Yannis Ritsos: Poet of Romiosini

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In keeping with the spirit of Yannis Ritsos, the title of this paper has a layered meaning. The obvious meaning is that Yannis Ritsos is the poet of a composition titled “Romiosini.” But with the word “poet,” I invoke the literal meaning of the word ποιητής, “creator, maker.” For although “Romiosini” is the title of the poem, it is also a concept. I suggest that Ritsos’ poem presents a particular and, within the context of modern Greek poetry, unique construct of Romiosini. Like all Greek nouns ending in the suffix -σύν (e.g., δικαιοσύνη, καλοσύνη, σωφροσύνη), the term “Romiosini” is an abstract noun deriving from an adjective. Just as δικαιοσύνη (justice) refers to the essence of a person who is just (δικαιος), the word ρωμιοσύνη encapsulates the essence of a person who calls himself a Ρωμιός. It is noteworthy that the English translations of this poem do not translate the title: it appears only in transliteration. “Romiosini,” as a word, remains untranslatable.

With this title, Ritsos enters a polarized arena. The concept of Greekness is charged for all Greek people. It is also charged for Hellenists and Philhellenes, those scholars who devote their lives to the study and appreciation of Greek culture. The phenomenon of Hellenism swelled in nineteenth-century Europe and England, fueled to no small degree by the Greek Revolution of 1821. In the late nineteenth century Matthew Arnold defined Hellenism as follows: “to get rid of one’s ignorance, to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple
and attractive ideal which Hellenism holds out before human nature; and from the simplicity and charm of this ideal, Hellenism, and human life in the hands of Hellenism... are full of what we call sweetness and light... As the great movement of Christianity was a triumph of Hebraism and man's moral impulses, so the great movement which goes by the name of the Renaissance, was an uprising and re-instatement of man's intellectual impulses and of Hellenism.” Hellenism, in short, is the code word for the European concept of high culture and the glorification of an intellectual and artistically refined past that can be reclaimed through education. For European intellectuals, “man’s moral impulses” are attributable to Christianity, while the intellectual domain is assigned to the Hellenes. According to such a view, Hellenism is primarily a cognitive phenomenon.

Accompanying the European glorification of the Hellenic past, however, is a dismissal of a non-intellectual and morally deficient present — a dismissal especially of the modern Greeks whom European intellectuals met when they visited Hellas. Lord Byron, philhellenic supreme, was not above expressing his disdain for contemporary Greeks in the copious notes which he appended to his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage.* Even his philhellenic verses only lightly conceal a disappointment with the contemporary people. “For what is left the poet here? For Greeks, a blush — for Greece, a tear.... Must we but blush o’er days more blest? Our fathers bled.... Of the three hundred grant but three to make a new Thermopylae!” The implication is that contemporary Greece can produce barely one percent of the heroes of antiquity. Likewise, poet and journalist Rhigas Ferraios, writes: ὃς πότε παλλικάρια, θα νιώθεις στα στενά; His address to the “pallikaria” is ironic, since truly brave lads and heroes do not live like animals. “How much longer will you continue to sleep soundly in your caves?” ὃς πότε στις σπηλιές σας καμάτωσε σφαλμότα; These are shaming words, aimed to rouse the spiritually lethargic. Disillusion with the present informs the poetry of Nobel Laureate George Seferis: “Wherever I travel, Greece wounds me” (όπου καὶ να ταξιδέψω, η Ελλάδα με πληγώνει). Visual reminders of ancient glories punctuate the Greek countryside: all those statues, marble columns, museum pieces, and temple ruins “wound” the modern poet who cannot

live up to those idealized standards of human perfection. This concept of Hellenism was, of course, a “construct” which played a vital role in instilling in the oppressed Greeks an awareness of their cultural past, an awareness that had been all but obliterated under 400 years of Turkish rule. But the idealization of the ancients came at the expense of the moderns and their sense of self. In the opening sentence to his *Concise History of Greece,* Richard Clogg states, “All countries are burdened by their history, but the past weighs particularly heavily on Greece. It is still, regrettably, a commonplace to talk of ‘modern Greece’ and of ‘modern Greek’ as though ‘Greece’ and ‘Greek’ must necessarily refer to the ancient world. The burden of antiquity has been both a boon and a bane.”

Running counter to this archaising tradition is the concept of Romiosini. The adjective Romios, which originated in the 5th century C.E., describes a member of the Eastern half of the Roman Empire. The term applies to the Greeks of the Byzantine period, to those of the 400-year Tourkokratia, and to Greeks after their liberation from the Ottomans. Spanning such a long period, the term gave rise to a variety of definitions, some of which are listed in Babiniotis’ *Lexicon of the Modern Greek Language:* “historically, a citizen of the Roman Empire, especially during the Byzantine period, and a speaker of Greek; historically, an Orthodox Christian during the post-Byzantine era of the Tourkokratia; during the 19th century, a modern Greek who has preserved the Orthodox tradition of Byzantium (as distinct from an advocate of the European enlightenment); with ironic force, a type of modern Greek characterized by Greeks themselves in disparaging terms as servile towards power, lazy, conniving or gullible (as opposed to the idealized model of the Hellene of classical antiquity)” (δουλοπλήκτης προς την εξουσία, τεμπέλης, κουτοπόνης ἢ αφελής, κατ’ αντιδιαστολή προς το ιδεατό πρότυπο του Ἑλλήνα τῆς κλασικῆς αρχαίατης). At the same time, the definition of Romiosini runs, “the Greek soul, the mind-set and the ideals of Hellenism” (η Ελληνική ψυχή, το φρόνημα και τα ιδεώδη του ελληνισμού). With such a checkered semantic past, Romiosini is open to a wide range of poetic constructs which revolve around the central question, “Is the Greek soul a venerable relic or a living presence?” Who, in the end, claims ownership of “the mind-set
and the ideals of Hellenism?”

Literally, this is a burning issue for the young Ritsos. In August 1936, at the age of 27, he witnessed the burning of some 250 copies of his Epitaphios by the martial-law government of John Metaxas. The site was the Pillars of Olympian Zeus in downtown Athens, near Syntagma Square. The symbolism of the event is heavily laden with irony and contradiction: a dictator who had promised to restore “The Third Hellenic Civilization” publicly denied a citizen his freedom of speech (παρόντος) at the very foundation of a classical temple. When Ritsos turned to his poem Romiosini, some nine years later, the Nazis had just left after a five-year brutal Occupation. As soon as the foreign occupier evacuated, the Civil War erupted, as Greek turned against Greek. At issue was the question, “To whom does Greece belong?” Ritsos gives his answer in this poem. It is significant that he did not call his poem, “Hellenism” (Ελληνισμός). The title he chose is a bold invocation of the immediate reality of Greece as opposed to the idealized past that had been appropriated by the West. The reason for his choice is not far to seek: a committed Marxist and a loyal activist in the Resistance movement, Ritsos distanced himself from the conservative and capitalistic proponents of Greek identity. A poem celebrating the common people, the λαός, was only natural for a poet of the Left.11

But I propose another reason, a poetic rather than political explanation. And it is here that the poem of Romiosini merges with the construct. For, in the end, Romiosini transcends political definitions. In Ritsos’ estimation, the classical Greek past had lost its potency among the modern people. His Parentheses (1950-61) include a poem, In the Ruins of an Ancient Temple:

The museum guard was smoking in front of the sheepfold.
The sheep were grazing among the marble ruins.
Farther down the women were washing in the river....
A woman spread her washed clothing on the shrubs and the statues —
she spread her husband’s underpants on Hera’s shoulders.12

The point is not sacrilege. It is not that Ritsos devalues the past. The ancient statue of Hera has lost its sanctity in the eyes of the washing woman. The statue is no longer spiritually charged, no object of veneration. 13 To invoke a term from twentieth-century psychology, the ancient statue has lost its “numinosity.” The marble does not evoke awe. Unlike Seferis, Ritsos is not wounded by Greece. Nor are the contemporary people, as portrayed in his poems.

But this portrait of a tired past does not mean that contemporary Greece is deficient of soul. On the contrary, soul, for Ritsos, abounds, but not in marble ruins. It is to be found within the land itself: in the trees, the rocks, the sun. The terrain is harsh:

ετούτο το τοπίο είναι σκληρό σαν τη σωπή, 
σφίγγει στον χόρτο του τα πυρομένα του λιθάρια, 
σφίγγει στο φως τις ορφανές ελές του και τα γαμάτα 
του, σφίγγει τα δόντια. Δεν υπάρχει νερό. Μονάχα φως.

This terrain is as harsh as silence, clenching fiery stones to its breast, clenching its orphan olive trees and vineyards to its light, clenching its teeth. There is no water. Only light.

This is a far cry from the “sweetness and light” of Matthew Arnold. The Greece of Ritsos is no soft, nurturing mother. Rather, it is a poor and bitter mother, toughened by poverty and the loss of her children, a veritable φτωχομάκα who clenches scorching stones to her breast. This is a terrain of toughness in which stamina is required for survival. It is under these conditions that the Greeks have always lived, according to the poet:

'Όλοι διψάνε. Χρόνια τώρα. 'Όλοι μασάνε μια 
μπουκά ορφανό πάνω απ'την πύρα τους.
Τα μάτια τους είναι κόκκαλα απ'την αγρύπνια.

Everyone thirsts. For years now. Everyone chews a morsel of sky over their pain. Their eyes are red from sleeplessness.
These are not the mock-*pallikaria* of Rhigas Feraios, asleep in caves. In fact, Ritsos includes this poem in a collection titled, “Vigilance” (Ἀγρύπνησις). The continuing existence of the race is itself proof of its long-suffering resilience — its μαχαιρώματα. This itself is a form of heroism. The poet sees no need to seek inspiration in the ancients. In his *Romiosini* Ritsos establishes an equation between the survival and continued existence of the contemporary people and the heroism of the entire race. For, to be alive proves that one has not succumbed to the enemy — the ultimate enemy that is death itself:

Ἀπὸ τις τρύπες του πανωφοροῦ τους
μπαινοβγάινε θάνατος.

Death comes and goes through the holes in their overcoats.

To be a Greek, to be a “Romios,” is to perpetually and unflinchingly resist the oppressor. The tattered overcoat provides no protection. On the contrary, it allows death to come in direct contact with the body, and it is at this point of contact that the Romios, stripped of outer defenses, resists with nothing more and nothing less than his native internal resources:

Το ψωμί σώθηκε, τα βόλια σώθηκαν,
γεμίζουν τώρα τα κανόνα τους μόνο με την καρδιά τους.

They’ve run out of bread, they’ve run out of bullets, now they load their cannons only with their hearts.

These poetic expressions strike at the heart of a people who endured a decade that historians have termed “the darkest in Greece’s independent history.” In the winter of 1941-42, 300 people died per day in Athens alone. In all, over 100,000 people died of starvation, and there is hardly a Greek alive today who does not harbor poignant memories of that time, whether directly, through personal suffering, or indirectly, through accounts of family members. When Ritsos says, “For so many years everyone has hungered” (τόσο

γρόνια όλοι πεινάνε), he is describing a real experience. When he says that “their fields have been scorched by fire and their houses watered by brine” (έφαγε η κάσια τα χωράφια τους, η αρπύρα πότε και σπίτα τους) he is not engaging in hyperbole. For, when the Nazis left the island of Crete, they flew over the fertile plain of Lassithi, dropping tons of salt to burn the soil. The fact that Ritsos devotes a poem to the sufferings of the people in the aftermath of the national resistance effort amounts to a recognition and a validation of their pain and loss. In his *Tristichs*, written some 40 years later, the poet writes:

Το μαύρο, απ’ τ’ άλλο του μέρος,
όστρο είναι. Δική σου δουλεία
να το αντιπρέψεις.

Black, on its other side,
is white. It’s your task
to reverse it.

In Ritsos’ construct, *Romiosini*, the essence of “the Greek soul, the mindset and the ideals of Hellenism,” is activated not by “sweetness and light” but by suffering and endurance, by unflinching resistance to the enemy, whether that enemy is a Nazi in the twentieth century, a Turk in the post-Byzantine era, or a Persian in pre-Christian antiquity; whether that enemy is death itself. Suffering therefore serves a purpose: it becomes a source of strength. It is in suffering and resistance that today’s people unite with the heroes of the past:

Μπήκαν στα οίκηα και στη φωτιά, κουβέντιασαν
με τα λιθάρια,
κεράσαν ραδι το χάνα απο το καύδαλο του
παππούλη τους,
στ’ Αλούνα τα ίδια αντάμωσαν το Δίγενη και
στροφήκαν στο δείπνο
κόβουνας τον καμπό στα δύο έτοι που κόβανε στο
γόνατο το χριστιανό τους καβέλι.
They entered into iron and fire, they conversed with the stones, they treated death to raki from their grandfather’s skull, on the same threshing floors they met Dighenis and set their dinner slicing their pain in two the way they slice their barley loaf on the knee.

The reference is to Dighenis Akritas, the legendary Byzantine hero who fights at the border to stave off the invader. The poet knows, of course, that today’s people have no Byzantine borders to defend. With the Asia Minor Catastrophe of 1922, Greece abandoned even the dream of a restored empire, the “Great Idea” (Μεγάλη Ιδέα). But today’s unsung heroes find Dighenis on the rustic threshing floor, the border area where, in Greek folk tradition, every hero wrestles with death. As Ritsos writes in Stanza III:

Ολα τα μονοπάτια βγάζουν στα Ψηλαλώνια.
Ο αγέρας είναι αγών και πάνω.

All the footpaths lead to the Lofty Threshing Floors. The air is sharp up there.

The hero knows that he will die. Nevertheless, or rather, for this very reason, he fights. On a literal level, the air of the mountainous threshing floors is rarefied. Threshing floors are built in areas where the wind is strong enough to separate the wheat from the chaff. This literal rarefication of the air, for the poet, is a manifestation of the spiritual rarefication of the hero who will wrestle with death. Both literally and metaphysically, therefore, the footpath to the threshing floor leads upward. The hero who knowingly goes to his death is thus uplifted. On this same literal and symbolic threshing floor today’s heroes likewise encounter the classical past:

Δω πέρα η κάθε πόρτα έχει πελεκημένο ένα όνομα κάπου από τρεις χιλιάδες χρόνια.

In this place every door has the etched name of some one from 3,000 years ago. It is here that we find the Christian saints and martyrs:...
ing evoke memories of the past in order to find courage. But for Ritsos, the urge to challenge originates within the Ρωμοί themselves. This urge is an eternal and wakeful presence in the heart, rather than the mind, of the people. Heroic resistance is innate within the “laos” and has been there for “so many years.” Modern folk and idealized heroes become one, and their meeting point is not necessarily in the victory over the foe. The ancient Hellenes, in this vision, are reconstructed as also being Ρωμοί, for many an ancient hero lost a battle, such as the Byron’s 300 who fell at Thermopylae. That is why, for Ritsos, today’s people are also saints, heroes, and martyrs. He will articulate this vision a few years later in Kapnitsmeno Tsoukali (1949):

Αυτοί που περιμένουν στο ξύλινο πάγκο είναι οι
φτωχοί, οι δυσκόλες, οι δυνατοί...
Είναι οι δικοί μας Χριστοί, οι δικοί μας Άγιοι.

Those waiting on the wooden bench are the poor, our people, the strong...
They are our Christs, our Saints.

One of the most arresting aspects of Ritsos’ poetry is his insistence on engagement with the present. The present is eternally numinous. In “The Meaning of Simplicity” (Parentheses 1946-47), he writes:

I hide behind simple things, that you may find me;
if you do not find me, you will find the things,
you will touch what my hand has touched,
our hand prints will merge.
Every word is a way out
for a meeting.

Little wonder that the poetic vocabulary of Ritsos consists of basic, concrete nouns: water, light, stone. But then he juxtaposes abstract nouns. The juxtaposition of simple things with abstract words suggests an identification of the mundane with the eternal. According to this poetic vision, which resembles Plato’s concept of “participation” (μεθέξις), the world in which we physically dwell participates in a higher and intangible realm. The poem provides the meeting ground for all existence: present and past, simple and complex, lowly and exalted, finite and infinite. The poet arranges for a meeting over these things and these words:

Αυτά τα δέντρα δε βολεύονται με λιγότερο υμανό,
αυτές οι πέτρες δε βολεύονται κάτω απ’ τα ξένα βήματα,
αυτά τα πρόσωπα δε βολεύονται παρά μόνο στον ήμιο,

These trees do not acclimate to less sky,
these stones do not acclimate beneath foreign footsteps,
these faces do not acclimate except to the sun.

So far, mere description of Greek terrain. But then:

αυτές οι καιριές δε βολεύονται παρά μόνο στο δίψα.

These hearts do not acclimate except to justice.

Within 4 lines, the poet transports the reader and listener from the temporal and mundane to the internal and ethical: from rocks, trees, and sky to human hearts and justice. The connection is not logical. It is not cognitive. It is poetic.20 For Ritsos, justice is as permanent and indelible a feature of the Greek landscape as rocks and trees and sun. In this Greece, justice is concretized: it is tangible, it is palpable, it is real. And it is numinous, not because it is validated by the past but because it exists here and now.21

As “poet” and “creator” (ποιητής) of Romiosini, therefore, Ritsos stations himself at the meeting point of two worlds. He is Dighenis fighting at the border. He is Christ, who faces death to give eternal life to all mankind. In 1983, Ritsos wrote “Hallowed Be,” (Epinicians):

Αν ανεβαίνεις τα υψηλά σκαλοπάτια δεν είναι
gια περιασόμενο αέρα δεν είναι για να μείνεις
πλησίον στον υμανό το μόνο που γιορτάζεις
eίναι να γιορτάσεις μια στιγμή το στίγμα της
Anyone familiar with Ritsos’ poetry cannot fail to notice the frequent allusions to Christ, especially to Christ as a sufferer. The main church in Monemvasia, where Ritsos was born, is named “Christ in Chains” (Χριστός ο Αλαξάμενος). The host icon shows Christ wearing a crown of thorns, his hands bound and folded, his head bowed in submission. But the submission is only apparent: Christ goes to death of his own will. He submits to his suffering, and in that submission lies his victory. The Christ of the Orthodox Church, the Christ in the Byzantine tradition of Romiosini, is the only paradigm that corresponds consistently with Ritsos’ poetic message. "Black, on its other side, is white," says the poet. Such paradoxes abound in the Orthodox tradition: the Holy Friday lamentations sing of “Life in the Tomb (ἡ ζωή ἐν τόφῳ); hymns from Orthros celebrate Christ as “first born among the dead” (πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν); when the Orthodox lower the dead into the dark grave they pray that Christ give rest to them “in a place of dew, light, and refreshment” (ἐν τόπῳ χλοερῷ, ἐν τόπῳ φωτεινῷ, ἐν τόπῳ ἀνυψόμενῳ), the diametric opposite of conditions within the tomb. The humbly folded hands of Christ are the same powerful hands that lift Adam and Eve from the tombs in the icon of the Resurrection: folded hands look weak but are truly strong. Both Orthodox Christianity and the poet of Romiosini acknowledge the mortal reality of the physical world and construct thereon a new and transcendent reality. The procession is from the physical to the metaphysical: the very procession promised in the Orthodox view of the afterlife. “Black, on its other side, is white,” says the poet. “Death, on its other side, is life,” says the Byzantine Christ. This is not logic. It is paradox. It is faith. It is poetry.

Lest I give the impression that Ritsos is engaging in rhetorical exercises, I call to mind the open letter that journalist George Vlachos wrote to Adolf Hitler on March 8, 1941 in the newspaper Kathimerini. Saying “no” to Hitler’s demand to expel British troops, he writes, “But how are we to bid the dead to leave, those who fell here in our mountains ... and those who left their dying breath, struggling here and falling here and finding here their common grave? We can bid neither the living nor the dead to leave, your Eminence. We will stand by them until a glimmer of sunlight appears and the storm passes.” Black on its other side is indeed white. It is not a manipulation of words that produces the transformation. The transformation occurs within resistance itself. The poet merely chronicles what he sees: the greater reality. When asked at the concentration camp of Makronisos why he refused to sign a recantation of his beliefs, Ritsos responded, “It will be an honor for me to sacrifice my life for what I believe. It will be the best poem I have ever written.” Poem and action become one. The poem Romiosini is a verbal incarnation of the Romiosini already present.

For Ritsos, it is not the dead who rouse the lethargic living to action. Rather, the living resurrect the dead:
tance. The dead arise to assist the living. Their presence is palpable. In the Lianotragouda, the poet initially despairs over the building of a huge house by so few people:

Тο σπίτι βάλει αυτό πώς θα κπει, τις πόρτες πως θα βάλει πού ναι τα χέρια λαγοστά κα’ σκοίλρες οι πέτρες:
Σώπα τα χέρια στη δουλεία τρανένοις κα’ αναγατάινου κα’
μην ξεχνάς που ολονυχής βοηθάν κα’ οι αποθαμένοι.

How will this house get built, who will install the doors since the hands are few and the rocks unliftable?
Hush; the hands at work grow enormous and multiply and do not forget that throughout the night the dead are also helping.

In this poetic vision, the living and the dead coexist in a dynamic relationship. As long as the living despair in idleness, nothing is accomplished. But as soon as the living put their hands to work, the dead arise to assist, tolling the Resurrection.

This construct of Romiosini has significant implications. First, the poet establishes a relationship between the living and the dead that is paradoxically symbiotic. The dead remain alive in the memory of the living. The germ of this notion appears in the Epitaphios (1936), where the mourning mother cries:

Глυχε μου, εσθε δεν χάθηκες, μόνο στις φλέξες μου είσαι.
Πε μου, στις φλέξες ολουνών, είμαι βατία κα’ και ζήσε.

You have not vanished, my sweet, you are in my veins.
Enter deep into everyone’s veins, my son, and live.

This is, of course, paradox. But, in this poetic world view, life itself is paradox. The dead, invisible to the outside world, dwell within the inner world of the living. The vital presence of the dead manifests itself in the actions of the living who incarnate their memory. The poet of Romiosini thus concludes in paradox:

Τόσα χρόνια όλοι πείνανε, όλοι σκοτώνονται, και
κανένας δεν πέθανε.

For so many years all are starving, all are being killed, and no one has died.

But Romiosini does more than survive. It flourishes as it goes:

Όταν σκοτώνονται η ζωή τραβάει την ανηφόρα.

When they are killed, life advances upward.

In addition to reversing the philhellenic model, Ritsos takes it one step further. He projects the Greek spirit into the future and foresees greater glories. Just as the heroes of today validate the heroes of the past, so will the sufferings and losses of today be validated by the Ποιμήν of the future. The ultimate source of Romiosini lies in two diametrically opposed realms: in the past and in the conviction of brighter future. Indeed, in the poetry of Ritsos past and future come together in an indistinguishable manner. They merge in an eternal present that is not subject to the laws of time.

It may be the case that the tough terrain of Greece, with its stones, scarce water, relentless light, and salted fields is a terrain of physical anguish. For the poet, however, it is also a terrain of ineffable spiritual sustenance. Only through the antagonistic engagement with the present do the living activate their reserves of inner strength and resurrect all the dead who have preceded them. After today’s living are dead and gone, furthermore, they will be resurrected, in turn, by tomorrow’s heroes, and the future that awaits them both is a very different place. The poet is as certain of the future as he is of the past. Ultimately, the new world will be one in which brotherhood, not strife, reigns, one in which the harsh image of a sun-burned terrain is transformed into a lush paradise. Ritsos articulates this image in Kapnismeno Tsoukali:

Ξέροντε πως ο Ισχυρός μας θα μένει πάνω στα χωράφια
We know that our shadow will remain upon the fields, upon the brick fence around the humble house, upon the walls of the large houses that will be built tomorrow, upon the apron of the mother cleaning fresh green beans at the cool courtyard door. We know it. 
Blessed be our bitterness. 
Blessed be our brotherhood. 
Blessed be the world being born.26

Romiosini concludes with a similar, and paradoxical, promise:

Tóte. Μα πάλι αυτά τα πράγματα είναι λιγάκι σαν πολύ μακρινά. 
Είναι λιγάκι σαν πολύ κοντινά, σαν όταν πάνες στο σποτάδι ένα χέρι και λες καλλιτέρα με την πικρή καλλιγραφία του ξενιτεμένου όταν γυρνάει στο πατρικό του και δεν τον γνωρίζουν μήπω οι δικοί του, γιατί αυτός έχει γνωρίσει το θάνατο κ'έχει γνωρίσει τη ζωή πριν απ' την ζωή και πάνου από το θάνατο και τους γνωρίζει. Δεν πικραίνεται. Αύριο, λέει. 
Κ'έναι σίγουρος πως ο δρόμος ο πιο μακρινός είναι ο πιο κοντινός στην καρδιά του Θεού.

Then. But these things are bit too distant. 
They are a bit too near, as when you clasp a hand in the

dark and say good-evening
with the bitter politeness of one returning from abroad
to his ancestral home
and not even his own family recognizes him, because
he has known death
and has known the life that comes before life
and beyond death
and he recognizes them. He is not embittered. Tomor-
row, he says. And he is certain that the longest road is the
shortest route to the heart of God.

NOTES

1 An oral version of this paper was presented at the keynote speech at the one day symposium, "Yannis Ritsos: A Poet's Gaze at the New Millenium," organized by the Center for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies of Queens College, City University of New York, on April 29, 2001 at the Chian House, Astoria, New York. The program included recitations and musical performances of Romiosini and other works by Ritsos. This paper, with its focus on Romiosini, includes allusions to his other works which were included in the program (Epitaphios, Lianorragouda, Kapnistemo Tsouklai).

2 For an account of the surface-level simplicity of Ritsos' verse which conceals a deeper complexity, see Peter Bien, "Three Generations of Greek Writers: Cavafy, Kazantzakis, Ritsos" (Efstathiadis Group 1993) 97-125.


4 For an historical and anthropological study of the European origins of the concept of Hellenism, see Michael Herzfeld, Ours Once More: Folklore, Ideology, and the Making of Modern Greece (Pella, New York 1986).

5 Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy iv (1875) 136 and 143, as
cited in The Oxford English Dictionary, s.v., "Hellenism."
6 Frederick Page, ed., Byron: Poetical Works (Oxford University Press, London; third edition, corrected by John Pumf 1970) 885: "The Greeks, in particular, are a melancholy example of the near connection between moral degradation and national decay... I am sorry to say [that]... the Athenians in particular, are much altered; being far from choice either in their dialect or expressions, as the whole Attic race are barbarous to a proverb: 'Ω Αθήνα, πρότη χώρα, τι γαδάρους τρέφετε τώρα.' Byron's lengthy note also discusses the large number of contemporary Greek intellectuals who write religious tracts, dismissed by Europeans as intellectually and spiritually worthless, but cited by Byron as "proof that the spirit of inquiry is not dormant among the Greeks." Byron defends these writers by pointing out that, under the Ottomans, Greek subjects were not allowed to write about political, scientific, or philosophical matters: "What then is left him, if he has a turn for scribbling? Religion and holy biography; and it is natural enough that those who have so little in this life should look to the next." Especially interesting in Byron's apology for contemporary Greek intellectuals is his tacit agreement that Greek ecclesiastical tracts were "mostly... good for nothing." This dismissal may be attributed to the disdain which the Western Christian Church held toward Eastern Orthodoxy in general. The European dismissal of Orthodox religious writings was based not on an examination of the content of the texts but on the very fact of their Orthodox orientation. Note also that Matthew Arnold's accounts (cited above) distinguish Hellenism from Christianity.

7 Cf. Homer, Iliad 2.23-25: Dream, sent by Zeus, shames Agamemnon, guardian of the host, for sleeping soundly through the night while his men are in peril. Cf. also Matthew 26.40-41: Christ chastises Peter for his inability to stay awake for a single hour.
8 John Campbell and Philip Sherrard, Modern Greece (Prager Publishers, New York 1969) 229-30: "With the spread of education on the western European pattern in Greece, many more Greeks themselves, and particularly the cultivated Greeks, now accepted that idealized version of Greek antiquity which, as we have seen, had so captured the mind of educated Europeans in the post-Renaissance period. These factors alone are sufficient to account for the overshadowing place that the classical past began to assume in the modern Greek poetic consciousness.... The statues have taken over from the living."
10 See Roula Kaklananaki, Yannis Ritsos: His Life and Work ( imreadnikos Ritsos: Η ζωή και το έργο του) (Pataki, Athens 1999) 30-31: of the 10,000 original copies of the poem, published under the title Μονολό ("Lamentation"), only 250 remained unsold when Metaxas conducted the book-burning ceremony.
11 Within this context, it is interesting to observe the anonymous English translation, which emerged during the years of the 1967-74 Junta, by "O. Laos," Romiosini: The Story of the Greeks (Dust Books, Paradise, California 1969), with introduction by Dan Georgakas and drawings by Gary Elder.
13 See Edmund Keeley, Modern Greek Poetry: Voice and Myth (Princeton University Press 1983) 160-61: "The woman with her washing... is wonderfully casual toward the ancient gods, not to say downright sacrilegious, in hanging her husband's underpants on Hera's shoulders.... The poem seems to offer a contrary, anyway an ambivalent, implication: there may be good reason for these new primitives to submit to practical necessity when the old gods have lost their godly relevance.... Rather than simple irony, one gets the sense of territory being cleared... for new beginnings... as though preparing perhaps to start the divine cycle over again in terms of the contemporary reality they actually live."
14 Though written in 1944, Romiosini was not published for another ten years. It first appeared in print, along with the other poems of Αγκυλία, in 1954. When the poem was reissued in 1966, Mikis Theodorakis set portions of it to music, thereby exposing it to an extremely wide and popular audience. The works of Ritsos and Theodorakis were banned shortly thereafter by the regime of April 21, 1967.
15 See Clogg (above, note 9) 145.
16 Among the enemies of the Romain Greeks, in this construct, one may include those non-Romain Greeks who, in the name of a Euro-centric Hellenism imported by the West (and even imposed with military force), would appropriate land and liberty from the people. Ritsos' poem, composed in 1944, addresses not only the resistance against the Nazi Occupation but also the first year of the Civil War, in which the leftist-dominated resistance movement was routed with British aid. See Peter Bien (above, note 2) 117: "The Romoii..., despite wave after wave of invasion by foreign troops or usurpation by un-Romain Hellenes, have remained the only true proprietors of the Greek landscape — itself cel-
and they calmly accept the threat of death .... It is a quiet sort of heroism composed of acceptance and persistence rather than antagonistic combat.” It may be significant Ritosos refers to his Laconian identity in his essay, “By Way of Introduction to the Testimonia.” His Rutosos may present a particularly Lacedaemonian brand of heroic resistance, similar to that of the Spartans as portrayed by Herodotus.


20 The merging of poetic truth with the objective reality of the physical universe may be something that Ritosos will personally experience on a literal level. In exile, the poet will develop the habit of inscribing poems on rocks, matchbook covers, and scraps of paper, transforming them into poetry and “transporting” them to a higher existential realm: see Kaklamani (above, note 10) 36-46. He will also smuggle poems in bundles of laundry that he will send to his sister Nira for washing. It is interesting to observe in Tristichs 3.57, he writes: “To you I leave my clothes / my poems, my shoes. / Wear them on Sundays.” The concept of “metaphor,” which also means “transport” in Greek, is especially forceful in Ritosos’ verse.

21 On the difficulty which the Greek demotic tradition encounters in incorporating abstract nouns, see Kimon Friar, tr., Modern Greek Poetry: From Cavafis to Elytis (Simon and Schuster, New York 1973) 11: “Today such lack of abstract words in the demotic is the despair of the modern poet who may wish to express a thought of metaphysical nicety. Although Seferis with much difficulty had succeeded in translating Eliot’s The Waste Land, he found that such a lack of abstract words in the demotic made it impossible for him to translate the more metaphysical Four Quartets. And yet, today the contemporary Greek poet may mold his expression on a living language of great antiquity and borrow his vocabulary from ancient, Hellenistic, Byzantine, medieval, and modern Greek and its dialects.”


23 See Kaklamani (above, note 10) 44, quoting the poet: “Θα είναι τιμή να θυσιάσου τη ζωή μου γιατί έποτέ πιστεύα, θα είναι το καλύτερο πολίτη που έχει γράψει στη ζωή μου.”
Yannis Ritsos: A Poet of Resilience and Hope

GEORGE PILITSIS

Yannis Ritsos was one of Greece’s most distinguished and celebrated poets whose poetic genius can easily be compared to that of Cavafy, Seferis and Elytis. In Greece, and in many other European countries, Ritsos has been hailed as one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. He was the recipient of numerous national and international awards and prizes.

His reputation as “the greatest living poet of our time,” as Louis Aragon referred to him over twenty years ago, has grown immensely in the last decade. The numerous perceptive reviews and copious translations of his poetry published in various languages individually or in anthologies have contributed greatly to Ritsos’ international reputation.

In the seventy years of active life as a poet, Ritsos produced works that have never ceased to amaze and surprise his readers with the diversity of form, style, subject matter and technique that he employs in his verse. The subject matter he chose for his poems varies greatly. There are the personal poems, those that evoke the everyday life of his country, as well as those with historical and mythological references set against time and space that fuse across the centuries.

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