

### **A Ritualistic View of Ritsos' "The Moonlight Sonata"**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

My own experience of rituals shows me that they are repeated, beyond rationality, and imperative. Furthermore, they attempt to control the outside world. Literary texts may acquire a ritualistic dimension if they incorporate these characteristics and/or others such as blending fantasy with realism, linking everyday action to a cosmic dimension, or perceiving time in a non-linear fashion. Some of these characteristics are found in Ritsos' "The Moonlight Sonata," which I originally viewed only in terms of "painterly technique" – the author's attempt to transform time into space in order to bring an element of incorruptibility into his text, as opposed to wastage. This links the poem to a cosmic dimension, and is therefore ritualistic. The "woman in black," whose confession the poem presents, seeks such a dimension in vain; however, the poet himself is able to find it in the music of Beethoven (artistic perfection), which he counterpoints against the wastage of the woman's false belief in the moon's redemptive power. Beethoven's music reaches out beyond the self, controlling the perceived outside world in relation to the self through Ritsos' faith that decay and wastage may be overcome, or at least mollified, by the incorruptible Truth of art. Also, the poem exhibits



other ritualistic characteristics: repetition (the fact that the first movement of Beethoven's sonata is heard over and over again), a sense of the imperative nature of the ritualistic exercise, and perhaps even entry into a cosmic realm.

Since this is the first time I have ever tried to think about a literary text in relation to ritual, I decided to start by wondering whether I had ever had any brush with ritual in my personal experience.

We all partake, of course, of the rituals of breakfast, lunch, and supper, not to mention toiletries and, if we are lucky, an afternoon siesta. But my own life offers more than this, since I am a practicing Quaker, which means that on Sunday morning I normally sit in silence for an hour with other Quakers. This strange practice is ritualistic in various ways: (1) it is repeated year-in year-out, (2) it is a bit crazy, deeper than merely rational, and (3) it is an imperative: if I miss a Quaker Meeting I feel somehow unclean, unfulfilled.

But that is not all. For fifty years I have participated in a very different sort of ritual – namely, the mowing of twelve acres of meadow on our Adirondack farm. Here, too, the characteristics are repetition, a degree of craziness (for the fields really do not need to be mowed every year), and – perhaps most important – a sense that if the mowing is not accomplished I remain bereft to a degree far exceeding any rational justification. Thus the mowing, like Quaker meditation, is an imperative.

Lastly, on two occasions I was privileged to be a spectator in Greece at the *Anastenárides*' fire-walking ritual on May 21st in Langadas, Macedonia. I was not just in the grandstand along with thousands of others; because my brother-in-law served at the time as the agriculturalist of that town, I was granted entry to the *konáki* where the *Anastenárides* danced themselves into trance – an amazing experience. This ritual shares the characteristics I mentioned above: repetition, non-rationality, and the imperative that it *must* take place.

For example, young dancers who were doing their military service would return on May 21st in order not to miss even one year's participation. And, at the end, the expression *kai tou chrónou* was on everyone's lips, indicating that although the necessary ritual had been fulfilled that year, it would need to be repeated on the following May 21st.

Interestingly, when I finish mowing in the Adirondacks each August, I always say – and feel, deep down, in some fashion more profound than rational – *kai tou chrónou!*

These are the personal experiences that I hoped would help me deal with a literary text in relation to ritual. But I also wanted some theoretical underpinning. There is of course an appropriate lecture entitled "‘Not by Words Alone’: Ritual Approaches to Greek Literature"<sup>1</sup> by Margaret Alexiou. I was pleased to find here a confirmation of two of the findings from my own experience. Alexiou writes that ritual "involves the *repetition...of actions, gestures, utterances, which do not mean by words alone*" (italics added) – i.e., which are somehow non-logical, non-rational, crazy. Beyond this, she stresses that "ritual is an attempt, by a group or by an individual, to control the perceived outside world in relation to the self." That is something I did not personally conclude, but now I realize how true this characteristic is for Quaker worship, the mowing of my fields, and perhaps most obviously for the *Anastenárides*. In each case, the ritual is bankrupt if it does not reach out beyond the self to the world outside.

Alexiou then proceeds beyond these broad definitions to more specific considerations of ritual in relation to literature. A literary text may become partially or wholly ritualistic in various ways: by incorporating liturgical language, by following a ritual schema such as passion/crucifixion/resurrection, by linking our everyday activities to a cosmic dimension, by blending fantasy and realism, by perceiving time and space in non-linear, often cyclical, ways so that



a plot becomes repeatable instead of having a beginning, middle, and end.

Examples of all these elements are not difficult to find in Greek and non-Greek literature. Liturgical language is incorporated in Elytis' *Axion estí*. Ritual schemata govern Ritsos' *Epitáfios* and Kazantzakis' *O Christós xanastavrónetai*. Everyday activities are linked to a cosmic dimension in Sikelianos' poem "Pan." Fantasy and realism are blended in the work of E. M. Forster and Henry James. Time and space are perceived non-linearly in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Each of these works shares at least one of the three characteristics of ritual that I identified from my own experience: repetition, craziness, and a sense that the issues presented or actions done are imperative. Some of the works also clearly incorporate an attempt to control the perceived outside world in relation to the self.

But my subject today is not Greek or Western modernistic literature in general. It is a single text, Yannis Ritsos' "The Moonlight Sonata."<sup>2</sup> I translated this long poem more than twenty years ago<sup>3</sup> and thought of it subsequently only in terms of "painterly technique" – that is, Ritsos' effort, as he matured, to transform time into space and sound into sight as a painter does, in order to bring into his poetry an element of the incorruptibility (as opposed to wastage) that is so often his major theme.<sup>4</sup> Now I am trying to extend my appreciation of this text by viewing it ritualistically, thereby responding to Margaret Alexiou's hope that by exploring the resources of ritual we may "broaden our aesthetic criteria and enrich our understanding of literature."

Of course, my previous approach to the poem is not irrelevant, even though I never connected the text with ritual. One of the characteristics of ritual identified earlier is the ways in which it links our everyday activities to a cosmic dimension. And this is precisely what Ritsos does through his

painterly technique. The poem's ostensible theme is deception – more precisely, self-deception. Accordingly, its technique becomes deceptive in its own right, confusing us. We do not know which narrator to trust. If we seek the author's genuine voice, we seek it in vain as a *voice* (although we may find a minuscule sign in the three bars of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* printed at the poem's end, in which the author inserts the word *misterioso*, a direction not in Beethoven's original). Nevertheless we do find his voice – voiceless, so to speak, not functioning by words alone – in the poem's painterly form in which a prologue and an epilogue are employed to frame a dramatic monologue. As soon as we register this form, we begin to understand that the poem's deepest meaning is not deception; it is humanity's yearning to be delivered from decay and to participate in a cosmic dimension characterized by incorruptibility. In this instance, decay is represented by the self-deception of a romantic woman who tries to sustain herself by means of the illusion that "*o chrónos k'i phthorá tou*" (time and its decay) do not exist beneath the redemptive moonlight:

*Ti fengári apópse!*  
*Eínai kaló to fengári, – dhen tha fáinetai*  
*pou asprísan ta malliá mou. . . .*  
 What a moon tonight!  
 The moon is good, – that my hair's turned gray  
 will not show.

She seeks her salvation in places where it does not exist: in the idealized past, the daydreamy present. But although *she* cannot know the cosmic dimension, escaping time, the *poet* can. He is certain that deception is subordinate to an incorruptible Truth that converts deception into beauty. He does not utter a word about this, however. He cannot utter a word, since his own voice is nowhere to be found. Instead, he takes this monologue that is so beleaguered by time and



frames it in such a way that the poem acquires, to some degree at least, the characteristics of a painting, existing more basically in space than in time. When we encounter the narrator in the epilogue, we are encouraged to recall the narrator in the prologue and thereby to register the poem not just as a succession of kinetic fragments unfolding in time but as a single, static composition immobilized in space. The painterly technique reminds us that we are not hearing about life in the raw, despite the woman's anguished lament; instead, we are seeing life as a "cold pastoral" painted as though on Keats' Grecian urn, *misterioso*, in a way designed to "tease us out of thought as doth eternity."

Viewing the poem in this way, I now appreciate how clearly it also manifests some of the other characteristics of ritual elaborated earlier. Most obvious, perhaps, is the element I call "craziness," by which I mean all that is beyond rationality and decorum, requiring a work to speak not by words alone. The woman's lament is frenzied and neurotic, but that, I think, is a pseudo-ritual. The real ritual is the poet's attempt to deal with wastage in the *misterioso* mode, which he accomplishes not only via the painterly technique but also by counterpointing the entire lament, with its false reliance on moonlight, against Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* itself, which comments wordlessly on the woman's futile words, placing her false ritual within a true ritual because, reaching out beyond the self, it controls the perceived outside world in relation to the self through the poet's faith that decay and wastage may be overcome, or at least mollified, by the incorruptible Truth of art. All this is crazy; it speaks to us not by words alone or not by words at all.

What about repetition, the first characteristics of ritual that I identified owing to my personal experience as a Quaker, a mower of fields, and a privileged observer of the *Anastenárides*? Repetition is certainly obvious in the woman's lament, with its oft-repeated refrain "*Afisé me nártho mazi*

*sou*" ("Let me come with you"), and with its importunate, monomaniacal return to elements such as the disemboweled armchair. But all this, as I claimed, is embedded in a false ritual. The truly ritualistic repetition occurs because of the fact announced by the narrator at the end: that "this entire scene [has] been accompanied pianissimo by 'The Moonlight Sonata', *the first movement only*" (italics added). This is indeed *misterioso*! Instead of having a proper beginning, middle, and end as Beethoven's three-movement sonata actually does, in this poem the sonata's opening movement continues interminably, timelessly.

Regarding the third characteristic that I identified from my own experience, the imperative nature of one's participation in ritual, I can record only a subjective impression – that Beethoven's music, obviously central to the poem, cleansing as it does the wastage of the woman's life, the futility of her confession, the shadows of rage huddling in the corners of her room (cleansing them, that is, for us, not for her), is *necessary* because its absence will leave us feeling discouraged by the woman's impasse – unfulfilled, bereft, just as I feel when I miss a Quaker meeting on Sunday. Insofar as we identify with the woman (which we should, given that we all experience wastage), the ritual of Beethoven's music in this poem will make us realize how imperative it is for us not to forgo the redemptive rituals of our own lives.

Returning now to the additional characteristics of ritual identified by Margaret Alexiou, I need to ask whether Ritsos' poem employs liturgical language and/or a liturgical schema. I do not find liturgical language in it, even though the woman submits that she conversed with God on many a spring night. But the basic liturgical schema of darkness giving way to light is present – the light being, of course, Beethoven's music. I need to ask, furthermore, whether the poem controls the perceived outside world in relation to the self. The woman of course aspires to do this, but futilely. Hers, I repeat, is a



false ritual. But the *poet* is conducting a true ritual, thanks to which the vicissitudes of the outside world – none of which the woman can conquer – are beaten down by art's quiet power: Beethoven's forever-repeated first movement. Does this establish a link with the cosmos? Yes, insofar as we are able to posit an incorruptible realm unbounded by earthly space and time. We are tempted to ask whether such a realm exists, but this is not the proper question. The proper question is: Do we have the *faith* that it exists? We may not; yet Ritsos does. In poem after poem he is driven by the need to affirm to his readers that the negatives of human life lie in an eternal cradle that can rock them into peace.

Margaret Alexiou claims that we may broaden our aesthetic criteria and our understanding of literature by exploring the resources of ritual. I hope that my examination of Ritsos' "The Moonlight Sonata" has strengthened this claim by demonstrating how a ritualistic approach to the poem enables us to discover in it some important new dimensions.

But let me end with the poem itself so that, with luck, its power may enter our personal experience.

## The Moonlight Sonata

YANNIS RITSOS

Translated from the Modern Greek by Peter Bien

(An evening in springtime. A large room in an old house. A woman advanced in years is speaking to a young man. She is dressed entirely in black. They have not turned on the lights. Pitiless moonlight enters through the two windows. Oh, I forgot to mention that the woman in black has published two or three collections of verse – interesting volumes, religious in spirit...As I was saying, the woman in black is addressing the young man):

Let me come with you. What a moon tonight!  
The moon is kind – no one will sense  
my hair's turned gray. The moon  
will make it blond again. You will not notice.  
Let me come with you.

Moonlight lengthens shadows inside the house,  
unseen hands draw aside the drapes,  
a sallow finger writes long-forgotten words  
in the piano's dust – I refuse to hear them. Quiet!

Let me come with you  
a little way, as far as the brickyard wall,  
where the road turns and downtown  
slips into view, all concrete and thin air, stuccoed white with moonlight,  
so unconcerned and immaterial  
so positively real (as though metaphysical)  
you can believe at last that you exist and do not exist,  
that you never did exist, nor did time exist, nor time's ruins.  
Let me come with you.  
We'll sit awhile on the wall at the vantage point



and spring winds will blow on us in such a way  
 we might even imagine we'll take flight  
 since often (and now as well) the swish of my skirt  
 sounds to me like the swish of two strong, flapping wings,  
 and when one is shut inside that sound  
 of flight one feels throat, ribs, flesh all packed together –  
 cramped like that between the blue wind's muscles,  
 between the sky's robust sinews,  
 who cares if you go away or return,  
 who cares if my hair's turned gray  
 (what I regret is something else: I regret  
 my heart's not turning gray as well).  
 Let me come with you.

I know that everyone makes do – alone – with love,  
 alone with fame and death.  
 I know; I've had my try. It doesn't help.  
 Let me come with you.

This house is haunted now; it's evicting me.  
 I mean it's grown so very old, the picture hooks work loose,  
 the paintings drop as though diving into a void,  
 plaster falls without a sound,  
 as a dead man's hat falls from the peg in the darkened hallway,  
 as silence's frayed woolen glove falls from her knees  
 or a ribbon of moonlight falls on the old, disemboweled armchair.

That was young, too, once upon a time. Not the photograph you're viewing  
 with such disbelief –  
 I mean the armchair: very comfortable, you could lounge in it for  
 hours at a stretch,  
 your eyes shut tight, and dream of whatever comes to mind  
 – of a sandy stretch of wetted shoreline polished by the moon,  
 more highly polished than my ancient patent-leather boots I bring  
 each month to the shoe-black's on the corner,  
 or of a fisherman's sail that fades in the offing, rocked by breaths its  
 very own,  
 a three-cornered sail like a pocket handkerchief folded only once,  
 diagonally,

as if lacking some object to enclose or hold,  
 or any need to wave farewell, opened wide...I've always had a craze  
 for handkerchiefs,  
 not to bind things up and hold them  
 – some flower seeds or chamomile picked in fields at sundown –  
 or to knot four times, like those head-cloths worn by workmen on the  
 construction job across the street,  
 or to wipe my eyes – my sight continues strong,  
 I never have worn glasses. Handkerchiefs with me are merely an  
 eccentricity.

I fold them now in fourths, in eighths, sixteenths  
 to occupy my fingers. Ah, now I remember:  
 I counted music just like that when I went to Conservatory  
 in my blue pinafore and white collar, with my two blond braids  
 – 8, 16, 32, 64 –  
 holding hands with my beloved little peach tree, all sunlight and rose-  
 red blossoms  
 (forgive such language: an unfortunate habit) – 32, 64 – my parents  
 had high hopes for my musical talent. But I was telling you about the  
 armchair – disemboweled – the rusty springs hang out, the stuffing  
 too –  
 I thought to take it to the upholsterer's nearby,  
 but where's the time and money, or the proper frame of mind – what  
 to fix first? –  
 I thought to throw a sheet over it – I dreaded  
 the white sheet in such moonlight. In that chair people  
 sat who dreamed great dreams, just as you have and I have too;  
 they're at rest now beneath the sod, untroubled by rain or moonlight.  
 Let me come with you.

We'll pause at the top of Saint Nicholas' marble steps;  
 then you'll go down and I'll go home again,  
 having on my left some warmth from the chance brush of your jacket  
 and a few squares of light still, from our neighborhood's tiny windows,  
 and that pearl-white vapor from the moon, like a grand escort of  
 silvery swans –  
 the expression does not frighten me, since in the past



on many a spring night I conversed with God, who revealed himself  
to me  
dressed in the haze and splendor of such moonlight,  
and I sacrificed to him scads of young men even handsomer than  
yourself,  
so that, white and inaccessible, I keep turning to vapor inside my  
snow-white passion,  
inside the moonlight's whiteness,  
kindled by men's voracious looks and youngsters' hesitating  
ecstasies,  
besieged by exquisite sun-tanned bodies,  
sturdy limbs trained at swimming, soccer, crew, and track (I pretended  
not to stare at them),  
brows, lips and throats, knees, fingers and eyes,  
 chests, arms, and thighs (really, I did not stare at them)  
– you know, occasionally in your admiration you forget what you  
admire; your admiration itself suffices –  
good Lord, what star-filled eyes! Up I flew to those repudiated stars  
in their glorification,  
for, besieged like that from outside and within,  
the only course left to me was toward the heights – or depths. No,  
that won't do.  
Let me come with you.

I know the time is late. Let me,  
since so very many years, days and nights, crimson afternoons, I have  
remained alone,  
unyielding, alone and oh so chaste,  
alone and chaste even in my marriage bed,  
composing on God's lap illustrious poems,  
poems that shall remain, I assure you,  
well beyond my lifetime and yours, as though  
carved into unblemished marble – well beyond. That won't do.  
Let me come with you.

I cannot stand this house an instant longer,  
cannot bear to carry it on my back.  
You must always take care, take care,

to steady the wall with the large buffet,  
to steady the buffet with the antique, carved table,  
to steady the table with the chairs,  
to steady the chairs with your hands,  
to place your shoulder beneath the sagging beam.  
And the piano: like a black coffin, nailed shut. You dare not open it.  
Nothing but taking care, taking care, lest they collapse, lest you  
collapse. I cannot  
bear it.  
Let me come with you.

This house, despite its many dead, does not plan to die.  
It persists in living with its dead,  
living off its dead,  
living off the certainty of its own death  
and arranging even its corpses tidily on dilapidated beds and shelves.  
Let me come with you.

However lightly I tread in here, in the haze of evening,  
whether barefooted or with slippers,  
something is bound to creak – a windowpane or mirror cracks,  
some footsteps sound: not mine.  
Outside in the street perhaps those footsteps are not heard  
– regret, they say, wears wooden clogs –  
and if you chance to gaze into that mirror or the other one,  
behind the dust and cracks you'll view your face  
still dimmer and more shattered,  
your face that all your life you sought simply to preserve clear and whole.

The rim of the drinking glass sparkles in the moonlight  
like a circular razor-edge. How can I lift that glass to my lips?  
Whatever my thirst, how can I? You see?  
My penchant for similitudes remains – that's been left to me,  
that assures me still I have not slipped away.  
Let me come with you.

Every now and then as evening falls I sense  
the trainer passing outside my window with his aged, plodding bear,



her fur all thorns and thistles,  
 stirring up the dust in our neighborhood street,  
 a solitary dust-cloud misting the sundown with incense.  
 The children have gone inside for supper and cannot come out again,  
 even though from behind the walls they surmise the old bear's footsteps.

And the bear: wearily she carries on inside the wisdom of her solitude,  
 not

knowing wither or why.

She's overweight and cannot dance upon her two hind legs any longer,  
 cannot wear her petite lace bonnet to entertain children, idlers, or

those who importune,  
 and all she wants is to stretch out on the ground  
 and let them step upon her belly, playing thus her final game,  
 showing her grim capacity for renunciation,  
 her defiance of others' profit, the rings through her lips, her teeth's  
 requirements,

her defiance of pain and life  
 through firm alliance with death, even a lingering death,  
 her ultimate defiance of death through life's continuity and awareness:  
 life that, through awareness and deed, transcends its own enslavement.

But who can play that game out to its end?

The bear gets up again and moves on,  
 obeying her leash, her rings, her teeth,  
 smiling with torn lips at the pennies tossed her by lovely unsuspecting  
 children

(lovely precisely because unsuspecting)  
 and saying "Thanks." Because bears grown old  
 have learned to utter one thing only: "Thanks." "Thanks."  
 Let me come with you.

This house is drowning me. Indeed the kitchen  
 seems like an ocean floor. The hanging saucepans gleam  
 like huge round eyes of improbable fish,  
 the plates sway slowly back and forth like jellyfish,  
 seaweed and shells get tangled in my hair – I cannot dislodge them  
 afterwards,

I cannot float up again to the surface –  
 the serving tray slips from my hands and drops without a sound. I sink  
 downward  
 in a heap  
 and watch the bubbles from my breath rise up, rise up,  
 and I try to enjoy the sight of them,  
 wondering: If someone were above and saw those bubbles, what  
 would he say?  
 That a person was drowning, I suppose, or that some diver was  
 probing the deep.

Indeed, I often discover pearls and coral and sunken treasure  
 there at the depths of drowning,  
 unforeseen encounters, pearls from past, present and future,  
 confirmations, almost, of eternal life,  
 a bit of relief, a certain smile (as they say) of immortality,  
 some happiness, intoxication, even enthusiasm,  
 pearls and coral and sapphires;  
 only I'm ignorant of how to give them away – no, I do give them away;  
 only I'm ignorant of whether they can be received – in any case, I  
 give them, I do.

Let me come with you.

Just a moment, I'll get my wrap.  
 One cannot be too careful while this shifting weather lasts.  
 The evenings are damp, and the moon  
 really does increase the chill, wouldn't you say?

Let me button up your shirt for you. What a strong chest you have,  
 – what a strong moon – the armchair, I mean – and when I clear the  
 coffee cup  
 from the table,  
 a hole-full of silence remains beneath. I lay my palm on top at once  
 so as not to look inside. The cup I restore to its place again.  
 The moon: that too a hole in the skull of the universe. Do not look  
 inside.

A magnetic force attracts us – do not look, do not look, dear sir –  
 listen, sir, to what I'm saying – you'll fall. This swoon,



so lovely, so light – you'll fall –  
the moon's a cistern lined with marble,  
shadows sway, and soundless wings, mysterious voices – can't you  
hear them, sir?

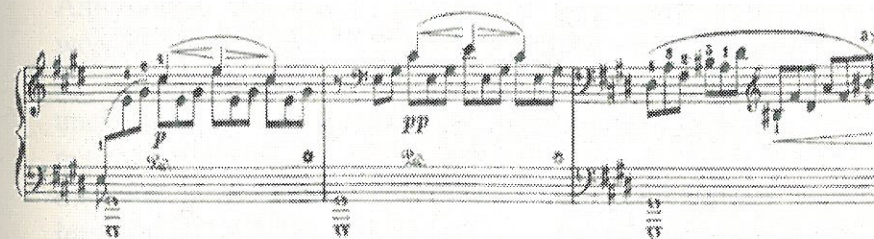
Deep, deep the fall,  
deep, deep the rise,  
the airy statue packed firm between outstretched wings;  
deep, deep the harsh benevolence of silence;  
brilliant flickerings from the other shore, as when you're rocking in  
your personal wake;  
ocean air. So lovely and so light  
this swoon – look out, you'll fall! Pay no attention to me;  
my place is in the rocking – the superb swoon. Thus every evening  
I have a slight headache, a touch of vertigo.

Often I pop over to the drugstore across the street for aspirin,  
but sometimes I could not care less, and stay here with my headache  
to listen to the water pipes making hollow noises in the walls,  
or I brew some coffee and, absent-mindedly as usual,  
forget myself and prepare a second cup – who will drink it?  
A joke, to be sure. I leave it on the windowsill to get cold  
or sometimes I drink that second cup as well, gazing through the panes  
at the green globe of the drugstore's lamp –  
as at the green light of a noiseless train arriving to take me away  
with my handkerchiefs, my shoes all down-at-heel, my black purse,  
my poems,  
without a single valise – what use are valises?  
Let me come with you.

Oh, you're leaving? Good night. No, I won't be coming. Good night.  
I'll go out in a little while. Thank you. Because I really must  
escape this dilapidated house at long last.  
I must see a bit of the city – no, not the moon –  
the city with its callused hands, the city of day laborers, the city  
that swears upon bread and its fists,  
the city that carries us all on its back  
together with our pettiness, our malice, our enmity,

together with our ambition, our ignorance, and our aging –  
I must hear the city's giant footsteps  
so I will not hear your footsteps any longer,  
or God's, or my own. Good night.

*(The room grows dark. It seems that some cloud must have covered the moon. Suddenly, as if a hand had turned up the radio in the neighborhood bar, an extremely familiar musical motif may be heard. I realized then that this entire scene had been accompanied pianissimo by "The Moonlight Sonata," the first movement only. The young man must be going down the slope now, with an ironic and perhaps compassionate smile on his well-shaped lips, and with a sense of liberation. As soon as he reaches Saint Nicholas', there precisely, before he descends the marble steps, he will laugh – loudly, without restraint. His laughter will sound not the least bit improper beneath the moon – the only improper part being perhaps that it is not the least bit improper. Soon, the young man, falling silent, will turn serious and say: "The decline of an era." Thus entirely at ease again, he will undo the buttons of his shirt, as before, and continue on his way. As for the woman in black, I do not know if she finally did go out. The moonlight is shining once more, and the shadows in the corners of her room are huddling together out of unbearable remorse, rage almost, directed not so much at life as at the futility of confession. Do you hear? The radio plays on...).*





## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Margaret Alexiou, "‘Not by Words Alone’: Ritual Approaches to Greek Literature." Lecture delivered at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University, November 9, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Yannis Ritsos, "Η Σονάτα του Σελινόφωτος," in *Τέταρτη Διάσταση* (Athens: Kedros, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> "Yannis Ritsos, 'The Moonlight Sonata,' translated from the modern Greek by Peter Bien," *New England Review*, Spring 1979.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Bien, "Ritsos' Painterly Technique in Short and Long Poems," *Το Γιοφρύι* 11 (1990-91), 5-11.

**Ritsos' Melian Women and Aeschylus' Eumenides**

RICK M. NEWTON

As both classicist and neohellenist, George Pilitsis was particularly drawn to those poems of Yannis Ritsos that rework myths and motifs from ancient Greece and provide poetic commentary on the personal, as well as political, life experiences of the modern poet. It is perhaps for this reason that his collaborative translation [with Philip Pastras] of selected poems from *The Fourth Dimension* bears the title, *The New Oresteia of Yannis Ritsos* (Pella 1991). This paper, dedicated to George's memory, explores Ritsos' utilization of an Aeschylean motif in "The Annihilation of Melos."

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The prologue to Yannis Ritsos' lengthy poem, "The Annihilation of Melos," describes three shriveled old women who, uprooted from their home island of Melos by the Athenians in 416 B.C. (the prologue mentions "old uncle Thucydides" by name), sit on the terrace of their new master's house and converse in hushed voices.<sup>1</sup> They recall their life from earlier peaceful days, recount the attack by invaders "from a foreign land," and struggle to determine if that former life was real: "Are we the ones speaking, are we the ones moving our lips, we who have been dead for years, we women of Melos? Did Melos ever exist? Did we too exist?" Most noteworthy in this description of the black-clad widows is the poet's reference to them as "creatures of