ONASSIS INTERNATIONAL PRIZES

Speech by
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Your Excellency Mr. President
Members of the Board of Directors of the Alexander S. Onassis Foundation

It is a great honor for me personally to receive this distinguished reward. And it is a great honor for the idryma that I proudly represent, Harvard University's Center for Hellenic Studies.

This idryma is located in Washington DC, but it now has a parartema located in Nafplion in Greece. The symbolism of this choice of space for the parartema is most significant, since Nafplion was not only the first capital of the modern Greek state but also the seaport of the Mycenaean empire in the Bronze Age. This place, then, symbolizes the continuity of Hellenic politismos, in all its beautiful variations, for almost four thousand years.

Our idryma, the Center for Hellenic Studies, is dedicated to the study of all these variations. It brings together a vast variety of research and teaching interests centering on Hellenic civilization in the widest sense of the term "Hellenic," encompassing the evolution of the Greek language and its culture as a central point of contact for all the different civilizations of the ancient Mediterranean world. A fitting metaphor for the mission of the Center is the lighthouse of Alexandria, the Pharos, as envisioned in the dream of Alexander the Great. The story of this vision, as retold in Plutarch's Life of Alexander, was meant to become a permanent "charter myth" that captured the ideal of Alexandria-in-Egypt as the ultimate Greek city and - more basically - of Hellenic Civilization as a universalized concept of humanism, transcending distinctions between Europe and non-Europe.

This humanistic vision remains the driving force of the Center for Hellenic Studies. I have dedicated my life to this vision not only in my capacity as the Director of the Center but also as the Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature at the Harvard campus in Cambridge, where I commute from Washington every week to continue my research and teaching as a professor.

Combining the roles of director and professor, I hope be more effective in maintaining the Center as a focal point for the diffusion of Hellenism as a universal model for the humanities. This humanism is at the heart of the Center's research and teaching goals. As one of the world's premier research institutes with its own specialized library and information technology, the Center for Hellenic Studies is committed to "give back," as we say in American English, all that it owes to Hellenism and to all the Hellenes of the world who represent that Hellenism.

Although philhellenes like me are not Hellenes by birth, we hope to be Hellenes in spirit, because we feel home here. Every time I come to Hellas, I experience a nostos. Or, to say it in the words of Nietzsche, "One is no longer at home anywhere, so in the end one longs to be back where one can somehow be at home because it is the only place where one would wish to be at home: and that is the world of Greece."