identity we will not survive in the Anglo American world as a dynamic and vibrant community in the twenty-first century and beyond. Greek culture and civilization are the basis of our Western and American culture. By being Western and American we are also Greek. We must strive to maintain our Greek heritage and culture as much as we can. In order to accomplish that we must develop bridges between Greece and the Greek communities in the diaspora, between the autochthones and heteroethones. We must develop within our Greek American communities (and outside) cultural and educational institutions including institutes of modern Greek studies at American universities. We must go beyond the Greek school, the annual festivals (panygyria), and the colorful parades. We must look at the substance and the Apollonian aspects of our heritage more than the Dionysian and external materialistic aspects of Greek American ethnicity . . . or, at least, maintain a balance of the two. We must stress modern Greece and modern Greek culture and avoid a sterile total subservience to the glory that was Greece. Americans know more about the classical part of our history than the Byzantine and modern components of our Greek civilization. Very few Americans know the struggles and tribulations of Greece as a new emerging nation in the middle of the nineteenth century. If we do what we must do as Greek Americans, then I am optimistic for the future of our Greek American community in the twenty-first century.

Blackened Clay Pot
by Yannis Ritsos

GEORGE PILITSIS

LIKE MANY OF RITSOS’ NARRATIVE COMPOSITIONS OF THE early period (1930-1951), the Blackened Clay Pot is a long poem of some three hundred lines written in free verse and narrated in the first person singular. The poem, as the date of the composition at the end of the poem indicates, was written in February 1949 in the Kontopouli prison camp on the island of Lemnos where Ritsos had been incarcerated along with other political prisoners. The reason for this as well as other subsequent incarcerations in various concentration camps, was the poet’s affiliation with the resistance forces of the EAM/ELAS who fought against the Germans in World War II and later in the Greek Civil War.

Like the Epitafios (1946) and Romiosini (1945-1947), the Blackened Clay Pot is one of Ritsos’ better known and well loved poems, especially after some of the verses were set to music. The popularity the poem enjoyed in Greece after its publication is also due to the poet’s ability to articulate with great compassion not only the hardship and suffering he and his fellow prisoners experienced within the prison walls, but also their heroic endurance and determination to survive the harsh conditions of the time and place. In spite of those conditions, however, the poet never allows bitterness or resignation to cloud his verses.

Although political in its dramatic context and approach, the poem should not be viewed as raw political propaganda for communism, as it has been suggested. Rather, in its quiet assertiveness, the poem is an expression of hope and belief in the indomitable nature of the human spirit, and in the human spirit’s ability to endure without surrendering to adverse and oppressive forces. Thus, the Blackened Clay Pot is not a poem of theory but a work of experience; one that not only documents conditions of a certain historical period in Greece, but one which also documents the physical abuse and mental anguish in the life of political prisoners.

There is another aspect to the poem, however, that requires a brief
comment here. It is the insight this poem offers with regard to Ritsos' view of the role of the poet and poetry, a view often expressed in many of his subsequent compositions. In this poem Ritsos alludes to his vision of his poetic mission by identifying himself with a clay pot that

"is boiling, boiling and singing
boiling on the fires of the sun and singing."

"... a wide clay pot
that has gone many times into the fire
that has cooked thousands of times for the poor
for the fieldhands, for the ferrymen,
for the workers and their embittered mothers,
for the hungry sun, for the world, — yes for the world
— a poor, soot-covered, blackened clay pot that
does its work well...

Poetry, as Ritsos has stated in a 1976 interview, fulfills the poet's profound duty and responsibility,

which is to bring together fraternally human
strengths and to organize them against tyranny,
injustice, and vileness. Such a mission always leads
the true poet. And the greatest honor for such a poet
is to carry his social responsibility on his shoulders to
the end. It is in this way that the masses find worthy spokesmen
and leaders.¹

By subordinating himself to the masses, therefore, the poet becomes
a vehicle by which the individual and ultimately the world finds its voice.
Thus, as Ritsos makes clear in "Thoughts on the Poetry of Paul Eluard"
in Studies, "The entire world begins to speak through the poet's mouth.
That is why the voice deepens, widens, and strengthens."

Throughout his long and extraordinarily productive career, and until
his death on November 11, 1990, Ritsos remained true to his conviction
and responsibility as a poet whose verses articulate the dreams and
hopes of man for brotherhood, love, freedom, and justice.

¹Yannis Ritsos, quoted by Kostas Myrsiades in Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems
THE ROAD has been long so far. Very long, my brother. The handcuffs weigh our hands down. On those evenings when the small light bulb shook its head saying “The hour has passed” we read the history of the world in the small names, in some dates scratched by fingernails into the walls of the prison in some crude sketches of men on death row—a heart, an arrow, a boat that with confidence defied time, in some verses that were left unfinished so that we might finish them in some verses that were finished so that we might not be finished. The road has been long so far—a difficult road. Now that road is yours. You hold it as you hold the hand of your friend to take his pulse on the mark left by the handcuffs. A regular pulse. A sure hand. A sure road.

THAT maimed man next to you takes off his leg before he goes to sleep and leaves it in the corner—a hollow wooden leg—you must fill it as you fill the flowerpot with soil to plant flowers as the darkness is filled with stars as poverty is filled little by little with thought and love.

We’ve made the decision that one day all mankind should have two legs a joyful bridge from eye to eye from heart to heart. And so wherever you sit.
among the sacks on the deck as you go in exile
behind the iron bars in the deportation station
close to death that doesn’t know “tomorrow”
amid thousands of crutches from bitter, crippled years,
you say “tomorrow” and sit, quiet and confident,
as a just man sits before mankind.

THOSE red spots on the wall could also be from blood
—all of the red in our days is from blood—
it could also be from the sunset that strikes the opposite wall.

At every sunset, things turn red before they vanish
and death moves closer. Beyond the prison bars,
the voices of children and the whistling of a train.

Then the cells become narrower
and you must think of light in a wheatfield
and of bread on the table of the poor
and mothers who smile in the windows
so that you might find room to stretch your legs.

At times like these you grasp the hand of your comrade,
a silence grows, filled with trees,
a cigarette, cut in half, makes its rounds from mouth to mouth
like a lantern that searches for the forest—we have found the vein
that reaches the heart of spring. We smile.

WE SMILE within. We hide that smile, now.
An illegal smile—just as the sun has become illegal,
the threat also illegal. We hide that smile
as we hide the photograph of our sweetheart in our pocket,
as we hide the idea of freedom deep in our heart.
All of us here have one sky and the same smile.
Tommorrow they might kill us. That smile and that sky
they cannot take from us.

WE KNOW that our shadow will remain on the fields
on the brick fence of the shanty house,
on the walls of the large houses that they will build tommorrow,
on the apron of the mother who cleans fresh string-beans
in the cool dooryard. We know it.
Blessed be our bitterness.
Blessed be our brotherhood.
Blessed be the world that's being born.

ONCE we were very proud, my brother,
because we were not in the least certain.
We said grand words,
we placed many golden stripes on the arm of our verse,
a tall crest swayed in the forehead of our song,
we made noise—we were afraid and so we made noise
we covered our fear with our voice.
We struck the sidewalk with the heels of our shoes
with the wide open strides as resonant
as those parades with empty cannons
that people watch from doorways and windows
and no one applauds.

THEN they made speeches from wooden platforms, from balconies,
radio at full blast rebroadcasted the speeches,
fear was hiding behind flags
the murdered dead kept vigil within the drums
no one understood what was happening
the trumpets set the rhythm for the marches
but not for the heart. We were seeking the rhythm.

The reflections from the weapons and the windowpanes gave something
to the eyes for a moment—nothing more;
later, no one remembered a word or a face or a sound.
In the evening, when the lights went out and the wind dragged the small
paper flags through the streets,
and the heavy shadow of a steamroller stayed at the door
we kept watch
we gathered the scattered din of the streets
we gathered the scattered footsteps
we found the rhythm, the heart, the banner.

SO THERE, my brother, we've learned how to converse quietly, and plainly.
Now we understand each other—nothing more is needed.
And tomorrow, I say, we'll become still more plain,
we'll find the words that weigh the same in all the hearts, in all the lips
so that we can call the spade a spade
so that the others can smile and say: "Poems like these
we're the first to know, blessed be our brotherhood.
Blessed be the world that's being born.
we can make for you at a rate of a hundred an hour.” That’s what we want, too.

Because we don’t sing to mark ourselves out from the world, my brother, we sing to bring the world together.

WELL then, I don’t have to shout for them to believe me and to say: “Whoever shouts is right.”

We are in the right and we know it and no matter how softly I speak to you, I know you’ll believe me—we are used to the hushed conversations in detention centers, at meetings, in the conspiratorial work of the Occupation we are used to the small and direct talk beyond fear and pain
day, hour, passwords in the dreadful, mutes corners of the night at time’s crossings that were lit for a moment by the searchlight of the future—hasty words, a brief summary of life, the main points only, written on a cigarette-box or on a tiny piece of paper hidden in the shoe or in the hem of our jacket, a small piece of paper like a large bridge over death.

Ah, true, they’ll say that all of those things mean nothing. But you know, my brother, how from these plain words, from these plain deeds, from these plain songs life grows in stature, the world grows, we grow.

AND DON’T say that I’ve done anything important only that I passed by and leaned against the same wall you leaned against, my comrades, only that I’ve read the names of our heroes and martyrs in the deportation stations only that I wore the same handcuffs you wore only that I suffered with you and shared the same dreams with you only that I found you and you found me, comrade.

Barba-Christos built the oven for the army. I had to stand his hands, aged, sure, plain, wise hands of a comrade—hour by hour the oven grew taller the world grew taller love grew taller and when I tasted the first slice from our warm loaf
from that taste I took within myself
something from the wise hands of the old builder
something from his peaceful smile that asks no repayment
something from the hands of all the comrades who knead
the bread of the world
that serene confidence of the man
who makes useful and necessary things.

LATER we learned much more, but if I stayed to tell you
the whole story
my song would never end
just as love never ends, or life, or the sun.

I come only to embrace you and to cry, my brother,
like the lover who returns after years to his sweetheart
and with a kiss he tells her of the years he waited
and of all the years that await them beyond the kiss.

FOR MANY hours we kept our eyes on the same sign
through many lives we sought that sign
until we entrusted our hearts and hands to it.
And that which thousands of suffering men watched
takes something from our eyes and from the meeting of our eyes
and rises, rises
like the dough in the kneading-trough, the tree in the sun,
and in our hearts.
And again, as for the other things, the very great,
the intangible and invisible,
having looked at them together for so long and loved them,
they’ve become our own, one with us, we have them beside us
like the salt-shaker, the fork, the plate
and now with the same plainness and warmth we look at a leaf or a star
the rock we sit on or the tall smokestacks of the future.

TODAY my heart bears no resemblance to a golden cloud
that glows in the sunset
or to an angel who sets the table amid the trees
of Paradise
and with his white wings shakes the crumbs of the stars
from the long beards of the ancient Saints.
Nothing like that. Now, my heart is a wide clay pot that has gone many times into the fire that has cooked thousands of times for the poor for the fieldhands, for the ferrymen, for the workers and their embittered mothers, for the hungry sun, for the world—yes, for the world—a poor, soot-covered, blackened clay pot that does its work well that boils wild dandelions and once in a while a bit of meat and my hungry brothers feed the fire from below—each of them adds his piece of wood and each awaits his portion.

They sit around together with the sheep and cattle just as all of you sit around me now they talk of the weather, of the seed-time, of the crops they talk of the rain, of the sun, of peace, of that sign that more and more eyes are watching of that star that no wind puts out and the dead gather around our table they, too, await their portion.

And this pot is boiling, boiling and singing.

THESE days the wind hunts us down barbed wire around every glance barbed wire around our hearts barbed wire around hope. Very cold this year.

Closer. Closer. The drenching miles are gathered around them.

In the pockets of their old overcoats they carry tiny fireplaces to warm the children.

They sit on the bench and give off vapors from the rain and the distance. Their breathing is the smoke of a train that travels far, very far. They are talking and then the room’s discolored door becomes like a mother who has crossed her arms and listens.

I, too, listen, and partake and increase—
I drop a word in here and there.
the flame swells, the light increases—log upon log—the walls turn red, the wind withdraws, the window-shutter creaks outside you can hear the small donkey still grazing in the grass and the dog sits quietly before the feet of the dead. All of us await the dawn.

THE WIND died down. Silence. In the corner of the room the plow sits pensively—waiting for the plowing. You can hear clearly the water boiling in the pot.

Those who wait on the wooden bench are the poor, our own, the strong, they are the fieldhands and the proletarians—each of their words is a glass of wine a slice of black bread a tree beside a rock a window open to the sunshine.

They are our Christs, our Saints.

Their heavy shoes are like coal-cars their hands are certainty itself—hands hardened from work, knotted hands with chewed-up nails, with rough hairs with a thumb as broad as the history of man, with a broad span like a bridge over the abyss.

Their fingerprints are not only in the registers of the prisons, they are kept in the archives of history their fingerprints are dense clusters of railroad tracks that cut across the future. And my heart is nothing more, comrades than a blackened clay pot that does its work well—nothing else.

WELL THEN, my children, I am thinking now like the grandfather who tells stories (don’t be angry that I call you “my children,” only in years I may be older than you, in nothing else and tomorrow you will call me “my child,” and I won’t be angry because as long as there is youth in the world I’ll be young.

κοκκινίζουν οι τούχοι, ἀποτραβεῖται ὁ ἄνεμος, τρίζει τὸ παραθυρόφυλλο ἀκούγεται ἤχο κάποιο γαϊδουράκι ποῦ βόσκει ἄκομα στὸ γρασίδι καὶ τὸ σκυλὶ κάθεται ἦσυχο μπροστά στὰ πόδια τῶν πεθαμένων. "Ὅλοι περιμένουμε νὰ ξημερώσει.

ΕΠΕΣΕ ὁ ἄνεμος. Σκυπῆ. Στὴ γυναὶ τῆς κάμαρας ἦν ἀλέτριο συλλογισμένο — περιμένει τ’ ἱργομα. Ἄκουγεται πιὸ καθαρὰ τὸ νεφό ποῦ κοχλάζει στὸ τσουκάλι Ἀρτοί ποῦ περιμένουν στὸν ἔλλινο πάγκο ἐναι οἱ φτωχοὶ, οἱ δικοὶ μας, οἱ δυνατοί ἐναι οἱ ἑξωμάχοι κ’ οἱ προλετάριοι — κάθε τους λέξη εἶναι ένα ποτήρι κρασί μιὰ γυναὶ μᾶὸ ψωμί ἐνα δήντρο πλαί στὸ βράχο ἐνα παράθυρο ἀνοίχτο στὴ λιακάδα.

Εἶναι οἱ δικοὶ μας Χριστοί, οἱ δικοὶ μας "Ἀγιοι.

Τὰ χοντρά τους παπούτσια εἶναι σὰ βαγόνα μὲ κάρβουνο τὰ χέρια τους εἶναι ή σιγουριά — ἀργαμενά χέρια, σκληρά χέρια, ροζαμενά μὲ φαρσομενά νόημα, μὲ ἁγρείς τρίχες μὲ τὸ μεγάλο δάχτυλο φαρδὲ δοσ ή ιστορία τοῦ ἀνθρώπου μὲ τὴ φαρδεὰ σπαθική σὰ χορό σιλάνου ἀπ’ τὸ γκρεμό.

Τὰ δαχτυλικὰ τους ἀποτυπώματα δὲν εἶναι μονάχα στὰ μητρώα τῶν φιλακιῶν φυλάγονται στὰ ἁρχαία τῆς ιστορίας, τὰ δαχτυλικὰ τους ἀποτυπώματα εἶναι οἱ πυκνὲς σιδηροδρομικὲς γραμμὲς που διασχίζουν τὸ μέλλον. Κ’ ή καρδιὰ μου ἡμένα τίποτα πιστέρου, συντρόφια μου, ἐνα πλίνυ μαρυσιμένο τουκάλι που κάνει καλὰ τὴ δουλειά του — τίποτ’ άλλο.

ΛΟΙΠΟΝ, παιδί μου, συλλογιέμαι τόρα σὰν τὸν παππού που λέει παραμυθία (και μὴ θυμάνετε ποῦ σὰς λέω «παιδί μου», μὸνο στὰ χρόνια μπορεί νὰ μάι πιὸ μεγάλος, σὲ τίποτ’ άλλο, κ’ αύριο τὰ μὲ πέντε ἑσές: «παιδί μου»), καὶ γὰ δὲ θὰ θυμάσαι πάτι δόσι θάνατο νιήτη μεσ στὸν κόσμο δήλως νότος, και νὰ μὲ λέστε: «παιδί μου», παιδί μου) — λοιπὸν, παιδί μου, συλλογιέμαι τόρα νὰ βρὸ μιὰ λέξη νὰ ταιριάζει στὸ μποτὶ τῆς λευτερίας
to think of a word that matches the stature of freedom
neither taller nor shorter
—the excess is false
falling short brings shame
and I don’t intend to take pride
in anything more or in anything less than man.

We’ll find our song. Things are going well. What do you say, comrade?
Good, very good.

The dandelions are cooked. Not much oil. It doesn’t matter
There is plenty of appetite and heart. It’s time.

HERE shines a brotherly light—plain are the hands and the eyes.
Here, it’s not for me to rise above you or you above me.
Here, each is meant to rise only above himself.
Here shines a brotherly light that runs like a river beside
the great wall.

We hear this river even in our dreams.
And when we’re sleeping, one of our arms, hanging outside
the covers,
bathers in this river.

Only two drops of this water are enough to sprinkle
the face of the incubus that vanishes like smoke behind the trees.
And death is nothing more than a leaf that fell
to nourish the leaf that rises.

NOW the tree looks at you straight in the eye from within its leaves
the root shows you all of its journey
and you look at the world in the face—you have
nothing to hide.

Your hands are clean, washed with the thick soap
of the sun
you leave your hands exposed on the comradely table
you entrust them in the hands of your comrades.

Their motion is plain, full of precision.
And when you lift a hair from the jacket
of your friend
it’s as though you turn a leaf from the calendar
and you hasten the rhythm of the world.

μήτε πιό ψηλή, μήτε πιό κοντή
— το περίσσοι είναι γενετικό
το λιγοστό είναι ντροπαλό,
και γιά δεν τόχο σκοπό να καμαράσω
γιά τίποτα πιστέρα, γιά τίποτα λιτότερο από άνθρωπος.
Θα βρούμε το τραγούδι μας. Καλά πάμε. Τι λές και σύ, σύντροφε;
Καλά, καλά.

Βράσανε τα ραδίκια. Λιγοστό το λάδι. Δεν πειράζει.
Περισσεύει ή δρες ή καρδιά. Είναι ίσα.

ΕΔΩ είναι ένα φος άδελφικο — άπλα τα χέρια και τα μάτια.
'Εδώ δεν είναι νάμαι εγώ πάνω από σένα ή εσύ πάνω
άπο μένα.
'Εδώ είναι νάμαι ο καθένας μας πάνω ἀπ’ τόν ξανό του.
'Εδώ είναι ένα φος άδελφικο πού τρέχει σάν ποτάμι δίπλα
στο μεγάλο τόξο.

Αυτό το ποτάμι το άκοψες δις και μέσα στόν άνω μας.
Κι’ όταν κομμόμαστε τόνα μας χέρι κρεμασμένο ἀπ’ δέος ἀπ’
την κουβέρτα
βρέχεται μέσα σ’ τούτο το ποτάμι.

Φτάνει με δύο σταγόνες μόνο από το νερό να παντίσεις
το πρόσωπο τού άλοπος, και χάνεται πίσω ἀπ’ τά δέντρα.
Κι’ ο δάνατος δεν είναι παρά ένα φύλλο που ἔπεσε γιά να θρέψει
ένα φύλλο πού άνεβαινε.

ΤΩΡΑ τό δέντρο σε κοιτάτε κατάματα μές ἀπ’ τά φύλλα του
ή ρίζα σού δείχνει όλο τό δρόμο της
ἔνας κοιτάς κατάματα τόν κόσμο — δέν έχεις τίποτα να
κρύψεις.

Τά χέρια σού είναι κακάρα, πλυμένα με το χυτό σαπούνι τού
ήλου
τά χέρια σού τ’ αφήνες στό συντροφικό τραπέζι έξοκα
τά δισταγμένα στά χέρια τόν συντρόφο σου.

’Η κίνησή τους είναι άπλη, γεμάτη άκριβεια.
Κι’ όταν άκομη βγάζες μια τρίχα ἀπ’ τό σακκάκι τού φύλου
σου
είναι αύ να βγάζεις ένα φύλλο ἀπό τό ἡμερολόγιο
ἐπιτιμώντας τό ρυθμό τού κόσμου.
Μ’ όλο πού τό έξορις πός έχεις άκομη να κλάψεις πολύ
όποιο μάθες τό κόσμο να γελάει.
A pot, then. Nothing more.
A blackened clay pot
is boiling, boiling and singing
boiling on the fires of the sun and singing.

CONTOPOULI, LEMNOS, February 1949

Y. Ritsos: Blackened Clay Pot

ΕΝΑ τσουκάλι λοιπόν. Τίποτ’ άλλο.
Πήλινο, μαυρισμένο τσουκάλι,
βράζοντας, βράζοντας και τραγουδώντας,
βράζοντας πάνω στοι ήλιου τη φωτιά και τραγουδώντας.

ΚΟΝΤΟΠΟΥΛΗ ΔΗΜΝΟΥ, Φεβρουάριος 1949