

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.

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 sanitarium 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 (Stavroula), 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 Makronesos. 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:

Ὅτι ἀγάπησα
μοῦ τό πῆρε ὁ θάνατος
κ' ἡ τρέλλα.
Ἕμεινα μόνος
κάτω ἀπ' τὰ ἐρείπια τοῦ οὐρανοῦ μου
ν' ἀριθμῶ τούς θανάτους.

.....
Δέν ἔχω δάκρυ πιά.
Δέν ἔχω δέος.
Δέν ἔχω τίποτ' ἄλλο νά μοῦ πάρουν.
Πένης, γυμνός καί κατάμονος —
ἰδοῦ τὰ πλούτη μου
πού κανεῖς δέν μπορεῖ
νά μοῦ πάρει.
Δέ θά χτυπήσω καμιά πόρτα.
Δέ θά ὑψώσω παράκληση καμιά.
Δίχως ψωμί
δίχως δισάκι
δίχως χαλκά
παίρνω τόν δρόμο τῆς δύσης
μέ βήματα πλατιά καί σταθερά,
γυμνός καί πλήρης,
ἄξιος νά ἐγγίσω τό 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:

.....Βγαίναμε άπλυτοι στο δρόμο.
Άλλάζαμε σπίτια κάθε τόσο. Πάντοτε θ' αφήναμε και
κάτι, ένα μπουζού με λίγα βιβλία, ένα σπασμένο μαντολίνο.
Θά περνούσαμε — λέγαμε — μιά Κυριακή νά τά πάρουμε.

Ποτέ δέν περάσαμε. Κι εκείνη ή πάνινη βαλίτσα
καταμεσής της άδειας κάμαρας, ξεγδαρμένη,
μέ τά λουριά της άπλωμένα στο πάτωμα. Έκεί μέσα
είχαμε παρατήσει ένα παλιό φυλαχτό μέ μαύρο σπάγκο.....

We went out in the street unwashed.
We kept moving from one house to another
every now and then, always leaving something behind—
a trunk with a few books, a broken mandolin.
We would come back on Sunday —we said— to pick them up.

We never did. And that cloth suitcase
in the middle of the empty room, torn and ragged,
with its straps spread out on the floor. Inside
we had left an old amulet on a black string...

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):

Βαθιά, στο μέσα χώρο, χωρίς καθόλου δέντρα,
ύπονοώντας ώστόσο τά δέντρα πού γίναν καρέκλες,
σκαμνιά, τραπέζια, κασόνια. Πάνω στο μπουζού κάθετα
ή σιωπηλή γυναίκα, σκεπάζει τά πόδια της,
κοιτάζει την κάμπια νά σέρνεται στο πάτωμα —
μιά πράσινη κάμπια, λιπαρή, ξεστρατισμένη,
εκείνη που' φαγε τό δάσος κι ήρθε νά φάει τό σπίτι,
τά κάδρα στον τοίχο και τό σκονί στο ταβάνι.

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 Ritsos 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 from *The Doorman's Booth* (1971). Here Ritsos states:

Είχαμε τὰ πηγάδια μας μέσα στά σπίτια μας.
Πίνανε τό νερό τῆς βροχῆς, λουζόμασταν,
κρατάγαμε μιά τάξη καί μιά πάστρα. Μιά νύχτα
κάποιος σηκώθηκε, ἄδειασε μέσα στό πηγάδι
τὴν κούπα μέ τό φαρμάκι. Οἱ ἄλλοι κἀναν
πῶς κοιμόνταν βαθιά. Μετά, ἕνας ἕνας
σηκώνονταν μέ τὴν σειρὰ τους, ἄδειαζαν
τὴν κούπα τους μέ τό φαρμάκι. Σάν ξημέρωσε
κανένας δέν ἔπινε νερό. "Ὡσπου, τέλος,
βούλιαξε ἡ σκάλα μέσα στό πηγάδι. Οἱ ἔνοικοι
ἀνέβηκαν στὴν στέγη, ἀνοίξανε τό στόμα
ἀσάλευτοι ἐκεῖ πάνω ὥρες ὀλάκερες μὴν πέσει
μιά σταγόνα βροχῆς. Ὁ πλανόδιος φωτογράφος
πέρασε κάτω στό δρόμο. Δέν τοὺς εἶδε. Κοιτοῦσε τὰ
πένθημα ἀγγελτήρια κολλημένα στοὺς στύλους
καί τίς μεγάλες πόρτες τῶν κλειστῶν μαγαζιῶν.

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," Ritsos 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' ἡ πέτρα ὅπου καθῆσαν κάτου ἀπ' τίς ἐλιές
τό ἀπομεσήμερο ἄντικρυ στὴ θάλασσα
αὐριο θά γίνεῖ ἀσβέστης στό καμίνι
μεθαύριο θ' ἀσβεστῶσουμε τὰ σπίτια μας καί τό πεζούλι
τῆς Ἀγία-Σωτήρας
ἀντιμεθαύριο θά φυτέψουμε τό σπόρο ἐκεῖ πού
ἀποκοιμήθηκαν
κ' ἕνα μπουμπούκι τῆς ροδιᾶς θά σκάσει πρῶτο γέλιο
τοῦ μωροῦ στόν κόρφο τῆς λακάδας.
Κ' ὕστερα πιά θά κάτσουμε στή πέτρα νά διαβάσουμε ὅλη
τὴν καρδιά τους
σά νά διαβάζουμε πρώτη φορὰ τὴν ἱστορία τοῦ 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.

μέ ύπομονή καί 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 Δεκαοχτώ Λιανοτράγουδα της Πικρής 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.

Τή Ρωμιουσίνη μὴν τήν κλαίς, — ἐκεῖ πού πάει νά σκύψει
μέ τόν σουγιά στό κόκκαλό, μέ τό λουρί στό σβέρκο,

Νά τη, πετιέται ἀποξαρχῆς κι ἀντρεύει καί θεριεύει
καί καμακώνει τό θεριό μέ τό καμάκι τοῦ ἥλιου.

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 *Λιανοτράγουδα* or *Eighteen Short Songs of Bitter Motherland* (1968-1970) Ritsos declares:

Μικρός λαός καί πολεμᾷ δίχως σπαθιά καί βόλια
γιά ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου τό ψωμί, τό φῶς καί τό 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."

Πατί ἐμεῖς δέν τραγουδάμε γιά νά ξεχωρίσουμε
 ἀδερφέ μου ἀπ' τόν κόσμο
 ἐμεῖς τραγουδάμε γιά νά σμίξουμε τόν κόσμο.

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 στήν ποίηση, στόν ἔρωτα, στόν θάνατο,
 γι' αὐτό ἀκριβῶς πιστεύω στήν ἀθανασία. Γράφω ἓνα στίχο.
 γράφω τόν κόσμο· ὑπάρχω· 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.

...ἔχ, γκαστρωμένες πάλε στά βδομήντα μας,
 στά γδόντα μας, νά γεννήσουμε πάλε
 πολλά παιδιά, χίλια παιδιά, νησιωτόπουλα, νά
 γεννήσουμε πάλε
 τή Μῆλο ροδομάγουλη..

...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:

Γλυκιέ μου, ἐσύ δέ χάθηκες, μέσα στίς φλέβες μου εἶσαι.
 Πέ μου, στίς φλέβες ὁλουνῶν, ἔμπα βαθιά καί ζῆσε.

Δές, πλάγι μας περνοῦν πολλοί καβαλλαραῖοι, —
 ὅλοι στητοί καί δυνατοί καί σάν κ' ἐσένα ὠραῖοι.

Ἀνάμεσά τους, γιόκα μου, θωρῶ σε ἀναστημένο, —
 τό θῶρι σου στό θῶρι τους μυριοζωγραφισμένο.

Κι ἀκολουθᾷς και σὺ νεκρός, κι ὁ κόμπος τοῦ λυγμοῦ μας
 δένεται κόμπος τοῦ σκοινιοῦ γιά τό λαίμο τοῦ ὀχτροῦ μας.

Κι ἀντίς τ' ἄφταιγα στήθεια μου νά γδέρνω, δές, βαδίζω
 καί πίσω ἀπό τά δάκρυα μου τόν ἥλιο ἀντικρῶζω.

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 πῆγαν ὅλοι καί μ' ἄφησαν ἐδῶ
νά κοιτάζω τίς ἄδειες παλάμες μου,
νά συντροφεύω τή σιωπή καί τή βροχή;
.....

Θέ μου γιατί ἔχουν φύγει ὅλα ἀπό κοντά μου;
.....

Ἄς φύγουν ὅλα. Ἄς φύγουν ὅλα.
Ἐγώ θά μείνω πάλι
ἄντικρυ στόν πλατύ οὐρανό
ἄντικρυ στήν μεγάλη θάλασσα
δίχως πικρία καί παράπονο
νά τραγουδῶ.
Ἄς φύγουν ὅλα.
Ὅσο μονάχος μένω
τόσο σιμότερα πηγαίνω στούς ἀνθρώπους
τόσο σιμότερα εἶμαι στό Θεό.

Where did they all go leaving me here
to stare at my empty palms,
to keep company with silence and rain?
.....

My God, why have they all gone from me?
.....

Let it all go. Let everything go.
I'll stay once again
facing the broad sky
facing the wide sea
to sing
without bitterness and complaint.
Let everything go.
As I remain alone
so I come closer to people
and so I am nearer to God.

It was his unique and masterful ability to communicate this attitude and articulate it through his verse that has established Ritsos as a man of resilience, endurance and hope and as a poet whose works will continue to comfort and inspire readers for many years to come.