

Dear colleague in scholarship, dear friend and highest representative of the Irish people, those brother Mediterraneans of the Atlantic, dear President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins,

It is for me a rare pleasure and honour to welcome a personality of your essential status here today on behalf of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and to initiate your integration as a Doctor honoris causa into our community of letters and science. I am sure that the Head of our Department of English Studies, Prof. Maria Sidiropoulou, will report to us in a few minutes the highlights of your scholarly contribution and the special traits of your intellectual persona. Thus, I feel relieved and relaxed to refer myself, in the form of an introduction to the warm climate of this afternoon, mainly to the feelings and bonds that connect Ireland and Greece.

Geography may sometimes prove highly misleading. What could be at first sight the connection between the most western European station, the guard-post of the Atlantic, and the southwestern edge of Europe, floating in the eternally problematic waters of the Mediterranean, Greece? Seemingly none. However, deeper similarities, even familiarities do exist.

First, the relationship to the sea and its possibilities of bringing remote worlds nearer by seafaring and exploring. Insularity is not loneliness, depending on the people and how they avail themselves of their opportunities. It is not accidental that James Joyce's, perhaps *the* literary Irishman's, most famous novel bears as title and leans against the figure of that Greek archetype, Odysseus-Ulysses.

Second, -but it could be placed first, of course- let me name the love of liberty and the experience of foreign rule, which looms greatly in the conscience of both nations. Ireland was not granted easily its independence and its free institutions. It had to strive for them, in a way that has been leaving bitter traces and deep wounds, even turned into scars with the passage of time.

Third, one notes the ability to express in art the feelings accompanying these historical developments. Greeks and Irish reach even an identification of passion as e.g. in theatrical works like Brendan Bean's *The Hostage*. The Greek

performance of that drama was perceived in the Greek atmosphere of the 50ties and 60ties of the 20th century as a fraternal protest against the spirit of the British Empire, from Dublin to Nicosia and beyond. The Greek songs for that epoch-making Greek performance, composed by no less a figure than Mikis Theodorakis, are still sung in Greece and bring so near each other Greek and Irish hearts. And this has certainly not been the only case of a successful reception of Irish theatre in Greece. Sean O' Casey's plays are another telling example.

A fourth point of connection concerns what one might call 'devotion to roots'. Not only are both Ireland and Greece proud of their beginnings and ancient language and culture but they also try to preserve and continue their tradition in present contexts. For tradition is no burden but a counter-weight and precious security in modern tempests. Our guest has repeatedly shown to understand it.

Let me end by a personal note. Our new Honorary Doctor of this memorable day belongs to those who have experienced not only in theory but also in practice the inequalities of society but also the assets and the mission of democracy in overcoming them. As a child rising from a poor milieu he knew and he knows well where his natural bastion is situated. We welcome therefore in his person a living piece of proof for what democracy, an old but enduring invention of this country, may mean for human societies, and how one should fight for its existence and promotion.

Dear President of Ireland, dear Michael D., as your compatriots often call you in a familiar tone, welcome at your home of ideas and ideals.-

K.B.