Yannis Ritsos: A Poet of Resilience and Hope

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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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In many of his poems, be they personal, political, or historical in context, Ritsos shows a profound concern for freedom, social justice and love for his fellow man. The individual and his struggle to maintain dignity in a world of political, social, as well as psychological turmoil and upheaval are recurring themes that the poet explores in his poetry.

The present study focuses on this latter theme, that is, on the struggle of the individual to maintain his dignity against all odds in society, and to persevere in life always hoping and believing that freedom, justice and love will prevail.

Ritsos’ poetry, from the early period of the thirties to the more mature verses of the seventies and eighties, remained intensely personal. At the same time, political events, social changes in Greece, family tragedies, intellectual stimulation and more specifically, changes in poetic orientations were realities that stimulated his poetic creativity and spirit.

Tragedy, for Ritsos, was not an abstract idea but a living reality. Very early in his life he witnessed the devastation and destruction of his family. In 1921 his older brother Dimitris died in Switzerland where he was being treated for tuberculosis. Three months later Ritsos’ mother Eleftheria died at the young age of forty-two from the same disease in the sanatorium of Portaria near the city of Volos in central Greece.

In 1926, the family tragedy took a new turn. Unable to cope with the death of his wife and son, the poet’s father Eleftherios went insane. On November 5, 1938, he died from prostate cancer. The poet’s sister Loula (Stavroura), who stood by her brother and supported him while he was pursuing his artistic career in Athens, also suffered a mental breakdown.

The poet’s own health did not fare much better. The disease that claimed his mother and brother hunted Ritsos for much of his adult life. Frequent relapses of tuberculosis forced him to live alone in an abandoned home near his birthplace in Monemvasia or to enter various sanatoria in Greece. It was during these long or brief stays in the sanatoria between 1927 and 1931 that he is said to have been indoctrinated by fellow patients with the political ideology of Marxism. His open support for such an ideology, led him to various arrests, exiles and persecutions.

For nearly thirty years, that is from 1948 to the fall of the Papadopoulos’ military dictatorship in 1976, Ritsos spent most of his time in and out of detention camps for political prisoners on the islands of Lemnos, Agios Efstratios, and in the infamous “Institution for National Reeducation” on the island of Makronisos. The feelings of isolation, neglect and abandonment that the poet experienced at this time stayed with him for many years beyond the restoration of political stability in Greece.

The humiliation, the physical and psychological tortures he endured in these places of incarceration combined with the devastating experience of poverty, disease, madness and death provided the source for themes and images in much of his poetry. Thus, in My Sister’s Song (1937), a long lyrical poem of profound emotion, the poet expresses his personal grief:

"Ό, τι αγάπησα
μου τό πτέρε ο θάνατος
κ’ ή τρέλλα.
Έμενα μόνος
κάτω Δέ τ’ έξείστα του οφανον’ μου
ν’ αρθύμω τούς θανάτους.

........................................
Δέν έχω δάκρυ πιά.
Δέν έχω δέος.
Δέν έχω τύπο’ άλλο να μου πάρουν.
Πένης, γυμνός και κακάμονος —
Ιδοὺ τα πλουτ’ μου
πού κανείς δεν μπορεῖ
να μου πάρει.
Δε θα χτυπήσω καμιά πότα.
Δε θα ψύσω παράδοχηση καμά.
Δίχος ψωμι.
Δίχος διάσκα
Δίχος χαλκά
παίρνω τόν δρόμο τής δύσης
με βήματα πλειτά και σταθερά,
γυμνός και πλήρης,
Δίχος να εγγίσω το Θεό.
Whatever I loved
death and madness
took away from me.
I’m left alone
in the ruins of my heaven
that count the dead.

I have no more tears left.
I have no fear.
I have nothing else for them
to take away from me.
Poor, naked and all alone —
that's my wealth which
no one can take away from me.
I will knock on no doors.
I will not beg.
With no bread,
no sack, no bond
I'll take the road west
with long and steady strides,
naked yes, but complete,
worthy of approaching God.

In many of his poems images of isolation, exile, despair and suffering often transcend the personal level. Through a masterful use of metaphor and irony, the poems offer universal statements about the devastating conditions people are subjected to by wars and forces beyond their control.

Reflecting on social and historical realities, many of Ritsos' poems, especially those of the late period of military dictatorship, project a world that has turned upside down. It is a world in which people exist and move about aimlessly in a state of terror where fear and death define their existence. Stripped of their dignity, robbed of their basic human rights, people have lost their drive to live or they are forced to live in strange places dispossessed of their homes, deprived of their physical and spiritual sustenance. For instance, in a poem called “Moving” from the Doorman's Booth (1971) we read:

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The nightmarish landscape Ritsos paints in a world of dislocated lives, of idleness, fear and terror often is paralleled by images of mutilation and destruction in nature such as in the poem “Decay” from The Doorman’s Booth (1971):

Deep in the inner space without any trees,
suggesting, nevertheless, the trees that have now become chairs,
stools, tables, crates. On top of the trunk
sits the silent woman, she covers her legs and looks at the caterpillar that crawls on the floor — a green, slimy caterpillar that has strayed from its path, the same caterpillar that had devoured the forest and has come now to eat the house, the picture frames on the wall and the rope hanging from the ceiling.

The Greek countryside which Ritos often celebrates in his poems has become a wasteland. The wells, springs and rivers, once a source of life, have dried up. Here too, death and sterility have taken their toll. This dreary atmosphere of destruction and void is depicted in the poem “Wells and People” also form The Doorman’s Booth (1971). Here Ritos states:

Είσαχμε τά πηγάδια μας μέσα στά σπίτια μας.
Πίνανε τό νερό τής βροχής, λουπάδιζαν,
κριάγαμε μιά τάξη και μιά πάστρα. Μιά νύχτα
κάποιος σημάδισε, δέθαισε μέσα στά πηγάδι
τήν κούπα με τό φαρμάκι. Οί άλλοι κάναν
πώς κοιμόταν Βασίλ. Μετά, ένας ένας
σημάδισαν με τήν σειρά τους, δέθαισαν
τήν κούπα τους με τό φαρμάκι. Σέν ζημέρωσα
καινένας δέν έπνευνε νερό. "Ωςπού, τέλος,
βούλιεζε ή σκάλα μέσα στά πηγάδι. Οί ένοικοι
άνεβαν στήν στέγη, ανοίχαν τό στάμα
διάλευτος έσκε πάνω φως διάκρεις μήν πέσει
με τσαγόνα βροχής." Ο πλανόδιος φωτογράφος
πέρασε κάτω στό δρόμο. Δέν τους είδε. Κοιτούσε τά
πένθιμα αγχητήρια κολλήματα στούς στόλους
και τά μεγάλες πόρτες τόν κλειστόν μαγαζίαν.

We had our wells in our houses.
We drank rain water, we bathed in it,
we kept everything clean and in order.
One night someone got up and emptied his cup of poison
into the well. The others pretended they were asleep.
Later, the rest of them got up one by one,
and emptied out their cup of poison. In the morning

no one would drink the water. Until, finally,
the stairs sank into the well. The tenants
climbed up on the roof, opened their mouths
and stood there motionless for hours
in hopes that a drop of rain might fall.

In spite of such a realistic depiction of destruction in man and nature, however, the poet does not allow despair to take complete control. For “In poetry,” Ritos declares, “there is no room for despair.” In many of his poems, emblems of hope for a better world that is certain to arrive often, like shooting stars, illumine the dark sky of oppression. Thus if there are poems where the destruction of life and nature is lamented, there are also others that suggest a possible change in the course that history has taken. In these latter poems nature is presented as a force that, in spite of numerous setbacks, continues its progress and process of regeneration. Thus in Romiosini (1945-1947) we read:

Κ’ ή πέτρα άφαντος καθήσαν κάτω απ’ τίς ήλιες
τό ύπομνήματος άντικυρ στή θάλασσα
στάθηκε θα γένει άξονας στό καθί
μεθαύμα θ’ άξονωσάμεθα μας καί τό πεζούλι
τής Άγα-Σωτήρας
άντικυρ αμφ’ έρχετες στό σπίτι έκατ’ τού
ξηκονιμήθηκαν
κ’ ένα μυστικά μας τής ροδών θα σκάσει πρώτο γέλα
τού μαρούν στόν κόμο τής λυτικόρας.
Κ’ ήστερα πιά θα κάτασμε στή πέτρα να διαβάσουμε όλη
tήν καινότα τους
ότι διαβάζουμε πρώτη φορά τήν ίστορια τού κόσμου.

And the rock where they sat under the olive trees
in the afternoon, facing the sea,
will turn into quicklime in the kiln tomorrow,
the day after tomorrow we’ll whitewash our houses
and the doorstep of St. Savior and
the day after that we’ll sow the seed where they slept
and a pomegranate bud will burst open like a baby’s
first laughter at the breast of sunshine.
And later still we'll sit on the rock and read their hearts
as if reading the history of the world for the first time.

This is also the meaning the poem "Message" from Parentheses
(1950-1961) conveys. It is a message of hope and resurrection. In
its optimistic outlook, the poem suggests that the world of lethargic
inertia in which the individual has been placed by outside forces
or by forces beyond his control is only a temporary condition. By
regaining a sense of communication with his natural environment,
Ritsos suggests, the individual will not fail to perceive that nature
continues its process of rebirth. He will also notice that the
plumber's hammer "strikes among small red sparks" and that:

Any day now
summer will be here. And the chickens have already
began to lay
some strong blue eggs next to the wine barrel and
the plough.

What is meant here is that even in the most gloomy and seeming-
ly sterile environment people will eventually find the strength
to look for and welcome a resurrection. They realize that the dark
cloud of oppression will soon pass, and that the sun of justice once
again will claim its proper place from which to reign and shine. In
the following lines from Romiosini (1945-1947), for example,
Ritsos states:

"Οταν σφίγγουν το χέρι, ο όμοιος είναι βέβαιος
για τόν κόσμο
όταν χαμογελάνε, ένα μικρό χελοδόντων φεύγει μέσα απ' τ' άνοιχτη
άγορα γένια τους
όταν κοιμούνται, δύο ολάθρες πέφτουν απ' τις άδειες
tοπείς τους
όταν σκοτώνονται, ή ζωή τραβάει τήν ανηφόρα με σημαίες
cαι με ταμπούρα.

When they tighten their grip, the sun becomes certain
for the world
when they smile, a small swallow flies out of

their wild beards
when they sleep, twelve stars fall out of their empty
pockets,
when they are killed, life marches on uphill with
unfurled flags at the beat of the drums.

In communicating this message of hope, the poems further im-
ply that one should not focus on his misdirected actions that seem
to contradict nature or on his futile attempts to find a place in a
distorted environment. Moreover, people must not concentrate on
their inability to act or on their obsession with things that are not
fulfilled, but on their ability to see these conditions as temporary
obstacles that will soon be removed. Therefore, a person needs to
waste no energy in trying to understand and cope in a world of evil
and destruction, but to muster the strength of his spirit and prepare
himself for the inevitable change that life and history have stored
for him. In other words, he must take courage and realize that:

There, where the wolf had lain
a pit remained, strewn with warm wolf-hair.
Now a lamb could lie down there.

This hope for restoration in a country that had witnessed the de-
struction of nature and its inhabitants is suggested in poems like "Our
Land" from The Wall in the Mirror (1967-1971). Here people haunted
by death, terrorized by undefined forces, walk in the streets of their
city or through the countryside that has been subjected to violent
destruction. In spite of all this, however, the poem does not refrain
from offering a glimmer of hope for restoration and rejuvenation, as
the reference to Easter and the Resurrection Service suggests:

Πῶς ἔχετε καὶ μ' ἔνα πέτρινο χέρι συγκρίσατε
τό σπίτι μος και τήν ξωή μας. Πάνω στ' ἀνώνυμα
είναι ἡ κατανά, χρόνο τό χρόνο, ἀπ' τά κεφά
τού Πάσχας —
μικρόι μικροί, μάταιοι σταυροί που χάραξαν
οι πεθαμένοι
γιμνίζοντας ἀπ' τήν Άνθοστασι. Πολύ ἀγαπέται αὕτως
ὁ τόπος
με ὑπομονή καὶ περηφάνια....

How did we manage to set our house and life in order with hands made of stone? On the lintels over the door, soot from Easter candles has gathered year after year — tiny black crosses that the dead have traced on their way home from the Resurrection Service.

This land is much loved, with patience and dignity....

This and many other similar poems imply that, as in the past, people again will find the strength to restore life and traditions of their homeland to their original vitality. The Greek spirit of Romiosini, as the poet declares in one of his Eighteen Short Songs of the Bitter Motherland (1968-1970), or Δισκογλωττία Διανομόμοια τῆς Πιστολής Πατρίδας, does not need lamentations. Even in the most difficult times, and when it appears that it’s about to yield to oppression that has placed “a leather strap around its neck, a knife close to the bone,” it finds the strength anew.

Τῆς Ρωμιοσύνης μὴ τὴν κλαῖς, — ἐκεῖ πού πάει νὰ σκύψει μὲ τὸν αυτοκαλό στὸ κόκκινο, μὲ τὸ λουρί στὸ οξέακο.

Νά τη, πετέται υποξαφρής καὶ ἀντιμενική καὶ θεμελέτη καὶ καμάκωνε τὸ θερίκο μὲ τὸ χαμάκα τοῦ Ἑλλου.

Don’t weep for Romiosini — when on the verge of yielding, a leather strap around its neck, a knife close to the bone,

There, it leaps up and starts all over again, it grows in vigor, flares up and spears the savage beast, with the harpoon of the sun.

In many of his poems Ritsos does not always present specific reasons or explanations for the individual’s disinclination to move or act in a world of desolation, oppression and emptiness. Explanations, he says, “tend to confuse things more.... poetry, naked and arrogant is nothing more than the wonderful accomplishment of the inexplicable,” Hints (1970-1971). Through ambiguity in the complex simplicity of his poems, Ritsos communicates the incommunicable complexity of the simplest objects or conditions that often transcend time and space. In this sense the poems and the message they contain acquire a temporal meaning without ever losing their immediacy or relevancy. In poems like these Ritsos speaks not only for the Greeks who had experienced the horrors of wars and the harsh years of the Papadopoulos dictatorship, but for all those who have lived in isolation or through physical or spiritual abuse and who may still be struggling to overcome all forms of oppression and to maintain their dignity without ever losing hope for a better future. Thus in one of his poems from Διανομόμοια or Eighteen Short Songs of Bitter Motherland (1968-1970) Ritsos declares:

Μικρός λαός καὶ πολεμικὰ δίχως σπαθιά καὶ βόλια γά δίου του κόσμου το ψωμί, το φῶς καὶ το τραγούδι.

(The Greeks,) a handful of people, keep fighting on with no swords or bullets for all the people of the world, for their bread, their song, their light.

The harsh years of incarceration Ritsos spent in various concentration camps, the suffering he and his fellow inmates endured there, had a profound influence on the poet’s subsequent life and creativity. This experience provided him with a deep sense of respect for human dignity and spiritual endurance with an appreciation and love for life. He strongly believed that the existence of humankind will continue despite every adversity that has to be endured. “If Ritsos was in pursuit of a better world,” says Peter Green, “it was always in the end, by means of a total devotion to poetry.” In other words, a total devotion to the art of communication. Thus, in the poem Blackened Clay Pot (1949) he declares “we don’t sing to mark ourselves out from the world, my brother, we sing to bring the world together.”
The poet’s belief in the power of communication through poetry is also expressed in “Pledge” a poem from Railing (1968) which Ritsos wrote while under house arrest on the island of Samos. He writes:

...Πιστεύω στην ποίηση, στόν έρωτα, στόν θάνατο, γι’ αυτό άκριβώς πιστεύω στην άθανασία. Πόρως ἔνα στήχο, γράφω τόν κόσμον ὑπάρχων ὑπάρχει ὁ κόσμος.

...I believe in poetry, in love, in death, that’s precisely why I believe in immortality.

I write a verse,

I write the world; I exist; the world exists.

A message of hope and resurrection and the poet’s vision of a better future for humankind and its environment is suggested also in The Annihilation of Melos (1969). Here the women who, once they thought they were dead or asleep for many years in a hostile environment of sterility and inertia, suddenly realize that despite their advanced age their barren wombs were carrying the seed of life.

...ἐκ, γναστρομοινές πάλε στά βδομίντα μας, στά γεόντα μας, να γεννήσουμε πάλε πολλά παιδία, χίλια παιδία, νησιωτόπουλα, να γεννήσουμε πάλε τή Μήλο ροδομαγούλη.

...eh, pregnant again in our seventies, in our eighties, to give birth again to many children, a thousand children, island boys and girls, to give birth again to rosy-cheeked Melos.

The same voice of hope for justice is heard in yet another poem, the ever popular Epitafios (1936). Here the tragic death of a young worker in a tobacco factory forms the specific background. In a larger perspective, however, the poem provides a mirror in which the struggle of ordinary people for justice, their resilience to survive the harsh conditions of times can easily be discerned. “Though equating the tragedy with Christ’s crucifixion,” says Peter Bien, “the poem moves at the end from crucifixion to resurrection, thus enclosing sorrow in the sweetness of the poet’s abiding hope that justice may be overcome.” Thus in her lament for her son’s death, the mother’s concluding remarks of hope in a future in which all people shall be united in love suggests the poet’s hope for the recovery of justice, and I quote:

Γλυκέ μου, ἐσδι σε ἁθηνης, μέσα στις φλέβες μου έλυσε. Πέ μου, στις φλέβες δισουνίου, ἐμπα βαθια και χεισε.

Δές, πλάγ μας περιονδο πολλοι καθώλασατο, — ὁλοι στηρικ και δυνατοι και σάν θ’ ἐδένα ωρατοι.

Ἀνάμεοκα τοις, γούκα μου, θωρο σε ἀναστημένο, — τό θωρι σου στο θωρι τους μυροσαγαριμένου. 

Κι άκολουθας και σύ νεκρός, ξα ο κόμπος του λυγμού μας δένεται κόμπος του σκοινιού γα τό λαμή τού ὅχρο χαμ.

Κι ἐντις τ’ άφτωσα στήθεα μου να γιέρνι, δές, βαδιζο και πίσω από τα δάκρυα μου τόν ἡλιο ὀντικρύζω.

My sweet boy, you have not vanished. Your blood still runs in my veins.

Enter deep into everybody’s veins, my son, and live again.

Look! Crowds of people are passing us by, men on horseback, all erect, strong and handsome, just like you.

You’ve been resurrected, my son, I see you among them,
your looks printed on theirs a thousand times over.

And you, a corpse now, follow along too, and the lump in your throat as we sob, ties itself into a knot in the rope for your enemy’s neck.

And instead of beating by innocent breast, look, I’m marching along and through my tears I behold the sun.

Antithetical forces, Ritsos believed, may be necessary in life. Opposition must be endured in order for the positive creativity of the human spirit to triumph and to receive its proper appreciation. Ritsos believes that even the darkest and gloomiest aspects of life are necessary for the ultimate appreciation of freedom and the triumph of justice and love. If there was anything for which he was grateful to his tormentors, the poet confesses, it was their injustice. It was in their lack of humanity that the poet found a stimulus to descend to the depths of his consciousness in search of meaning for his existence and the existence of the world:

...I also have enemies for whom I feel gratitude. It was because of them, and on account of their injustice, on account of their tortures that I was able to descend to the depths of my consciousness. [there] I searched not only the depth of my existence, but also the existence of the world.

This positive attitude towards life provided Ritsos with the strength to resist without bitterness or complaint, and to endure every adversity that came his way. Thus, in The March of the Ocean (1939-1940), a long poem steeped in pure lyricism, the poet expresses his heroic affirmation and justification of life when he states:

Ποῦ πήγαν ὅλοι καὶ μ’ ἄφησαν ἔδω
νά κοιτάξω τις ἄνεις πάλαις μου,
νά συντροφεσθώ τῇ σωπῇ καὶ τῇ βροχῇ;

...