



Poems to illustrate

Greece

Odysseus Elytis

Odysseus Elytis (pen name of Odysseus Alepoudellis), was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1979, "for his poetry, which, against the background of Greek tradition, depicts with sensuous strength and intellectual clear-sightedness modern man's struggle for freedom and creativeness."

Descendant of an old family of Lesbos, he was born in Heraclion on the island of Crete, on 2 November 1911. His family later moved to Athens, where the poet graduated from high school and later attended courses as at the law school at University of Athens.

Intrigued by French Surrealism, and particularly by the poet Paul Éluard, he began publishing verse in the 1930s, notably in "Nea grammata" ("New Culture"). This magazine was a prime vehicle for the "Generation of the '30s," an influential school that included George Seferis, who in 1963 became the first Greek Nobel laureate for literature.

Elytis' poetry has marked, through an active presence of over forty years, a broad spectrum. Unlike others, he did not turn back to Ancient Greece or Byzantium but devoted himself exclusively to today's Hellenism, of which he attempted – in a certain way based on psychical and sentimental aspects – to build up the mythology and the institutions. His main endeavour has been to rid his people's conscience from remorse unjustifiable, to complement natural elements through ethical powers, to achieve the highest possible transparency in expression and to finally succeed in approaching the mystery of light, "the metaphysic of the sun" – according to his own definition. A parallel way concerning technique resulted in introducing the "inner architecture", which is clearly perceptible in a great many works of his; mainly in the "Axion Esti" – "It Is Worthy." This work – thanks to its setting to music by Mikis Theodorakis – was to be widely spread among all Greeks.

Elytis' theoretical and philosophical ideas have been expressed in a series of essays under the title "(Offering) My Cards To Sight". Besides creating poetry he applied himself to translating

poetry and theatre as well as a series of collage pictures. Translations of his poetry have been published as autonomous books, in anthologies or in periodicals in eleven languages.

He died in Athens on 18 March 1996, at the age of 84.

Odysseus Elytis

Sun the first

“BURNISHED DAY,
CONCH OF THE VOICE...”

Burnished day, conch of the voice that fashioned me
Naked, to step through my perpetual Sundays
Between the shores' cries of welcome,
Let your wind, known for the first time, blow freely
Unfold a lawn of tenderness
Where the sun can roll his head
Can enflame the poppies with his kiss
Poppies nourished by men so fine
That the sole mark on their bare chests
Is the blood of defiance that annuls sorrow
And attains the remembrance of liberty.

I spoke of love, of the rose's health, of the ray
That by itself goes straight to the heart,
Of Greece that steps so surely on the sea
Greece that carries me always
Among naked snow-crowned mountains.

I give my hand to justice

Diaphanous fountain, sublimest spring,
My sky is deep and changeless
All I love is incessantly reborn
All I love is always at its beginning.

Spain

Federico Garcia Lorca (1898–1936)

Granada-born poet Federico Garcia Lorca (1898–1936) was arguably the most important Spanish writer of the 20th century. The folklore and Gypsy culture of his native Andalusia provided inspiration and subject matter, as did love, mortality, flamenco and bullfighting.

Lorca was murdered by fascist soldiers in 1936, at the beginning of Spain's Civil War, and the exact whereabouts of his final resting place is unknown, facts that have only enhanced the appeal of this deeply romantic poet.

‘The Guitar’ (from Poem of the Cante Jondo, 1921)

One of the cluster of short poems that together make up Lorca's Poem of the Cante Jondo (Poem of the Deep Song), ‘The Guitar’ is a brilliant example of how much feeling and drama the poet could pack into a few lines of verse. Lorca wrote the majority of these poems in November 1921 to prepare for a flamenco festival in Granada the following year. In this work, the sound of flamenco guitar is described as a ‘sob’ that cannot be silenced once it begins. The guitar, writes Lorca, ‘sobs for distant things’, such as the scorched landscape of Andalusia, flamenco's true home. Lorca attributes an elemental power to the guitar's music: like the wind or the snow, it is a natural force that cannot be resisted.

The guitar

The weeping of the guitar
begins.

The goblets of dawn

are smashed.

The weeping of the guitar

begins.

Useless

to silence it.

Impossible

to silence it.

It weeps monotonously

as water weeps

as the wind weeps

over snowfields.

Impossible

to silence it.

It weeps for distant

things.

Hot southern sands

yearning for white camellias.

Weeps arrow without target

evening without morning

and the first dead bird

on the branch.

Oh, guitar!

Heart mortally wounded

by five swords.

Italy

Salvatore Quasimodo

The poet offers glimpses of landscapes and memories: the soft hill of Tindari that looks over the Gulf of Patti and the Eolian Islands.

The sweet wind that sweeps across the hill of Tindari alludes to the more dramatic and erosive wind of the “pain of living”.

The nostalgic call of the native island is, therefore, also a discovery of the resemblance between the pain of the poet and that of his land. This discovery constitutes the essential condition for a new historical awareness of the South of Italy, dominated by poverty and disease.

Wind at Tindari

Tindari, I know you
mild between broad hills, overhanging the waters
of the god’s sweet islands.
Today, you confront me
and break into my heart.

I climb airy peaks, precipices,
following the wind in the pines,
and the crowd of them, lightly accompanying me,
fly off into the air,
wave of love and sound,
and you take me to you,
you from whom I wrongly drew
evil, and fear of silence, shadow,
- refuge of sweetness, once certain -

and death of spirit.

It is unknown to you, that country
where each day I go down deep
to nourish secret syllables.

A different light strips you, behind the windows
clothed in night,
and another joy than mine
lies against you.

Exile is harsh
and the search, for harmony, that ended in you
changes today
to a precocious anxiousness for death,
and every love is a shield against sadness,
a silent stair in the gloom,
where you station me
to break my bitter bread.

Return, serene Tindari,
stir me, sweet friend,
to raise myself to the sky from the rock,
so that I might shape fear, for those who do not know
what deep wind has searched me.

Romania

Lucian Blaga (1895 – 1961)

Romanian poet, playwright, journalist, philosopher, university professor and diplomat. Full member of the Romanian Academy. He was both a literature and philosophy prodigy, nominated to the Nobel Prize for Literature, which he missed winning due to Communist government protests/opposition. During the Communist regime he was prohibited from publishing. Despite these attempts to dull his work, Lucian Blaga stands out as one of the great Romanian poets of the 20th century and a prominent East European philosopher.

Risipei se dedă florarul

May Gives Itself with Sweet Abandon

We shall remember once, too late,
This simple happening, so fine,
This very bench where we are seated,
Your burning temple next to mine.

From hazel stamens, cinders fall
White as the poplars that they land on,
Beginnings want to be fecund,
May gives itself with sweet abandon.

The pollen falls on both of us,
Small mountains made of golden ashes
It forms around us, and it falls

On our shoulders and our lashes.

It falls into our mouths when speaking,
On eyes, when we are mute with wonder
And there's regret, but we don't know
Why it would tear us both asunder.

We shall remember once, too late,
This simple happening, so fine,
This very bench where we are seated
Your burning temple next to mine.

In dreams, through longings, we can see—
All latent in the dust of gold
These forests that perhaps could be—
But that will never, ever, grow.

Lithuania

Pranas Vaicaitis

1876-1901

Pranas Vaičaitis (10 February 1876 – 21 September 1901) was a Lithuanian poet. After graduation from the Marijampolė Gymnasium, he studied law at the Saint Petersburg University. Due to the violations of the Lithuanian press ban, he was imprisoned for a month in 1899 and could not find a jurist job. He worked at the library of the Russian Academy of Sciences before progressing tuberculosis forced him to return home. He died at the age of 25 and left less than a hundred original poems. His first poems were published in 1896 in Varpas though the vast majority of them were published in *Vienybė lietuvninkų*, a Lithuanian newspaper published in Plymouth, Pennsylvania. The first collection of his poems was published posthumously in 1903 in the United States. His poems are popular, particularly those about nature in Lithuania, and have been adopted to folk songs. His poetry is sensitive, intimate, without more complex metaphors or lyrical devices, and with a depth of feeling that distinguishes it from other poetry of the period.

There Is A Land Where Rivers Flow

There is a land where rivers flow
Through humming forests merrily
And babble gaily as they go
While tuneful skylarks sing in glee.
There people shed abundant sweat
In summer, working heavily,
And threadbare clothing – shred on shred –
Covers their bodies scantily.
And yet they treat with all their heart
A guest with hospitality
With food and drink all piping hot
Without undue formality.
The slender lasses of that land
Are fairer than in any song.
That land is Lithuania,
But I was there not very long...
Inviting folk to sleep, the sun
Beneath the skyline hides away;
Poor Lithuanians then sing
After the labours of the day,
And pretty girls with faces bent
Towards the rue, at evening hours
Water it, breathing in its scent,
And pluck the lily's fragile flowers.

A warm, soft evening I recall
After a torrid summer day;
With peace and calm it fills my soul,
While songs rise somewhere far away.
A distant bell sends heavy chimes,
Pure clear and loud they come to me.
I cannot sleep, although the birds
Long since sleep fast in every tree.
Like river waters flow my thoughts,
My spirit bathes in perfect bliss,
And Nature seems to say to me:
How lovely Lithuania is!
My country! What a lovely land
I left and lost so suddenly!
No words are there that could express
My anguish flowing turbidly!