

The Mythic Voice of Yannis Ritsos

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Ancient Greek myths and legends, especially those that have been dramatized by the major playwrights of Classical Greece, have inspired and stimulated the creative imagination of many artists, novelists and poets of the twentieth century. Evidence of such influences in literature can easily be found in the works of major European and American writers such as Anouilh, Giraudoux, Sartre, T.S. Eliot, Joyce, Yeats and Pound, or Eugene O'Neill and Joyce Carol Oates to mention only a few. These, and undoubtedly many other intellectuals, use myth as a literary device to respond to the critical issues that modern man was facing in the new industrial society of the post war era.¹

Some of these issues involved man's alienation from nature, the disintegration of social and family values, the surpassing of nationalism and the destruction of unity in the world. Moreover, the devastating effects the war had on the lives of people, the atrocities committed, and the undermining of human values, all in the name of cultural purity, national expansionism, and ethnic superiority, created a major problem of historical and cultural continuity in Europe. Consequently, some intellectuals began to question the validity of Western tradition and its values while others took upon themselves the mission to defend them.

¹ For the use of ancient mythology in contemporary literature see: Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition* (New York, 1949, 1967); M. I. Finley, ed. *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal* (Oxford, 1981); Arnold Toynbee, *The Greeks and their Heritage* (Oxford, 1981); Wendell A. Aycok, Theodore M. Klein, eds. *Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Thought and Literature: Proceedings of the Comparative Literature Symposium*, 11 (Lubbock, 1980); Juannetta Boswell, *Past Ruined Iliion: A Bibliography of English and American Literature Based on Greco-Roman Mythology* (Metuchen NJ, 1982).

Greece was not immune to these problems. The atrocities the Greek people experienced during the Balkan Wars and the German occupation continued into the crucial years of the civil strife that broke out in Greece after the War as well as during the years of the military junta in the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Like their fellow intellectuals of Western Europe, many Greek writers responded in a similar manner. They, too, found the mythic method as an effective way to voice their concerns. A number of ancient myths and legends are being "recycled" now and used as a means of dealing not only with the social problems that man faced in his environment but also with the problem of cultural identity and continuity that have become crucial issues in Greece for some time.²

One of those intellectuals who employs the mythic method in his work to articulate his concerns was one of the most popular and amazingly prolific poet of Greece, Yannis Ritsos.³ In his response to a question regarding the influence of ancient myths and their relation to his poetry, Ritsos states:

In Greek mythology there are elements that for us remain contemporary. Furthermore, we encounter this phenomenon in all mythologies of the world. If a myth has universal applications, it contributes to the development of poetry and art. Greek mythology is not our property. For centuries now it has been a source of inspiration for the West. Not only the names of heroes and gods, but even more, the

² The problem of cultural identity and historical continuity has resurfaced recently as a serious political issue in Greece with the creation of the so-called "Republic of Macedonia" in the southern part of former Yugoslavia.

³ For various studies on the subject of myth in the poetry of Ritsos see: Pantelis Prevelakis, *The Poet Yannis Ritsos* (in Greek) (Athens, 1992) with special attention to Chapters 5 and 6; Peter Bien, "Some Modern Greek Responses to 'The Glory That Was Greece'" in *Classical Mythology in Twentieth-Century Thought and Literature, Responses*, pp. 21-44; Idem, "Myth in Modern Greek Letters, with Special Attention to Yannis Ritsos' Philoctetes," *Books Abroad* 48, No. 1 (Winter 1974) pp. 15-20; Mariantny Colakis, "Classical Mythology in Yannis Ritsos' Dramatic Monologues" *CML* 4, 3 (Spring 1984) pp. 117-30; Yorgos Veloudis, *Approaches to the Works of Yannis Ritsos* (in Greek) (Athens, 1984); Sangilio Crescenzo, *Myth and Poetry in Ritsos* (Greek edition) (Athens, 1978); Leandros Polenakis, "Agamemnon, Orestes, without Eumenides" (in Greek) *Diavazo* 205 (December 21, 1988) pp. 128-31. For a study on the use of ancient Greek mythology in the works of modern Greek poets see Peter Mackridge, ed. *Ancient Greek Myth in Modern Greek Poetry, Essays in Memory of C.A. Trypanis* (London, 1996). Regrettably the book was not available when this article was written.

perception, the events and the emotions expressed through myth can inspire a writer.⁴

In many of his poems, be they short or long, lyrical or dramatic, personal, political or historical in context, Ritsos makes an extensive use of ancient Greek history, myths and legends. His fascination with the ancient Greek past can be traced quite early in his career. From the early 1940s onward he composed a number of long poems in a dramatic form modeled after the choral parts of ancient Greek dramas. These include *Three Chorals* (1944-1947), *The Old Men and Tranquility* (1948), *The Old Women and the Sea* (1958), *The Sponge Divers' Chorale* (1960), *The Prison Tree and the Women* (1962), *Tiresias* (1964-1971), *News Bearers* (1967-1969), *The Annihilation of Milos* (1969), *Souder* (1973), and *Parlor* (1979-1981). In these long poems the speakers, comprised of peasant men or women, young or old, function together as a chorus of an ancient tragedy. Articulating a developing thought expressed by a number of voices, they comment on events and issues concerning their lives as individuals or as members of a community they represent.

Ritsos' experimentation with the dramatic form can also be seen in eleven long dramatic monologues similar in form to the choral poems. Here, however, the collective voice of the chorus has been replaced by the voice of the main speaker who functions as a mouthpiece for the poet and the people he represents. The first dramatic monologue was introduced in 1956 with the publication of *Moonlight Sonata*. The full impact of the dramatic monologues in the works of Ritsos, however, was not felt until 1965 beginning with the publication of the mythic monologue *Orestes* and ending in 1978 with the publication of *Phaedra*. In the dramatic monologues the characters contemplate the action they are about to undertake rather than the execution of the action itself. "Studied as a microcosm of Ritsos' work," Myrsiades explains,

⁴ Yannis Ritsos quoted by Ozdemir Ince in "Συνάντηση με τὸν Γιάννη Ρίτσο," *Διαβάξω* 205 (December 21, 1988), p. 114. Ritsos gave this interview to Mr. Ince in 1981 during his visit with the poet at his home in Karlovasi on the island of Samos. The interview translated from the French by Titika Dimitroulias, appears in Greek in the journal *Diavazo*. All quotes from the interview that appear in this study as well as all translations of Ritsos' works quoted here are by the author of the present study unless it is stated otherwise. For a complete translation of Ritsos' six mythic monologues that deal with the legendary House of Atreus, with an introduction and commentary see George Pilitsis and Philip Pastras, *The New Oresteia of Yannis Ritsos* (New York, 1991).

the dramatic monologue deals with themes essential to his poetry – the irresistible force of life in the face of death, archetypal feminine tenderness, the carnal bonds by means of which men are united to those objects which express them, and the ravaged nightmarish home to which men are umbilically tied.⁵

In these monologues as well as in many other poems Ritsos produced in his lifetime, ancient Greek history and mythology permeate the lines and define the background of the story which unfolds and develops in a contemporary setting. Much like Seferis and others before him, Ritsos saw in the tragicality of the ancient myths, as depicted in the dramas of the Attic playwrights, a parallel tragicality of contemporary Greek experience. Yet, unlike many of his contemporaries, his preoccupation with ancient myths is not to search for continuity of the past into the present as Sikelianos' laudatory poems indicate, nor to express the disappointments, frustrations, losses and inadequacies of the present as Seferis often does in his works.⁶ Much like Varnalis, Ritsos' main concern is the present and its meaning for the future. In many of his poems the reader is often reminded that "the open present remains in the foreground from the beginning to the end which is still the beginning."⁷

⁵ Kostas Myrsiades, *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems*, eds. and trans. Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades (New York, 1989) p. 451

⁶ In Seferis' poetry the classical past is viewed also as a burden from which the Greeks must find ways to liberate themselves in order to understand and appreciate their true historical and cultural background. Another poet who makes frequent use of the ancient Greek past in his poetry is C.P. Cavafy. Unlike Seferis, however, as many critics have observed, Cavafy applies this poetic technique to suggest a view which de-idealized ancient Greek history by exposing the illusion of the classical or Hellenistic age. Andreas Empirikos too, inspired by the new intellectual fermentation in Europe, and under the influence of Freudian theories, makes frequent use of classical mythology. In his surrealist poetry, Greek myths are presented in a different light as they become a subject of psychoanalytical interpretation and thought. Another poet who also uses the mythic technique of confusing events and historical incidents in an atmosphere of imprecision and synchronicity was Kostas Varnalis. In his poetry myths, legendary figures or historical incidents are often placed against a contemporary or medieval background which defines the action as it develops. This technique allows the poet the freedom to present a more general picture of the development of history and also to show the relationship of history and time.

⁷ William Spanos, "Yannis Ritsos' *Romiosini*: Style as Historical Memory." *The Charioteer* 29/30 (1987-1988) p. 95.

In Ritsos' poetry, myths, legends and the classical past in general are not idealized. The legacy of ancient Greece is not viewed as a standard of greatness against which modern Greeks must measure themselves and their achievements. Rather, the classical past is viewed as a means of dealing with contemporary issues with historical detachment. Thus in many of Ritsos' poems the past comes to life somehow transformed. Historical incidents, mythological as well as historical figures are often fused and deliberately confused with events and figures of contemporary history, and in this way all Greek history is understood to exist simultaneously. Consequently, action, time and space acquire a personal and immediate application. Thus the ten year long campaign of the ancient Greeks against Troy narrated in the Homeric epics, for instance, is understood in Ritsos' poetry as the decade of war from 1912 to 1922 in which the Greeks fought the Turkish army on the same battlefields. The decade in the *Iliad* also becomes the ten year resistance and struggle of the Greeks against the Nazi forces, and later the civil war in that country that lasted until 1950.

The poet's attempt to apply this technique to an exclusively Greek theme can be seen in his long lyric poem *Romiosini* (1945-1947) the subject matter of which is essentially epic in nature and in scope. In his commentary Spanos explains:

The poem focuses so intensely on a concrete contemporary historical situation that it opens up . . . into the farthest reaches of the Greek past . . . (Here, the poet) discloses a mnemonic time in which all the 'times' of Greek history are continuously present.⁸

This is a time in which the temporal fragments of Greek historical events and figures like the images of the warriors of the 1821 Greek revolution against the occupying forces of the Ottoman empire, the Akrites of the Byzantine times and the Homeric heroes, "emerge from the subconscious racial matrix to achieve identity and continuity with the contemporary images of the fighter of the Resistance."⁹ In the poet's imagination, in other words, the images of the past, be they historical, legendary or mythic, are perceived synchronically as images of the present.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 94.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Thus, in *Romiosini* the contemporary Greek sailor, for instance, shares the Homeric hero's agony, and in his search for homeland and justice he "drinks the bitter sea from the cup of Odysseus" (II); the Resistance fighters meet with the legendary folk hero Digenis on the same threshing floors of Byzantium; or the old women who climb up to their looking posts on the Great Rock "when the Minoan fresco of sunset frays in the distance" (III). In lines like these we see that the continuity of the Greek past is not presented symbolically. Rather it exists as immediate knowledge in the poet's memory. "You don't have to remember," he declares because "We know it." Thus in the poet's own words:

III

Over here every door has a name carved on it, a name
 some three thousand years old
 every rock has painted on it a saint with wild eyes
 and rope-like hair
 every man has a mermaid tattooed on his left arm, stitch
 by stitch
 every girl has a fistful of salted light under her skirt
 and the children five or six tiny bitter crosses
 on their hearts
 like gulls' tracks on the afternoon sand.
 You don't have to remember. We know it.

Ritsos' identification of this synchronic imagery with the immediate knowledge of the Greek racial memory, this temporal simultaneity, this fusion of historical imagery into the present, emerge also in the figure of Panaghia. This Orthodox Christian image of the Virgin Mary merges into one with the blacksmith's daughter, with the old peasant mother of contemporary Greece who, like Niobe of the mythic past, laments the loss of her seven slaughtered sons in "the scorched sheepfold of the summer." Finally, in the poet's masterful use of the mythic method, these female images from the distant as well as the recent Greek past merge with the figure of Mother Greece. Thus she becomes the Gorgona, the legendary sister of Alexander the Great, then the Panaghia, or the mother earth goddess of the Minoan civilization. She becomes also Leda, and the warrior goddess Athena, and Solomos' Liberty, and finally, Persephone and her mother Demeter who are easily identified with the blacksmith's daughter and the peasant woman in section II of the poem.

The identification or rather the deliberate confusion of the mythic past with contemporary history and place can also be seen in the long poem *Hroniko* (1957) or "Chronicle" which Ritsos published a few years later. Here the action, as the poet states in the Prologue of the poem, unfolds on an island which may or may not be Samos,¹⁰ among the ruins of an ancient temple, pine trees, vineyards and small shops. In a place which centuries ago "was the center of a very important civilization . . . What's left now are the famous ruins of aqueducts, gymnasiums, theaters and some temple - Hera's or Athena's I think." In a place where a priest walks alone on the shores on his way to give communion to aunt Theodora. In a place where the day before yesterday Helen died from cancer of the uterus, and her husband Menelaos, an electrician, drowns his sorrows in wine. Here, the poet continues, more people frequent funerals than weddings, and the women find time to comment on Penelope's dress, on her art of weaving and on the famous shroud she worked on her loom. In *Hroniko*, like in *Romiosini*, as Yatromanolakis has observed, ". . . the sense of memory of the remote past breaks through (in whatever form) and the ancient Greek tradition is located within the (contemporary) Greek space and the present."¹¹

By imposing mythical details on contemporary characters together with allusions to the ancient as well as to the Byzantine and Greek Orthodox traditions, Ritsos illustrates what Keeley has described as the mutilation and sometimes the transformation of past gods and heroes by the violent dislocation of contemporary history. Ritsos' contemporary landscape, sometimes impoverished and bleak, remains haunted by gods and heroes out of the Greek past, however transformed they may be by the poet's unsentimental, historically acute perception, as the inhabitants of his recreated myths and historical episodes are transformed within their ancient settings by the analogous relation to the citizens of Ritsos' contemporary wasteland.¹²

¹⁰ Samos is an island in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Turkey. During the Papadopoulos regime Ritsos was sent into exile and was under house arrest for some time in his wife's home on the island. Many of his poems were written on that island.

¹¹ Yorgos Yatromanolakis, "Ιστορική επιφάνεια και βάθος: μελέτη πάνω σε δύο συνθέσεις του Γιάννη Ρίτσου," *Αφιέρωμα στον Γιάννη Ρίτσο* (Athens, 1981), p. 199 (translated by the author of this study).

¹² Edmund Keeley, *Yannis Ritsos in Repetitions, Testimonies, Parentheses*, (Princeton, 1991) p. xxvii.

This mode on which Ritsos relies in order to accomplish the negation of temporal and spacial dimensions, necessary for the fusion of historical eras, becomes more effective in his mythic monologues which include: *The Dead House* (1959), *Under the Shadow of the Mountain* (1960), *Philoctetes* (1963-1965), *Orestes* (1962-1966), *Ajax* (1967-1969), *Persephone* (1965-1970), *Agamemnon* (1966-1970), *Chrysothemis* (1967-1970), *Helen* (1970), *Ismene* (1966-1971), *The Return of Iphigeneia* (1971-1972), and *Phaedra* (1974-1975). In this collection of twelve long dramatic narratives, eleven of which were published in a volume under the title of *The Fourth Dimension*, (*Phaedra*, published at a later date, is not included in this volume), and beginning with the *Dead House*, the first in the series, Ritsos has managed to recover the authentic human forms of the ancient past and make them accessible once again as a living past of Greek culture. The monologues, as Victor Sokoliuk has suggested, create a discourse between the living and the dead which defines all historical eras. In his interesting and thoughtful essay he states:

The heroes of Yannis Ritsos acquire the ability to see the world in a contemporary-diachronic "fourth dimension", that is, in other words, to confront it not only in the horizontal plane of a contemporary time, but also in a vertical mythological-historical cross-section. In this way, they acquire the ability to come into contact with the objective, eternal, and for this reason, just laws of the Universe. The "fourth dimension" of Ritsos is not the dimension of the past within the contemporary era; it is not the knowledge of the present through that which has past, but the discovery of that common element which brings into fellowship and unites all historical times.¹³

In most of these dramatic monologues the characters, be they male or female, contemplate, move and operate in an undefined space and time. While their identity is kept ambiguous, their association with the past and their identification with mythological characters become evident only from the development of the story and the interaction of the characters with other figures from the relevant myth. In

¹³ Victor Sokoliuk, "Μῦθος σὸ ἔργο τοῦ Γιάννη Ρίτσου: Ἡ τέταρτη διάσταση στὰ 'μυθολογικά' ποιήματα," *Ἀφιέρωμα στὸν Γιάννη Ρίτσο*, p. 394.

Agamemnon (1960-1970), for instance, the vague references to the "marble staircase covered with purple carpets," to the "loud prophetic cries of a raving woman and her inexplicable cries in a foreign tongue," to the bath that the mistress of the house has prepared for her warlord, to the black sunken net, and to the handsome "man with the blood-stained sword in his hand" evoke the myth of Agamemnon as we know it from Aeschylus.

Similar evocations of the mythological past are found also in the other monologues. Here, too, certain references to incidents, events and objects associated with the characters may suggest, for instance, the figures of Electra, Orestes, Chrysothemis, Iphigeneia or Clytemnestra as they appear in the legend of the House of Atreus. Others may be recognized as the mythological figures of Ajax, Philoctetes, Helen or Phaedra. However, many of these references often contain elements that may or may not be directly related to the characters and their historic period or myth. Moreover, the landscape in which these characters function and operate, and objects with which they are associated are often made to fit contemporary setting. Thus major landmarks such as the lion gate, the huge stone walls, the palace and the vaulted tombs which history and myth associate with Agamemnon and ancient Argos figure extensively in several poems. In this supposedly Mycenaean landscape, however, we are invited to visualize also private cars and tourist-buses or "a piece of newspaper that fluttered on the burnt grass," a newspaper reporter clasping under her arm a briefcase where she had placed the interview she conducted a while ago in shorthand, or a mailman who has come to deliver a letter to Chrysothemis.

Such deliberate anachronisms intrude also in *Agamemnon*. In the Prologue, we are told that coming back from a long expedition the warlord enters his house walking on purple carpets. He takes off his military boots and uniform, places his helmet on a console before a large mirror, he slumps into a sofa and begins to speak of his favorite ashtray where the smoke from his cigarette rises above it. The setting, again, is anywhere in the essence of time. While the purple carpets on which the warlord walks may suggest Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the military boots and uniform, the sofa, the ashtray and the cigarette place the figure in a contemporary situation. "The atmosphere of imprecision and synchronism in which historical incidents become one under different names," says Myrsiades, "establishes the poet's

treatment of the past as continuous present history and as isolated phenomena."¹⁴

With regard to the experience the dramatic monologues relate, they are of people who have been stripped of their ancient heroism and glory. They have become portraits of ordinary people with all the concerns and problems of contemporary man. Thus the suffering and remorse, Agamemnon, Ajax, Electra or Orestes, for instance, are trying to articulate, become a metaphor for the tragedy of the poet's own life as well as for the agony all Greeks have experienced in years of turmoil throughout their long history.

Reflecting on the personal as well as on the social, political and historical conditions of the times these monologues were written, it is safe to assume that in these poems the mythological figures serve as masks behind which Ritsos feels free and safe to confess personal experiences and contemporary realities with historical detachment. Thus, like Iphigeneia, in *The Return of Iphigeneia* (1971-1972), the poet can state:

... a beautiful mask ...

As I put it on
I felt as though I'd sunk to the bottom of a dark sea-bed
from which I could see more clearly.

.....

I sensed a distant solemn
protection and a kind of freedom.

That beautiful mask almost took away from me the
responsibility of any motion of mine. I was not myself
anymore;

I was the other; and beneath the other, or within the other
I was entirely myself, myself alone. I could make jumps
I would never have tried before. I rejoiced in
the agility, a joy, a strict skill. My own words,
passing from within the porch of a strange mouth, took on
another daring and another resonance.

... I suddenly revealed and uttered
astonishing truths and deeper sounds that I didn't know
and had never imagined.

¹⁴ Kostas Myrsiades, "The Classical Past in Yannis Ritsos' Dramatic Monologues," *Papers on Language and Literature* 14, 4 (Fall 1978) p. 453.

Masks, like the one Iphigeneia describes, allow the poet to distance himself from his own emotions. Protected behind the mask, Ritsos feels free not only to objectify material events but also to explore any similarities with events of past history and to apply universal values on them. "The mask of a classical persona and the framing of the present in the past," Myrsiades notes,

are necessary to alienate events, to displace them elsewhere and to attribute them to someone else. . . . Only at a distance can he come out of himself, rendered whole enough to look at himself, in himself, to manipulate this experience, to command it, and thus to draw from it the lessons it offers.¹⁵

The mythic monologue *The Dead House* may serve as yet another example that illustrates the point further. Here Ritsos presents the mask of an aged Electra who speaks of her home and her immediate family. While a number of mythological references in the poem may evoke the Mycenaean past, Agamemnon's family and the legendary House of Atreus, certain details in her account are not of one specific historic period. A closer examination of these details may reveal that the narrator is a mirror image of Ritsos himself. The agony and suffering Electra is trying to articulate are not very different from Ritsos's own life and experience. Thus, by keeping a relatively safe distance and by protecting himself behind a mask, the poet can objectify his own emotions. Furthermore, as Pantelis Prevelakis has noted, by creating a mask of a distant mythic world of an unspecified time and place, Ritsos can deal with problems and issues with which, for various reasons, he could not deal openly and directly.

Like Electra, Ritsos also came from an aristocratic family. His house, like the House of Atreus, was beset with tragedy when the poet was still a young boy. At a very young age he witnessed the death of his brother and mother, and the misfortunes of his father who died insane in an asylum. His sister also died insane. Electra's "house of death and destruction" as it is referred to by Sophocles, may have struck Ritsos as an appropriate setting for the tragedy of his own house of death and decay. It would be safe to assume, therefore, that Electra serves as a persona for the poet. Assuming her attributes and by acting in her space and time, Ritsos can speak of his own family's suffering which was indeed very similar to that of Electra's.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 456-57.

The intrusion of personal history and contemporary events can be seen also in Electra's reference to a second brother who left his sisters with his sketch-books, and who has stopped writing to them from the sanatorium. The allusion to a second brother may be as problematic for the reader as it was for the messenger in the poem. The myth as we know it, assigns one son to Agamemnon's family. Confused by the insane woman's reference to the younger brother, the messenger wonders to himself as he leaves the house: "And the younger brother with the artistic tendencies? Who was he?" Given the fact that since childhood the poet was fond of poetry, music, dancing, acting and painting, it would be safe to assume that the reference to the second brother alludes to Ritsos himself. As for the reference to the sanatorium, the poet's biographical accounts lead us to the same conclusion. Like his mother and brother, Ritsos also suffered from tuberculosis. For five years frequent relapses forced him to live alone in an abandoned home in Monemvasia or to enter various sanatoria.

In the decades of the 1960 and 1970 when the monologues and many of the short poems with mythological themes, like those in *Testimonies II* (1964-1965) and *Repetitions* (1968-1969) were produced, Greece was experiencing one of the most devastating and politically unstable periods of her history. "The Greek political situation," notes Keeley, "became more and more incoherent and finally resulted in a vicious dictatorship that cost the poet his personal freedom."¹⁶ The situation, therefore, Chrysothemis describes in *Chrysothemis* (1967-1972), may very well reflect not only the political climate in the country, but also the sense of confusion, futility, oppression or despair people and the poet himself felt at that time. The section of the poem deserves to be quoted in full for a better appreciation of the situation described.

And suddenly

thousand of loud hoofbeats were heard down on the
plain and on the roads –
the horsemen were advancing behind the poplar trees; they
were closing the passes;
some flags at half-mast and others unfurled in the
barrage of gunshots.
You couldn't tell who was coming and who was leaving

¹⁶ Edmund Keeley, *Yannis Ritsos*, p. xviii.

– or what was going on. Some were running,
others hiding, others were writing something on their
knees,
others were killing themselves,
others were being executed at daybreak in front of
the brick factory,
others were working together, the two buttons on their vests
unbuttoned still.

Abandoned cattle wandered about the marketplace, weary,
looking at watches, mirrors, the display windows
of the stores,
as if they were shopping for a new fur. An old set of
balancing scales
had fallen on its back in the large storeroom. People
set up the scales temporarily
and began again to weigh sacks, barrels, boxes,
baskets, cans, demijohns. Others weighed their small
children.
A man brought a bird to be weighed. The bird flew away;
it left through the door.
The man shouted: "It's weightless, I'm weightless, we're
flying" –
and opened up his arms wide as though he were ready to
fly.

His laughter was heard past midnight, close to the river.

And then nothing. Neither curses nor cheers. Silence
was the only form of freedom left. In the abandoned
gardens
the nettles, daffodils and some kind of strange thistles
with unfamiliar golden flowers like stars of desolation
grew tall. The wells dried up –
if you dropped a stone in, it would strike a rock and the
sound would continue
to an endless depth; and if you'd look inside,
a solitary eye, dark, without eyelashes, looked back at you
in the eye,
making your entire face hollow, like a bottomless hole.

Later, long cold spells set in. Flocks of wolves came down to the villages, and the city. Everyone locked themselves in their houses. It even snowed.

An indescribable whiteness had covered the roofs, trees, memory,

like piety, like remission – like that veil I was telling you about –

and behind the whiteness you could make out all of the blackness, unfragmented, painless, peaceful.

During the harsh years of the Papadopoulos military dictatorship, Ritsos spent a great deal of his time in and out of various hospitals or detention camps for political prisoners on the islands of Yaros, Leros, Aghios Efstratios, in places with which he was already familiar from previous incarcerations and exiles in the 40s and 50s. He was also the subject of numerous house arrests in Athens and in his family residence on the island of Samos.

The humiliation, the physical and psychological tortures he endured in those places of isolation and exile, combined with the devastating experience of poverty, disease, madness and death he witnessed in earlier years became Ritsos' constant companions and provided the source for themes and images in his poetry. This does not mean, however, that Ritsos' poetry is autobiographical in the strict sense of the word. The images of isolation, exile, despair and suffering the mythic poems in *Testimonies*, *Repetitions*, or the long monologues project often transcend the personal level. Through the poet's masterful use of metaphor and a Cavafean or Euripidean irony, the poems offer a universal statement about the devastating conditions people are subjected to in life by wars and forces beyond their control.

In the dramatic monologue *Ajax* (1967-1969), a work representative of this genre, heroic Ajax has been reduced to represent the tragedy of an ordinary man who was caught in the web of such forces. Having served his country with passion and dignity, Ajax now finds himself abandoned and rejected by all those he once considered friends and allies. In the monologue the poet concentrates on the emotional state of the man who has been wronged by his comrades through lies and deceptions. Addressing a nameless figure, Ajax states his feelings with visible bitterness and irony in his voice:

None of you has ever asked me what I think and what I see,
what terrors,
what injustices, or envy I have to face (I, being fearless,
you see), or at least
if I have a toothache, or a headache, as if I didn't
have teeth or a head, but stones or plain air. . .

No one ever asked to share some of my suffering.
You, the innocent, the cunning, the desperate, the
ambitious, had nothing but selfish admiration for
me, never love, only pretentious admiration. Moreover,
you get angry at my indisposition, as if I've
betrayed you.

And he continues:

My old achievements seem like lies. All the prizes meant
for me, others have usurped through crafty means and
briberies; when during the hour of judgement in the life
of the Greeks,

I cast into the helmet not fresh lumps of earth
but my big, conspicuous, wedding ring and came forth first
confronting the enemy body to body.

.....

And again. . . when Hector
charged unrestrained on the trenches, I was first
to confront him face to face. The Atreidae don't seem to
remember these;
they care only for pillage and rewards. Let them apportion
these
with fraud, deceit and fear – until when? One day
they too will stand naked before the night and its long
road;

On the mythological level the lines remind us of the famous speech in Sophocles' play. A closer look, however, may reveal that the mythological figure may be a mask behind which Ritsos hides to express his bitter disappointment at his countrymen, some of whom were once

his fellow comrades, for not recognizing his struggles and the struggles of others like him for the liberation of their country from the German invaders. Instead of a recognition for his contribution to the common struggle, the poet was punished with various exiles and imprisonments reserved for criminals.

The same conclusion can be drawn in the manner of another mythological figure, namely that of Iphigeneia. In the monologue *The Return of Iphigeneia* the daughter of Agamemnon, addressing her brother across the table, states:

Whatever sympathy
our two sisters had shown me when I was sick
changed to aversion. They avoided looking at me,
as if I had offended them in some way that they didn't want
to confess,
as though I'd betrayed some secret of theirs. And so
I was left alone at last, necessarily alone
so I could get acquainted with my new face. They left me in
peace
in whatever room I might find myself.

And in few lines later she exclaims:

My God! how alone we are, and strangers in spite of our
common fate.

In his treatment of the figure of Iphigeneia, Ritsos adds a new dimension to the myth as we know it from Euripides' play. In the monologue, Orestes and his sister are brought together at their ancestral home. Sitting opposite her brother, Iphigeneia reminisces past events. The tone of her voice is filled with bitterness and disappointment. The experiences and events she relates are anywhere in the essence of time. However, given the fact that the poem was written at the time Ritsos was hospitalized in Athens, and also during his exile on the island of Samos where he was placed under house arrest at his wife's home, the references may very well allude to Ritsos' own experiences. Protected behind the mask of Iphigeneia, the poet now feels safe from the government censors to voice his protest against the treatment he received by his captors and torturers despite his frail health. Moreover, like Ajax, Iphigeneia becomes a cry of anguish against the apathy and indifference some friends and relatives showed him at a

time he needed their support and love. The feelings of isolation, betrayal, neglect and abandonment Ritsos experienced in the harsh years of incarceration and ill health stayed with him even after the restoration of democracy and political stability in Greece. In 1981, while discussing his personal life and experience with Ozdemir Ince, Ritsos, like his Iphigeneia addressing Orestes, confesses:

Excluding my wife and my daughter, in essence I have no family. I am alone, all alone. I came from an aristocratic background and my relatives never accepted the fact that I am a communist. As far as they are concerned, I never existed. Now that my fame as a poet is well known in the world, they try, in their way, to reestablish ties with me. When they call, I hang up on them . . . One of the most bitter experiences for me was when I saw the son of my cousin appointed governor of Athens by the colonels at the time I was in a prison camp.¹⁷

In spite of all the humiliation he suffered, however, the poet does not always allow despair to take complete control. 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 receive its proper appreciation. If there is anything for which he was grateful to his adversaries, 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 for his existence and the existence of the world. Thus he states:

. . . 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 depths of my existence, but also the existence of the world.¹⁸

For his sense of optimism in the darkest hours of his life, and his belief in man's creative spirit in spite of all antithetical forces, or perhaps on account of them, Ritsos points to his poem "Method for Optimism" from *Stones* (1968). The poem deserves to be quoted in full for its sensibility and the insight it offers:

¹⁷ Yannis Ritsos in Ozdemir Ince, *Συνάντηση*, pp. 113-14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 118.

A rancorous man – he would remember all that was gloomy
 – this is what he underlined;
 indeed, he would generalize, somewhat arbitrarily and
 persuasively together – a system
 that was profound, obscure, and probably foreseeing.
 Everything was dark, almost black –
 furniture, faces, windows, time. For all that, his face
 remained luminous, suffused with a certain secret happi-
 ness – perhaps because he had the ability
 of discerning in the dark, of discerning the dark itself, and
 even the four bronze bullets gleaming in the distance, on
 the large bed
 where the two beautiful dead reposed in a position of
 sexual intercourse.¹⁹

Motivated by such a profound understanding, Helen, who may func-
 tion as yet another mask for Ritsos in the monologue *Helen* (1970),
 finds the strength to show tolerance and understanding towards her
 abusive servants who mock her mercilessly.

The servants get inexplicably furious with me, they throw
 the broom
 here, right into the middle of the room, and go into the
 kitchen; I hear them
 making coffee in big pots, spilling sugar on the floor –

.....

“A coffee for me too,” I call to the servants;
 “a coffee,” (that’s all I ask for; I don’t want anything else).

They
 act as though they don’t hear.

.....

The servants loath me. I hear them opening my drawers at
 night,
 taking the lacey things, the jewels, the gold coins; who can
 tell
 if they’ll leave me with a single decent dress for some
 necessary hour

¹⁹Translated by Kimon Friar in *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems*, eds. and trans.
 K. Friar and K. Myrsiades (New York, 1989) pp. 207-08.

or a single pair of shoes. They even took my keys
 from under my pillow; I didn’t stir at all; I pretended I was
 asleep –

.....

One day, when I felt a little better, I asked them again
 to make up my face. They did. I asked for a mirror.
 They had painted my face green, with a black mouth.
 “Thank you,” I told them,
 as though I hadn’t seen anything strange. They were
 laughing . . .

In spite of her servants’ cruelty and contemptuous behavior, how-
 ever, Helen realizes that not only she needs them as much as they
 need her, but also that their disfunctional coexistence is necessary.
 Thus, instead of condemnation she offers the following consolation
 to herself:

What would I do without them? “Patience, patience,”
 I tell myself;
 “patience” – and this too is the smallest form of victory,

.....

I watch them as though I were in the theatre – with no
 humiliation or grief,
 or indignation – for what purpose? – But I kept telling
 myself:

“One day we’ll die,” “One day you will,” and that
 was a sure revenge, fear and consolation.²⁰

In the few examples presented in this study an attempt has been
 made to illustrate that just as Ritsos confuses temporal and spatial
 dimensions in his poems, he also confuses the personalities of his
 characters so that they, too, retain a certain imprecision and
 contemporaneity. This deliberate confusion of events and figures was
 the poet’s way to articulate the remarkable synchronicity he saw in
 history and myth. By approaching myth from a fresh, unprejudiced
 vantage point, Ritsos forces us to reevaluate the past and our relation-
 ship to it. And in doing so he has restored myth to its original function:
 to help orient the self in his environment.

²⁰Trans. G. Mac Ewen and Nikos Tsingos and appearing in *Myrsiades, Yannis Ritsos:
 Selected Poems*, pp. 276-78.