

Yannis Ritsos: Poet of *Romiosini*¹

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In keeping with the spirit of Yannis Ritsos, the title of this paper has a layered meaning.² 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 -σύνη (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 (δίκαιος), 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.³ "*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 1821.⁴ 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."⁵ 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, philhellene supreme, was not above expressing his disdain for contemporary Greeks in the copious notes which he appended to his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.⁶ 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: ὥς πότε. παλλικάρια, θα ζούμε 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?" ὥς πότε στις σπηλιές σας κοιμάστε σφαλιστά; These are shaming words, aimed to rouse the spiritually lethargic.⁷ Disillusion with the present informs the poetry of Nobel Laureate George Seferis: "Wherever I travel, Greece wounds me" (όπου και 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.⁸ 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."⁹

Running counter to this archaizing 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 Babinotis' *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)" (δουλοπρεπής προς την εξουσία, τεμπέλης, κουτοπόνηρος ή αφελής, κατ'αντιδιαστολή προς το ιδεατό πρότυπο του Έλληνα της κλασικής αρχαιότητας). 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 ιδανικά 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.¹⁰ 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 (παρρησία) 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 σιωπή,
σφίγγει στον κόρφο του τα πυρωμένα του λιθάρια,
σφίγγει στο φως τις ορφανές ελιές του και τ'αμπέλια
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 φτωχομάνα 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
μπουκιά ουρανό πάνου απ'την πίκρα τους.
Τα μάτια τους είναι κόκκινα 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 Ferraios, asleep in caves. In fact, Ritsos includes this poem in a collection titled, "Vigilance" (Αγρύπνια).¹⁴ The continuing existence of the race is itself proof of its long-suffering resilience — its μακροθυμία. 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:

Από τις τρύπες του πανωφοριού τους
μπαινοβγαίνει ο 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 κανόνια 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."¹⁵ 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" (τόσα

χρόνια 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 κάψα τα χωράφια τους, η αρμύρα πότισε τα σπίτια 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,
άσπρο είναι. Δική σου δουλειά
να το αντιστρέψεις.

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.¹⁶ Suffering therefore serves a purpose: it becomes a source of strength.¹⁷

It is in suffering and resistance that today's people unite with the heroes of the past:

Μπήκαν στα σίδερα και στη φωτιά, κουβέντιασαν
με τα λιθάρια,
κεράσανε ρακί το θάνατο στο καύκαλο του
παππουλή τους,
στ'Αλώνια τα ίδια αντάμωσαν το Διγενή και
στρώθηκαν στο δείπνο
κόβοντας τον καημό στα δυο έτσι που κόβανε στο
γόνατο το κριθαρένιο τους καρβέλι.

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:

Όλα τα μονοπάτια βγάζουνε στα Ψηλαλώνια.
Ο αγέρας είναι απύς κει πάνου.

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 rarefaction of the air, for the poet, is a manifestation of the spiritual rarefaction 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.¹⁸
It is here that we find the Christian saints and martyrs:

κάθε λιθάρι έχει ζωγραφισμένον έναν άγιο μ' άγρια
μάτια και μαλλιά σκοινένια...
και τα παιδιά έχουν πέντε-έξι σταυρουλάκια πίκρα
πάνου στην καρδιά τους.

Every stone bears the portrait of a saint with wild eyes
and ropy hair ...
And the children bear five or six little crosses of pain
over their heart.

It is here that we encounter the ultimate archetype of suffering:

Ναι, αλήθεια, ο Ελκόμενος έχει δυο χέρια τόσο
λυπημένα μέσα στη θηλειά τους
όμως το φρύδι του σαλεύει σαν το βράχο που όλο
πάει να ξεκολλήσει πάνου απ'το πικρό του μάτι.
Από βαθιά ανεβαίνει αυτό το κύμα που δεν ξέρει
παρακάλια
από ψηλά κυλάει αυτός ο αγέρας με ρετσίνι φλέβα
και πλεμόνι αλισφακιά.

Yes, truly, Christ in Chains has two hands so sorrowful
in their bonds
yet his eyebrow flickers like a rock that ever strives to
break free over his bitter eye.
From the depths surges that wave that knows not how to beg
from above cascades that wind with vein of resin and
lung of sage-brush.

This construct of *Romiosini* does indeed include the ancient past. It views that past, however, not in terms of superhuman legends, but in terms of the sufferings of all ancestors — ancient, Byzantine, and contemporary — who died to preserve and enrich the land called Greece. The poet sees himself, as most Greeks today, in an on-going relationship with the dead, not only the dead who died during his lifetime but also those whom he never personally knew.¹⁹ He sees present and past interacting in a dynamic that reverses the philhellenic model. In the European paradigm, the liv-

ing evoke memories of the past in order to find courage. But for Ritsos, the urge to challenge originates within the Πωμιοί 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 Πωμιοί, 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 *Kapnismeno Tsoukali* (1949):

Αυτοί που περιμένουνε στο ξύλινο πάγκο είναι οι
φτωχοί, οι δικοί μας, 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" (μέθεξις), 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 ουρανό,
αυτές οι πέτρες δε βολεύονται κάτω απ'τα ξένα βήματα,
αυτά τα πρόσωπα δε βολεύονται παρά μόνο στον ήλιο,

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 καρδιές δε βολεύονται παρά μόνο στο δίκιο.

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
για περισσότερο αέρα δεν είναι για να μείνεις
πλησιέστερα στον ουρανό το μόνο που γυρεύεις
είναι ν'αγγίξεις μια στιγμή το στίγμα της

διασταύρωσης του πάνω και του κάτω
εκεί που ενώνεται η φωνή του δυνατού πουλιού με
τη φωνή της φώκιας.

If you ascend the steep staircase it is not
for more air it is not to get
closer to the sky the only thing you seek
is to touch one moment the intersection point of up and down
the spot where the voice of the mighty bird unites with
the voice of the seal.

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 Ελκόμενος). 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.²² 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.²³ "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 (ή ζωή εν τάφω); 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" (εν τόπω χλοερῶ, εν τόπω φωτεινῶ, εν τόπω ἀναψύξεως), 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."²⁴ Poem and action become one. The poem *Romiosini* is a verbal incarnation of the *Romiosini* already present.²⁵

For Ritsos, it is not the dead who rouse the lethargic living to action. Rather, the living resurrect the dead:

Κάτου απ'το χώμα, μες στα σταυρωμένα χέρια τους
κρατάνε της καμπάνας το σκοινί — περμένουνε
την ώρα, δεν κοιμούνται,
περμένουν να σημάνουν την ανάσταση. Τούτο το
χώμα είναι δικό τους και δικό μας — δε μπορεί
κανείς να μας το πάρει...
Σώπα! Όπου νάναι, θα σημάνουν οι καμπάνες.

Beneath the earth, in their folded hands
they clutch the bell rope — they await the hour, they are
not asleep,
they await to toll the resurrection. This earth
belongs to them and to us — no one can take it from us....
Hush! At any moment the bells will ring.

The Resurrection, for the poet, occurs with every gesture of resis-

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:

Το σπίτι βάλει αυτό πώς θα κτιστεί, τις πόρτες ποιος θα
βάλει που 'ναι τα χέρια λιγοστά κι' ασήκωτες οι πέτρες;
Σώπα· τα χέρια στη δουλειά τρανεύουν
κι' αυγαταίνουν και
μην ξεχνάς που ολονυχτίς βοηθάν
κι' 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:

Γλυκέ μου, εσύ δεν χάθηκες, μέσα στις φλέβες μου είσαι.
Πε μου, στις φλέβες ολουνών, έμπα βαθιά 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 πεινάνε, όλοι σκοτώνονται, και
κανένas 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 'Ρωμιοί' 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-scorched terrain is transformed into a lush paradise. Ritsos articulates this image in *Kapnismeno Tsoukali*:

Ξέρουμε πως ο ίσκιος μας θα μένει πάνου στα χωράφια

πάνου στην πλίθινη μάντρα του φτωχόσπιτου
 πάνου στους τοίχους των μεγάλων σπιτιών που θα
 χτίζονται αύριο
 πάνου στην ποδιά της μητέρας που καθαρίζει
 φρέσκα φασολάκια
 στη δροσερή αυλόπορτα. Το ξέρουμε.
 Ευλογημένη ας είναι η πίκρα μας.
 Ευλογημένη η αδελφοσύνη μας.
 Ευλογημένος ο κόσμος που γεννιέται.

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:

Τότε. Μα πάλι αυτά τα πράγματα είναι λιγάκι σαν
 πολύ μακρινά.
 Είναι λιγάκι σαν πολύ κοντινά, σαν όταν πιάνεις
 στο σκοτάδι ένα χέρι και λες καλησπέρα
 με την πικρή καλογνωμιά του ξενιτεμένου όταν
 γυρνάει στο πατρικό του
 και δεν τον γνωρίζουνε μήτε 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'είναι 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. Tomorrow, he says. And he is certain that the longest road is
 the shortest road to the heart of God.

NOTES

¹ An oral version of this paper was presented as the keynote speech at the one day symposium, "Yannis Ritsos: A Poet's Gaze at the New Millennium," 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*, *Lianotragouda*, *Kapnismeno Tsoukali*).

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.

³ For English translations of the poem anthologized with other translated works of Ritsos, see Kimon Friar, tr., in Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades, eds., *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems, 1938-1988* (BOA Editions, Ltd., Brockport, New York 1989) 9-23; Philip Pastras and George Pilitsis, trs., *The Charioteer: An Annual Review of Modern Greek Culture* 29-30 (1987-88) 74-87; Eleftherios K. Parianos, tr., in Alan Bold, ed., *The Penguin Book of Socialist Verse* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England 1970) 312-329; Dan Georgakas and Heleni Paidoussi, trs., *Romiosini and Other Poems* (Quixote Press, Madison, Wisconsin 1969; bilingual edition); N. C. Germanakos, "Romiosini," *Chelsea* 30-31 (June 1972) 64-79.

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 Pump 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: ὦ Ἀθήνα, πρώτη χώρα, τί γαϊδάρους τρέφεις 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* (Praeger 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."

⁹ Richard Clogg, *A Concise History of Greece* (Cambridge University Press 1992) 1. Clogg's position on the issue of "Greekness" is suggested by the fact that he does not title his book, which begins with the Ottoman period, "A Concise History of Modern Greece." For a related discussion of

the evocation of ancient myth as a reflection of contemporary spiritual malaise, see Peter Bien, "Myth in Modern Greek Letters, with Special Attention to Yannis Ritsos' *Philoctetes*," *Books Abroad* 48.1 (1974) 15-19.

¹⁰ See Roula Kaklamanaki, *Yannis Ritsos: His Life and Work* (Πιάνης Πίτσος: Η ζωή και το Έργο του) (Pataki, Athens 1999) 30-31: of the 10,000 original copies of the poem, published under the title Μοιρολόι ("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.

¹² Edmund Keeley, *Ritsos in Parentheses* (Princeton University Press 1979) 83.

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 Αγγύπνια, 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 Romaic Greeks, in this construct, one may include those non-Romaic 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 Romioi ..., despite wave after wave of invasion by foreign troops or usurpation by un-Romaic Hellenes, have remained the only true proprietors of the Greek landscape — itself cel-

ebredated as the prime resister — and whose ever-renewed energy is the strongest bridge to an improved future.” Read from a political perspective, *Romiosini* evokes the spirit of resistance that united the people under the Occupation and employs that spirit in the cause of national unity during the outbreak of the Civil War. It may be argued, therefore, that the poem has a leftist orientation which has the potential to further divide the country. The careful reader of the poem will reply, however, that the final word of *Romiosini* is “brothers,” an especially powerful and reconciling term in an era of civil strife. The poet will become more outspoken in his mission to employ poetry to effect political unity, rather than divisiveness, in his *Kapnismeno Tsoukali* (1949): “We sing not to distinguish ourselves from the world, my brother. We sing in order to unite the world.”

¹⁷ Herein perhaps lies Ritsos’ most acute departure from the European model: just as he does not see the people degenerating under the Nazi Occupation, so too he does not see them as degenerating or “falling asleep” under Ottoman rule. In the final analysis, the myth of a freedom-loving but dormant Hellenism promotes the myth of a culturally-superior Europe which “roused” the ancients back to life: ancient Greece takes credit as the founder of democracy and personal liberty even as modern Europe takes credit for the validation, as well as the restoration, of these ideals. For the poet, the European concept of Hellenism amounts to an appropriation. Ritsos therefore replaces the Western-oriented myth with a new vision that presents the Greek race as one that has forever kept its “vigil” (αγρούπνια) over personal freedom. His poem speaks not to academics but to the people who have been engaged in the same struggle for generations.

¹⁸ Twice in the poem Ritsos refers to the heroes as elegant and casual “diners” before they enter the wrestling bout which they are certain to lose. In Stanza II the men set out their dinner and recline to dine (στρώθηκαν στο δείπνο), and in Stanza VI the heroes dine by night on the very spot where the contest will take place (μέσα στ’αλώνι όπου δειπνήσαν μια νυχτιά τα παλλικάρια). This relaxed image of the heroes facing death recalls Herodotus’ accounts of the relaxed and leisurely activities of the Spartans as they prepare for battle. See Stewart Flory, “Arion’s Leap: Brave Gestures in Herodotus,” *American Journal of Philology* 99 (1978) 411-421: Herodotus’ heroes who face certain death, Flory maintains (pp. 416-418), “keep to their normal habits despite danger. Arion, a singer, sings. Prexaspes, a councilor, makes a speech. The Spartans comb their hair Herodotus shows how Arion and the others, by proceeding calmly and in good spirits, almost as if nothing were wrong, make death seem a natural extension of their lives. They seize the initiative from the hostile forces which surround them ..., they adhere to an ingrained habit,

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 Ritsos refers to his Laconian identity in his essay, “By Way of Introduction to the *Testimonies*.” His *Romiosini* may present a particularly Lacedaemonian brand of heroic resistance, similar to that of the Spartans as portrayed by Herodotus.

¹⁹ Anna Caraveli-Chaves, “Bridge Between Worlds: The Greek Women’s Lament as Communicative Event,” *Journal of American Folklore* 93 (1980) 129-157.

²⁰ The merging of poetic truth with the objective reality of the physical universe may be something that Ritsos 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 Kaklamanaki (above, note 10) 36-46. He will also smuggle poems in bundles of laundry that he will send to his sister Nina 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 Ritsos’ 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.”

²² According to the Sunday Orthros *kathisma* of the first tone, “Of your own volition, O Savior, you endured the cross” (Ἐκουσίᾳ Σου βουλῇ, σταυρὸν ὑπέμεινας, Σωτήρ).

²³ I posit this explanation of Ritsos’ Christological allusions as a counter to that of Pandelis Prevelakis, *The Poet Yannis Ritsos: A Comprehensive Review of His Work* (Kedros Press, Athens 1983) 23-27. For Prevelakis, Ritsos views Christ in political and ideological terms as a prototype for the revolutionary underclass.

²⁴ See Kaklamanaki (above, note 10) 44, quoting the poet: “Θα είναι τιμή να θυσιάσω τη ζωή μου γι’αυτό που πιστεύω, θα είναι το καλύτερο ποίημα που έχω γράψει στη ζωή μου.”

²⁵ See Akis Mikromatis, *Ο Επιτάφιος του Γιάννη Ρίτσου: Νοηματική και Καλολογική Ερμηνεία* (Lefkosia 1996) 5: "Ritsos fashions a new reality that did not previously exist. The reality of life is what inspires him. The poet has nothing more to do than translate this reality into art. In order for this translation to succeed, in order for the new reality of art to truly manifest itself, a dual sensitivity is required of the poet. First, an intellectual and spiritual sensitivity that will allow him to feel the palpability of life's truth and live its messages. Second, the artistic sensitivity that will guide him to fashion his own truth and convey his own messages with those delicate techniques needed to lend his work a poetic quality."

²⁶ Note especially the conviction of the claim, "We know it." Note also the future progressive tense of the verb "to build:" the houses to be built tomorrow will be built on a continuous basis, again and again. Ritsos is convinced not only that there will be a tomorrow but that the tomorrow will extend indefinitely into a timeless future.

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.

* An earlier version of this study was presented at a 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.