecacci notes, Elytis here “starts from a premise entirely internal to Platonic aesthetics” (Mecacci 2010: 340, slightly modified). In what follows, the aim is to examine the nature of these premises: first, in order to identify in Elytis a genuine recovery of a properly “classical” (rather than merely classicizing) aesthetic category; second, and more importantly, to show how this “Platonic recovery” functions as the very device through which the Greek aesthetic-perceptual-expressive continuity theorized by Elytis primarily comes to manifestation.

As noted, this essay revolves around two key categories, the very ones to which the title refers: *apeikonizō* and *eikonizō*. These two verbs are nearly synonymous and are both etymologically connected to the noun *eikona*: the former means ‘to represent’, ‘to render something in image’, or, by extension, ‘to describe’ through other expressive means (Babiniōtis 2008: s.v. απεικονίζω); the latter, less commonly used, likewise refers to the act of portraying or illustrate figuratively (Babiniōtis 2008: s.v. εικονίζω).

Here, however, Elytis resemanticizes them, assigning to each a distinct – and, in some respects, opposing – meaning. As he writes, the “difference” between the two gestures is decisive:

The difference lies entirely between *de-pict* (a mere materialization of seeing) [*ἀπεικονίζω*, πού είναι μιὰ ὑλοποίηση ἀπλῶς τοῦ ὁρᾶν] and *picture* (a transformation of feeling into image) [*εἰκονίζω*, πού εἶναι μιὰ μετατροπή τοῦ αἰσθάνεσθαι σέ εἰκόνα]. (Elytis 2011: 212)

At a preliminary level, this distinction may be understood as opposing a more passive gesture, dependent on the way the object appears to the

perceiving subject, to a more autonomous and configurative one, in which the subject is partially freed from sensory constraints and draws more directly on inner resources. Accordingly, I render *apeikonizō* as *to de-pict* and *eikonizō* as *to picture*, a choice that preserves their shared etymology while marking their morphological difference – the presence of the prefix *apo-* in the former and its absence in the latter.

More importantly, the nature and underlying tensions of these two forms of representation are contextualized and delineated more clearly in the text, in which the poet explains:

From the moment when people no longer paint a body (or some other thing) but *this* body, Western art begins [...]. This is a tradition that reached the threshold of the Renaissance without interruption and was preserved with the same force in the art of the word, especially in poetry. The celebrated realism of the classical period resorts to observation only indicatively; representation does not concern “this particular horse” (to use an example familiar from ancient art), but simply “the horse.” A horse fashioned half from the characteristics of the species and half from imagination. No sculptor, painter, or poet ever cared to transfer the individualized case of an object into a specific place and time – for example, the way it was illuminated by a lamp or by the sun, or how a glint on its side made it appear more natural, “exactly the same”, as we would say today, as what the artist happened to see at a given moment. (Elytis 2011: 212)

Here, Elytis continues, rests the distinction between *apeikonizō* and *eikonizō*. The passage presents numerous crucial aspects that demand particularly careful reading. Let us begin, then, with Plato.

The Platonic echo previously discussed is expressed most clearly in the *Sophist*. In this context, as is well known, in attempting to characterize the potentially deceptive power of sophistic speech, the Stranger distinguishes between two types of *mimētikē technē*: the first type is defined as *eikastikē*, whose fundamental characteristics are to maintain “the proportions of the model” (Plat., *Soph.* 235c) in length, width, and height, and to assign to the representation the appropriate color in every part.

In this respect, as many scholars have emphasized (see Palumbo 2008: 139-47; Napolitano 2007: 8-17), the *phantastikē technē* shows particular affinities with another pictorial technique mentioned by Plato in various *loci* (Plat., *Phaed.* 69b; *Resp.* 2.365c, 7.523b, 9.583b, 9.586b, 10.602d; *Parm.* 165c7; *Thaet.* 208e; *Criti.* 107c-d; *Leg.* 663c) to refer, either literally or metaphorically, to the theme of illusion: the so-called *skiagraphia*. Plato’s use of the term is, in many respects, multifaceted, polysemous, and

continually reshaped to serve strictly philosophical purposes and argumentations (e.g., the condemnation of poetry, the discussions concerning the unreliability of the senses as a source of knowledge, and in the definition of conceptual cores of an ethical nature, for which see in particular Petrakī 2018: 5-29).

But before anything else, one must ask: what exactly was *skiagraphia*? The precise nature of this technique remains a subject of ongoing debate. Nevertheless, several of its defining features can be clearly discerned. According to Pliny’s testimony, the technique is dated to the late 5th century B.C. and attributed to the Athenian painter Apollodorus (see Plin., *N.H.* 35.60, on which Murray 1996: 214), who is elsewhere said to have invented “the fading out and the building up of shadows” (Plu., *Mor.* 364a). In all likelihood, it constituted an illusionistic painting modality, suggesting a sense of depth in a para-perspectival manner.

Some interpreters (e.g., Napolitano 2009: 7), drawing again on the *Naturalis historia* (in particular, Plin., *N.H.* 35.15 and 35.151), support the hypothesis that the illusionistic function of *skiagraphia* was achieved by tracing the silhouette of the cast shadow of the bodies to be represented onto the pictorial surface. More widely accepted among scholars, however (Keuls 1975; Pemberton 1976: 84; Rouveret 2006: 73; Petrakī 2018: 3-4), is the view that such effects were produced through coloristic techniques involving the juxtaposition or blending of colors. These techniques would have made it possible to render shadows on bodies, thereby conferring volume and spatial depth on figures and scenes – an effect plausibly comparable to that observed in the magnificent frescoes of the tombs at Agios Athanasios, Vergina, and Mieza in Greek Macedonia, which, as Z. Petraki notes, have undoubtedly “cast a new light on the technique” (Petrakī 2018: 3).

These characteristics are, in fact, explicitly invoked and employed by Plato as metaphorical instruments, with Petrakī noting a plausible allusion to the “color mixture” (Petrakī 2018: 13) motif in addressing the blending of virtue with pleasure, pain, and fear in *Phaedo* 69a-c. Yet the references to *skiagraphia* that matter for our analysis appear elsewhere.

In Book X of the *Republic* (*Resp.*, 10.598a), much as occurs with the *phantastikē technē*, Plato associates painting with the capacity to represent an object as it appears (οἷα φαίνεται) to the observing subject. Accordingly, the passages of the work that discuss *skiagraphia* are precisely concerned with the illusion and distortion that arise from taking the ob-

server’s point of view into account in the design of the pictorial representation. In this sense, it is noted that, while the moment the observer’s point of view is abandoned the depicted figure risks appearing distorted and confused (see especially *Resp.* 7.523b), it is equally true that, when this perspective is properly assumed and sustained, it can produce in the soul of the viewer a flawless illusion – one that deceives the subject and, through the subsequent superimposition of incompatible viewpoints, gives rise to contradiction and discord, in a manner reminiscent of a form of sorcery (*goēteia*, 10.602c-d). By exploiting and accommodating the natural defects and distortions of visual perception, *skiagraphia* elevates them to the level of a norm, thereby reaffirming, as L. Napolitano writes, “the perspectival, *individual*, and sensible point of view” (2007: 8, my emphasis).

And it achieves this, as the very name indicates, through the use of shadow. Whether it involved the application of mixed colors (see Rouveret 2006), “color changes”, “two-tone monochromatic paintings” (Pemberton 1976: 84), or whether it constituted a proto-divisionist technique, as hypothesized by E. Keuls (Keuls 1975: 11), it is through *chiaroscuro* that these illusionistic effects of depth are produced, and it is, even more clearly, through the introduction of shadow that such distortions operate. From this perspective, as E. Walter-Karydi observes, it is certainly anachronistic to speak of a fully systematic study of perspective or of a systematic reproduction of proportions at a distance in a homogeneous space: in 4th-century Greek painting, “there still results no space as a continuous whole where the position of every single item determines its size and its color intensity” (Walter-Karydi 2019: 59) and we may at best speak of a “body perspective”, which “applies only to figures and objects, so that there is still no coherent representation of space in the picture” (Walter-Karydi 2019: 56).

In this sense, Panofsky’s observations remain relevant: in his references to *skiagraphia*, he underscores that the rendering of depth in ancient painting did not yet entail a homogeneous mathematization of space, but proceeded rather through figurative conglomerates (see Panofsky 1991: 42; on Plato’s criticism of *skiagraphia*, specifically, 107 ff.). Equally, if *skiagraphia* cannot properly be called a proto-perspective, it is self-evident – one might almost say it goes without saying – that Plato cannot be anachronistically cast as a proto-anti-Renaissance theorist.

Yet it is undeniable that this practice entails a reconsideration of foreshortened vision, alongside the specific, individual, and bodily position of

the subject exercising it – and of its inherently unstable and *momentary* character. It is at this fundamental conjunction that Plato and Elytis converge, and it is precisely here that Elytis retrieves Plato. On the one hand, the gesture of *apeikonizō*, like *phantastikē technē*, transposes the specific and momentary impressions of our sensible organs onto the canvas. In this case, the embodied situatedness of the perceiving subject – imposing a partial, momentary, foreshortened, and perspectival vision – also governs the representation of the object depicted.

On the other hand, *eikonizō*, like *eikastikē technē*, assumes instead the function of making visible and configuring: it succeeds in overcoming the scattered impressions received by the subject in its sensible conditionedness and thereby approaches the model. Both Plato’s *eikastikē* and Elytis’s *eikonizō* testify to a creative spirit that transfigures the disaggregated data of perception into an ideal order. Beyond all technical developments, beyond every historical contingency and stylistic variation, this is, in Elytis’s view, the trait that unites authentically Greek art from Plato to the present.

In this light, it is now possible to assess more precisely the devotion Elytis accords to Theophilos. In the apparently naïve chromatic simplicity of his canvases, Theophilos demonstrates in the most vivid manner that he has exercised the gesture of *eikonizō*, thereby continuing, in his own way, the Platonic lesson of *eikastikē*.

One anecdote in particular brings this nexus into sharp relief. Referring to a painting depicting the humble interior of a baker’s shop, Elytis recounts that someone once expressed reservations about the manner in which the painter had represented the loaves of bread: geometrically rendered, with flat colors, without regard for “the alterations produced by light” (Elytis 1971: 222), and, above all, arranged vertically, against the conventions of perspective. Beneath an apparent simplicity, the response Theophilos was accustomed to give revealed remarkable theoretical depth: “In painting, everything must be visible”, and “a painted loaf must be recognizable as a painted loaf *from all its sides*”, for, he added, “only real bread falls” (Elytis 1971: 223, italics mine).

In a certain sense, both in his statements and in his pictorial practice, the painter from Mytilene may be said to be engaging with problems that are quintessentially Platonic. Nearly two and a half millennia earlier, at the beginning of Book X of the *Republic* (Plat., *Resp.* 10.596e-598b), Plato had located the weakness – and the deceptiveness – of painting in its very

mode of appearing: its capacity to render things only insofar as they appear, that is, only in a "small part" (σμικρὸν τι), thereby producing mere *eidōla*. As Palumbo has incisively shown, such representation remains structurally foreshortened and perspectival, irreducibly bound to the multiplicity of viewpoints: "The crucial reflection on the *eidolon*, understood as a 'small part' of being extracted by *mimētikē*" leads to the recognition that the painter's mimetic art is nothing other than "the art of reproducing such images, such perspectival appearances, and is therefore, by its very nature, intrinsically bound to the multiformity and variability of the perspectival condition" (Palumbo 2008: 74).

In Theophilos's reply there lies an implicit attempt to elaborate a mode of painting capable of overcoming the paradoxes and dangers denounced by Platonism: no longer a mere copy of the momentary, subjective, *chiaroscuro*-laden, and perspectival sensible impression, but rather a practice that appropriates those resources proper to painting as such, enabling it – while respecting the internal proportions of the model – to approach it and to reclaim its autonomy as painting qua painting. "Only real bread falls", says Theophilos – and it is as though, Elytis adds, he were thereby insisting on the necessity of finally thinking "painting as painting" (Elytis 1971: 223) in its full autonomy.

3.c. *Convergences and divergences of perspective*

Finally, it is necessary to return to the critical comparison that, in the passage cited above, Elytis institutes between Greece and the West – a comparison that constitutes the fundamental horizon against which the present inquiry has been articulated. In Elytis's construal, drawing on the categories outlined above, Greece is posited as the homeland of eikastic representation, while the West is conversely cast as the domain of phantastic, *chiaroscuro*-based, and perspectival representation.

These are, to be sure, schematic determinations, which neither aspire to exhaust the historical complexity of Greek figurative production nor that of European art, and which – as the very case of skiagraphic painting already attests – admit of zones of overlap, inversion, and reciprocal contamination. In this respect, it scarcely needs to be emphasized that Elytis's position entails an unavoidable risk of essentialization, insofar as it delib-

erately suspends the rigor and critical problematization proper to a historical-philological methodology. Yet the analysis he derives from this move is, precisely in virtue of its sweeping generality, profoundly destabilizing: it is this very generality that renders legible lines of tension and configurations of force that a more granular, case-specific, and methodologically circumspect inquiry might well fail to apprehend.

In his analysis, the moment at which the aesthetic destinies of East and West diverge most sharply is made to coincide, as we have seen, with the Renaissance – a point to which Elytis returns insistently throughout his oeuvre (e.g., Elytis 1971: 28, 72, 221; 2000: 21-2, 104; on this issue, see especially Pourgouris 2011: 97-112). Precisely the epoch that, in the historicist revaluations of Michelet and later Burckhardt, had been assigned the task of revivifying the splendor of Greek antiquity ultimately came to constitute, in Elytis's account, its most intimate betrayal. Accordingly, elsewhere in his work (see Elytis 1971: 211), Elytis remarks that it was precisely the introduction of Renaissance *maniera* by the 17th century painter Panagiotis Doxaras – who translated into Greek several of Alberti's writings as well as Leonardo's *Treatise on painting* – that opened the gates of Greece to Western incursion.

As has already been emphasized, no theoretical or practical filiation between *skiagraphia* and Renaissance perspective, or its associated chromatic procedures, is being posited here; and – once again – Panofsky was undoubtedly right to underscore the specificity and originality of perspective as a symbolic form grounded in the discovery of homogeneous space.

Yet there remains, perhaps, at least one point of convergence between Elytis and Panofsky which, beyond any historicist contingency, may be retrojected onto the very categories instituted by Plato and reactivated in Elytis's rereading: perspectival painting, even when construed in an extended sense, harbors a constitutive and disquieting ambiguity. For while, within the Western tradition, perspective provided the conditions for "subject[ing] the artistic phenomenon to stable and even mathematical exact rules" thereby enabling what Panofsky describes as "a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real" (Panofsky 1991: 67) it may with equal justification be construed as that which renders pictorial representation "contingent [...] upon the individual", binding it to the subjectivism of a "freely chosen point of view" (Panofsky 1991: 67).

For the poet of Lesbos, Greece conceived as "authentic" has consistently elected to resist this eventuality, even at the cost of relinquishing

the objectifying promises bound up with perspectival representation. This may be because – and it is here that Elytis’s position diverges most sharply from Panofsky’s – unlike the art historian, the poet never discerned in such subjectivism the affirmation of a “distance-denying human struggle for control” (Panofsky 1991: 67), but rather perceived in it, in a far more modest and entirely non-heroic sense, the outcome of a “fall” (Elytis 2011: 212): the retreat of a spiritually tired society before materiality, its dependency upon the precarious and the instantaneous (*stigmatotipo*), and, ultimately, the collapse of the artist’s creative possibilities into what he elsewhere characterizes as the “orgy” of sensible impressions.

4. A final paradox, beyond Plato: the mystery of the noontime hour

At this stage, reservations may naturally arise. On closer scrutiny, Elytis may appear little more than a twentieth-century Plato, merely transposing inherited aesthetic categories while presuming their continued universal validity. Even more puzzling, however, is a second incongruity: having construed Greece as imperishable and continuous by virtue of its aesthetic-perceptual consistency, Elytis ultimately seems, by contrast, to celebrate its art precisely insofar as it adheres to the most absolute and uncompromising idealism. To put it more sharply: if Elytis retrieves a Platonic, eikastic model of representation, how can this coexist with the idea that Greece endures as an aesthetic modality? Does his position ultimately collapse into a form of idealism, or does it instead demand a reconfiguration of the relation between the sensible and the ideal?

If Elytis is anchored exclusively to a Platonic form of idealism, we are clearly confronted with a manifest paradox. It thus becomes necessary to determine how this tension might be resolved, and to investigate whether – and in what manner – the poet moves beyond Plato. The question must thus be reopened, its terms interrogated, and its implications examined one last time.

Indeed, Elytis never addresses this problem directly. In his writings, one rather observes a certain oscillation between these two poles: the exaltation of pictorial idealism – its geometric, configurative, quasi-poietic force – on the one hand, and the valorization of materiality and sensible apprehension as capable of grasping the deepest structures of the real on the other (“To give the idea of an object does not mean to render it immaterial” [Elytis 2011: 213] – he writes).

Yet, scattered throughout his works, we encounter indications that seek to sketch a possible conciliation between these two dimensions: in *Open Papers*, for instance, he writes that what can make any human being truly Greek is the awareness that "only from Sensation does one arrive with certainty at the Idea" (Elytis 1971: 574); elsewhere, explicitly reflecting on his debt to Plato, he states that artistic practice consists in "beginning with sensation and, passing through its purification, ending again with sensation" (Elytis 2021: 84).

These reflections are brought together – almost in the form of a final testament – in *The garden of self-deceptions*, the last collection published by the poet before his death, in 1995:

Here, at this point, one can easily discern how fluid, without exception, the status of material and spiritual phenomena is. In the same way that a fragment of matter participates in something else – even in its opposite – or that a thought participates in a broader system of ideas that surrounds it, both of these mutually partake of one another. (Elytis 2011: 447)

The interpenetration, interrelation, and mutual influence between the ideal and the sensible are here decisively affirmed. These remarks, however, remain more evocative than strictly demonstrative and, in truth, rather rarefied in their theoretical articulation and artistic applicability. Are we to understand this movement as an ascent from sensation to idea, or rather as a circular process? And, more importantly, how is this process articulated in artistic practice, whether poetic or pictorial?

What I propose to do, in conclusion, is to outline an alternative solution – one that takes its point of departure precisely from Elytis's analyses of painting and seeks to probe, in concrete terms, that perceptual-expressive complex through which the specificity of the "Greek" mode of perception discussed in this contribution may be grasped.

To do so, a brief digression on one of the most recurrent themes in Elytis's work is necessary. Among the most well-known features of his poetics is what he terms a "solar metaphysics." As we shall see, reflection on light – its relation to Greece, to its art, and to its nature – likewise recurs in his writings on painting. Before turning to this aspect in more detail, however, it is worth considering the general features of this thematic line.

In an interview with Ivar Ivask in 1972, Elytis describes it in relation to both Surrealism and his Greek heritage. Here, Greece and the West re-emerge, transfigured into aesthetic categories, intervene precisely in the terms outlined above:

There is another passage in my *Open book* where I say that Europeans and Westerners always find mystery in obscurity, in the night, while we Greeks find it in light, which is for us an absolute. To illustrate this, I give three images. I tell how once, at high noon, I saw a lizard climb upon a stone (it was unafraid since I stood stock-still, ceasing even to breathe) and then, in broad daylight, commence a veritable dance, with a multitude of tiny movements, in honor of light. There and then I deeply sensed the mystery of light. At another time I experienced this mystery while at sea between the islands of Naxos and Paros. Suddenly in the distance I saw dolphins that approached and passed us, leaping above the water to the height of our deck. The final image is that of a young woman on whose naked breast a butterfly descended one day at noon while cicadas filled the air with their noise. This was for me another revelation of the mystery of light [...]. Perhaps it can be best understood here [in Greece], and poetry can reveal it to the entire world. The mystery of light. When I speak of solar metaphysics, that's exactly what I mean. (Elytis 1975: 642)

In these lines, Elytis describes the features of what appears to be a kind of epiphanic moment, rendered through sun-drenched scenes in which maximum clarity and maximum luminosity seem to coincide, paradoxically, with maximum mystery. It is within this paradox that the structure of what is commonly referred to as a "solar metaphysics" is articulated.

Setting aside the high-flown language and the quasi-mystical tone of these lines, what my analysis contends is that this intensification of light – immediately recast in metaphysical terms – ultimately discloses a specific perceptual situation in which Elytis resolves the tension between sensibility and ideality from which the present discussion originated. More significantly, I argue that this perceptual configuration is also what Elytis has in view when he situates himself within the perceptual-figurative domain that has been the focus of our analysis.

The theme of light appears particularly prominently, with almost identical references, in an essay devoted to the Greek painter Nikos Ghika. Here, Elytis advances a particularly revealing remark: in the pictorial domain, "many have grown irritated with light, claiming that it makes lines disappear, cancels colors, and destroys surfaces" (Elytis 1971: 413). An excess of light is indeed threatening to painting and risks rendering it impossible, insofar as the blinding it produces endangers the very condition of visibility. The introduction of shadow in *chiaroscuro* and perspectival rendering thus assumes, in this context, a defensive and safeguarding function: the constant danger of blinding, and the awareness of what might

aptly be termed an aesthetic insufficiency, demand the presence of shadow in the picture so that it can manifestly *appear* to the viewer through its paradoxical chiaroscuro clarity.

Yet – in Elytis’s view, as Ghika’s painting shows with particular force – Greek art appears to possess the capacity to withstand the luminous element and to govern it precisely when it approaches the threshold of blinding. Greek art, the poet observes, preserves what he calls “the mystery of the noontime hour” (Elytis 1971: 417). The vocabulary of mystery employed in the 1972 interview reappears here with striking precision. What is more, to evoke it, Elytis once again recalls the summer noon of the Greek landscape as sung in an ancient source, associating it with the heat and the song of cicadas, this time evoked through a fragment of Alcaeus: the season in which the cicada, singing, ποτ’ ἄν/φλόγιον καθέταν ἐπιπτάμενον καταυδεῖη, “laments whenever the blazing rays plunge straight down” (fr. 39 Bkg.).

Indeed, the cicadas, together with their song resonating in the blazing midsummer noon, recur in various contexts in Elytis’s poetry, either as an exaltation of the Greek landscape (see Elytis 1997: 72, 88, 126, 182, or as a figure of the poet who must abandon the meridian realm of poetry (Elytis 1997: 296). Although not mentioned by Elytis, one might add that this image also recalls the scene in the *Phaedrus* (see Plat., *Phaedr.* 258d-259a), where Socrates urges his companion to resist the song of the cicadas in the stifling heat beneath the midday sun. Here too, sensibility and ideality are poised along a fragile boundary: the song of the cicadas – prophets of the Muses – displays an emblematic ambiguity, as it is at once a source of sensual temptation, lulling one into sleep, and the spur that oversees musical activity and, through it, philosophy.

More decisively still – this is my final interpretative proposal – the cicadas, the piercing quality of their song, and the extreme heat allude to the moment when the sun, at its zenith, renders outlines fluid and – above all – abolishes shadow. Under the Greek meridian sun, neither objects nor people cast shadows. At noon, things appear not in foreshortening, but in their fullest, non-perspectival visibility. When the sun reaches its peak, objects no longer present themselves to a subject situated here and now; rather, they occupy the visual field as quasi-perceptual absolutes. Simultaneously, the subject assumes a less determinate position, casting no shadow and achieving an extraordinary continuity with things – things that appear both close and thus formable, and yet absolute, enduring, beyond the moment.

When Elytis defines Greekness as *aisthīsī* and speaks of the perceptual organs required to grasp it, he likely has this situation in mind. The Greek, unlike the European, does not fear light, not even when it becomes blinding at the zenith. In freeing himself from shadow, the Greek artist is released from the sensory conditioning tied to the positionality of his bodily subjectivity. The subject thus attains a relative emancipation from its embodied conditionings, while at the same time encountering an intensification of the sensible: things appear, finally, without foreshortening, in the least partial way possible. In this paradox, ideality and sensibility come into close proximity, approaching the point of near coincidence: the ideal is not attained by abstraction from the sensible, but manifests itself in its very absolutization and perceptual fullness.

This, I suggest, is the true *quid* of Greece as *aisthīsī*: the capacity to make the ideal converge with the most intense form of sensibility. It is this paradox that Europe has failed to resolve, entangled in the false opposition between subjectivism and realism, while Greece, in its liminal position, continues to bear witness to it.

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