

NOTES

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

² Yannis Ritsos, "Η Σονάτα του Σελινόφωτος," in Τέταρτη Διάσταση (Athens: Kedros, 1972).

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

⁴ Peter Bien, "Ritsos' Painterly Technique in Short and Long Poems," *To Γιοφούι* 11 (1990-91), 5-11.

Ritsos' Melian Women and Aeschylus' Eumenides

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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.¹ 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

the night, ghosts, you might say," a phrase which alludes to Aeschylus' well-known descriptions of the Erinyes in *Eumenides* 321-322 ("mother night who gave me birth"), 416 ("we are the children of gloomy night"), and 792-793 ("how greatly dishonored are we unfortunate daughters of night"). Through invoking the *Eumenides*, I will suggest, Ritsos joins Aeschylus in "mythmaking" and conveys a message that, while alluding to the ancient tragedian, makes a poetic statement that counters and also transcends the ancient prototype.

In her discussion of the *Oresteia*, Froma Zeitlin has suggested that Aeschylus constructs a non-canonical genealogy when he describes the Erinyes as the "daughters of night."² In the Hesiodic tradition (*Theogony* 185), the Erinyes spring from the drops of blood that fall to Earth (Gaia) from the severed genitalia of Ouranos: Hesiod's Erinyes have a father *and* a mother. Aeschylus' goddesses, by contrast, are born of only a female parent. This new mythmaking, as Zeitlin terms it, is part of the program of the *Oresteia* trilogy, which presents the evolution of justice from its origins in family-based blood vengeance to its administration by the male-dominated polis. In order to present this male appropriation as progressive and positive, Aeschylus paints the Erinyes specifically and the "female principle" generally in negative, not to say grotesque, terms: these goddesses "champion a justice which is judged blind, archaic, barbaric and regressive."³ Their presence in the city and in sacred places brings pollution and contagion. Most noticeably, these gruesome chthonic deities are obsessed with the womb, and they recognize the mother as the only "true parent" of the child. For them, blood-kinship as traced through the woman is the foundation of all family and social ties, superseding the claims of the father who, from their gynocentric perspective, remains an outsider to the strictly female activity of procreation. By the end of the trilogy, however, Apollo's and Athena's

pro-male arguments prevail: not only has Zeus sanctioned marriage, as demonstrated by the Olympian's own wedding to Hera, but the children of marriage must trace the source of life directly to the male, rather than to the female. The true parent, states Apollo, is "he who mounts" (*Eum.* 660), and the woman simply nurtures the male-planted seed. Apollo reinforces his argument with a myth: Athena herself sprang from the head of her father Zeus, thereby demonstrating that the life-giving force resides not within the female but within the male. Athena's extreme example of a motherless birth demonstrates, in Apollo's argument, that the male life-source is sufficient unto itself and requires no female nurturing.⁴ By the end of the *Eumenides*, Athena succeeds in persuading the Erinyes to bless the land of Attica: transformed into Eumenides, the formerly dreadful deities find themselves tamed and, in a wedding procession symbolic of their marriage to the state, take up their residence in a cave on the acropolis from which they will function as goddesses of blessing and civic order. Among the crimes these reformed goddesses will forbid is the shedding of young men's blood (*Eum.* 956-959) and the outbreak of civil war ("stasis": *Eum.* 976-978) in the city. In Aeschylus, the marriage of the Erinyes to the polis establishes a new order in which family-based blood-vengeance gives way to the morally superior civic administration of justice. Male and female come together in a dynamic in which the female is subservient to the male so that human life and society may continue to thrive.

Ritsos wrote his "Annihilation of Melos" in 1969 while under house arrest on the island of Samos during the regime of the Papadopoulos colonels. The poem was smuggled off the island and published in *New Texts (Nea Keimena)* by Kedros Press in 1971. The 263-page volume is a collection of essays, poems and short dramas written by political prisoners and other opponents of the 1967-74 Junta. It is a sequel to the original *Eighteen Texts*, published in summer 1970, by

the “intellectual” victims of the dictatorship who had refused to submit their writings to the state censors.⁵ These silenced writers challenged the government’s policy by illegally publishing uncensored manuscripts in *Eighteen Texts*. In *New Texts*, more speak up, much like the long-silent women of Melos who at first cannot believe that they are hearing their own voices. Written under such circumstances, Ritsos’ poem, with its direct invocation of the Athenian destruction of Melos in 416 B.C. as recounted in Thucydides 5.84-116 and its echoes of Aeschylus, makes a powerful statement about freedom and suppression, right and wrong, male and female, and even life and death. Although the stimulus for his poem clearly lies in the contemporary period, he creates a work which comments in diachronic fashion on themes and issues that fairly pervade the Greek cultural tradition. Ritsos clearly views himself not so much as a poet of the left opposing a specific political regime, but as a poet of resistance, specifically as a poet of the Greek spirit of resistance and regeneration.

Like Aeschylus’ Erinyes, Ritsos’ Melian women are closely associated with the womb.

Huddling together to speak in hushed voices, they sit on the ground “cross-legged, with head on knees, like the baby folded inside the belly.” Thus stooped in a fetal position, they share the memories that would occur to them “when doing housework or else in bed in the evening, right here in the stomach, farther down, near the navel, a knot, a lump hollow and heavy.” Also like the Erinyes, these women are repositories of memory, especially the memory of blood relatives. In their former life on Melos, which now seems only a hazy dream, they prepared for weddings and baptisms and kept track of who was born and who died. They recall with horror how, during the Athenian attack, “the blind beggar on the steps of St. Nicholas was stretching out his hand. A soldier cut it off with one stroke of the sword, picked

it up off the ground. The blood was gushing a river – ‘take it,’ he told him, he threw it at his knees.” But these atrocities, the women comment, are perpetrated by no barbarians: immediately after describing these attackers “from a foreign land,” they add, “And they were, they say, Greeks too.” Herein lies the point of Ritsos’ departure from his Aeschylean prototype. Whereas Aeschylus presents his frightful female goddesses of blood-vengeance as alien to Athenian values and as potentially destabilizing the state, Ritsos accentuates that the atrocities committed against the Melian women (and perhaps as well on himself and his fellow resisters) were perpetrated by males who were also kinsmen with their male and female victims. Just as the Thucydidean “Melian Dialogue” draws attention to a blatant contradiction between ancient Athenian political rhetoric and Athenian aggression against fellow Greeks during the Peloponnesian War, Ritsos’ poem draws attention to the fact that the oppression of citizens committed by the 1967-74 Junta was perpetrated against members of the same ethnic group: a state crime, as it were, is transformed into a family crime. In terms of censorship, Greeks of the Junta were attempting to suppress and silence fellow Greeks. Especially arresting is Ritsos’ anachronism: the beggar whose hand is cut off by the Athenian aggressor is sitting on the steps of St. Nicholas. This chronologically confused image of a Greek Orthodox church whose sacred space is violated in a pre-Christian period underlines what Ritsos may view as a contradiction between the motto of the Junta (“A Greece of Christian Greeks”) and the anti-Christian, as well as anti-Greek, actions of the colonels. But the anachronism is more than a rhetorical device. Ritsos here poses a counter-definition of Greekness, *Romiosini*, and he relocates the regenerative spirit of the Greek soul, for want of a more precise term, in the female, since it is the male, in his reworking of the myth, that brings about destruction, pollution and contagion. The modern poet joins Aeschylus

in mythmaking in order to establish a new myth that refutes the ancient poet.⁶

Just as Aeschylus' Erinyes are transformed by the end of the trilogy into kindly goddesses of blessing, so do Ritsos' Melian women undergo a transformation. After the slaughter of their sons and husbands, these same women were tossed like so many sacks of bones into slave ships and transported to strange lands. They could hear their elbows knock against the deck with a thud: "our bones were inside those sacks." Such an image suggests that Ritsos' Melian women are intimately associated with the dead. Indeed, the vision of bones in bags recalls the sight of exhumed remains often collected in pillow cases and preserved in the ossuaries of cemeteries throughout the Greek countryside. These collected bones, according to the Orthodox tradition, lie in anticipation of the Second Coming, the Universal Resurrection, when they will be fleshed out and restored to life in a new and transfigured body.⁷ But the women describe themselves as more than a pile of bones: "That word 'fatherland' is in us, and that word 'freedom' is in us, in us, and that other one, freedom's mate, 'death,' grazes on our entrails, like our husbands' seed, and it swells, filling us again." In the epilogue, the old and shriveled black-clad widows "look out. Their faces seem to be turning rosy – you'd think they were becoming young." They see a new Melos rising from the sea and feel themselves miraculously teeming with life: "Eh, pregnant again, in our seventies and eighties, to give birth again to many children, to a thousand children, island boys and girls, to give birth again to rosy-cheeked Melos." They fear at first that they are hallucinating in seeing themselves as giving birth on diaphanous islands in an azure sea: "Lord, have we gone out of our minds? Lord, have we died and emerged as night-walkers from the other side of the world?" But the prose epilogue assures us that this is no hallucination: "And their bellies, it's true, seem to be swelling."

It is especially interesting to note that, as the women describe their miraculous pregnancy, they refer to themselves with the term normally associated with illegitimate conception: they call themselves "*gastromenes*." Herein may lie Ritsos' point: with their husbands dead and gone ("not a male soul was left"), these women, in a manner both marvelous and illegitimate, regenerate not only their families but also their nation. The women respond to this inexplicable conception by making the sign of the cross: "Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy, Lord, have mercy – we cross ourselves; there's our hand, – we see it, there it is making the sign of the cross, and there is its shadow on the terrace – a hand worthy, ah, Lord, again to hold the bread, the infant, the knife, the flag." In this miracle, the female is not presented in Aeschylean terms as subservient to the male but, rather, as autonomous and self-sustaining. The women who initially questioned whether or not they existed in the past see the shadow of their hand: a proof of their corporeal reality. Through recollecting, they have not only verified their past existence but also ensured their future existence. That future, furthermore, embraces not only the immediate bloodline but also the nation: their hands will clutch both infant and flag. Something similar may be said of Ritsos' view of himself as a repository of ethnic memory who, in giving birth to poems, tended to identify with the "female principle."

It may be worth noting in this context that, while imprisoned in concentration camps during the 1967-1974 Junta and also after the 1944-1949 Civil War, Ritsos made a practice of burying his poems in the earth. His poems are quite literally chthonic, rooted specifically in the soil of Greece. It is as if he subjects the writings that emerge from within him to a symbolic death and burial so that they may ultimately rise in resurrection. That resurrection, like the miraculous parthenogenesis of the Melian women, occurs spontaneously. The sacks containing the women's bones, the

poet reminds us, also contain the words “freedom,” “death,” and “fatherland,” and these are the words which flesh out the bones to give birth to new life. It may be no coincidence that these very ingredients – bones and freedom – occur in Dionysios Solomos’ “Ode to Liberty,” which states explicitly that freedom is “extracted from the bones of the ancient Hellenes.” Ritsos appears to be invoking these associations in order to establish a direct, if mystical, link between word and matter. He may be viewed as symbolically somatizing his poetry, in a manner suggestive of incarnation: just as the union of bones and words in the Melian sacks gives rise to new creation, so does the poet poeticize his sufferings (as well as those of his compatriots) in order to generate new life. That new life, in turn, is more than a mere idea: it becomes a corporeal reality – in this case, the poem itself.

For Ritsos, therefore, unlike for Aeschylus, the survival and regeneration of human society is not dependent on a political construct or institution: his Melian women do not take new husbands in order to conceive, since they can give birth on their own. Similarly, the poet as an autonomous and self-sustaining entity is empowered to engender the poem that celebrates this incarnation. The poet presents a vision in which the forces of life and death, of freedom and oppression, and even of male and female, perpetually interact with one another. In the final tableau, four young men carry a white church on their shoulders and bid the women good morning – another anachronism suggesting an unbroken cultural continuum from antiquity into the modern period. In this continuum, the poet sees not a subjugation of one element by another (i.e., not a civilizing marriage of the savage female to the taming male, as in Aeschylus), but an infinite tug-of-war in which the forces of destruction and death mysteriously activate the cries of freedom and fatherland that reside within human bones. But it is important to note that, in this resurrection of Melos, the new island is

more than a continuum or mere replacement of the old. The new place, by contrast, is a transfigured reality: the women describe what they see as “just like on Melos” (i.e., not as Melos itself as they knew it). This new terrain is clearly recognizable, therefore, but it *is* a new creation. Such are the distinguishing characteristics of a transfigured body.⁸

George Pilitis observed in one of his last essays that Ritsos’ longer poems almost consistently end with a “a message of hope and resurrection...[and present] the poet’s vision of a better future for humankind.”⁹ He also maintained that, for this poet, “antithetical forces...may be necessary in life. Opposition must be endured in order for the positive creativity of the human spirit to triumph.... 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.”¹⁰ This observation is borne out in such poems as “Smoke-Blackened Pot,” which ends with a benediction, “Blessed be our bitterness. Blessed be the world now being born.” It is also evident in the end of the *Epitaphios*, as the mourning mother declares that her son is not dead but living deep inside her veins. In similar fashion, the Melian women, as repositories of memory, choose not to confine their memory to merely recent crimes and injustices. Like the poet himself, they recall the resilience of the race from eternity. In the final analysis, therefore, Ritsos’ poem presents a vision that may be said to transcend also that of Thucydides. The ancient historian recounted the events of his day because he believed that such events were likely to happen again “in accordance with human nature” (*kata to anthropinon*). But Ritsos sees more than the recurrence of a

power struggle in his poem. For, in addition to a repetition of atrocities, he presents a repeated response in which the power of life ultimately prevails over that of death. Exactly how this life-giving power prevails remains a mystery. Aeschylus explained the mystery of the survival of humanity and civilization through the myths of Athena's motherless birth and the solely female origins of the Erinyes. Ritsos counters with a new myth, the parthenogenesis of the Melian women, since this myth explains *his* reality: Melos was not, in the end, obliterated or annihilated, just as the censored poet was not, in the end, silenced. As a manifestation of the poet's and the women's autonomous regenerative memory and self-procreating capacities, the once-annihilated island has been restored to life. The poem entitled "The Annihilation of Melos" is, in the end, an exercise in poetic paradox because it presents Melos' reappearance in a transfigured form: there is no annihilation in the annihilation of Melos, just as there is no silence in the silencing of the poet. I would go so far as to suggest that, for this poet, there is no death in death. If Ritsos is to be read as a poet of resistance, we must conclude that the ultimate target of his resistance is neither a specific regime nor a particular myth or philosophy. Such particulars serve, rather, as a springboard that launch him into the poetic act which, for him, is the defiance and resistance of death itself, his final target. The poet's memory, like the Melian women, thus presents an historical event of death and destruction as the precondition for a new life that manifests itself in the corporeal reality that is both the island and the poem. It is in this tension and oscillation, I suggest, that Ritsos posits the locus for the Greek – and perhaps also for the human – soul as the seat of resistance for any and all forces that would diminish or obliterate life.¹¹

NOTES

¹ For an English translation of the poem, see Rick M. Newton, trans., "Yannis Ritsos: The Annihilation of Melos," *The Charioteer* 29-30 (1987-88), 168-193.

² Froma Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," in *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, ed. John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 159-194.

³ See Zeitlin, "Dynamics," 172.

⁴ Note that Aeschylus departs from Hesiod also in the genealogy of Athena: neither Apollo nor Athena makes reference to Zeus' swallowing of Metis, Athena's mother. Just as Aeschylus suppresses the element of the male in the genealogy of the Erinyes, so also he suppresses the female element in his recounting of the birth of Athena.

⁵ See Willis Barnstone, ed., *Eighteen Texts: Writings by Contemporary Greek Authors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). Besides Ritsos' poem (see above, note 1), only two essays from *New Texts* are available in English: Rachel Hadas, trans., "Georgios-Alexandros Mangakis: 'My Greece,'" *Charioteer* 19 (1977), 65-81; and Rick M. Newton, trans., "Pavlos A. Zannas: 'Bottle in the Sea,'" *Rackham Literary Studies* 5 (1974), 1-7.

⁶ For a discussion of Ritsos' 'anti-classical' concept of Greekness, see Rick M. Newton "Yannis Ritsos: Poet of *Romiosini*," *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 17-18 (2000-2001), 69-90.

⁷ See Loring M. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 67-69.

⁸ Note, for example, the poem's closing reference to "the first potter" who passes by and greets the women. Ritsos may intend here a reference to Mark 14:13, in which Jesus tells his disciples to follow a "man carrying a jug of water" who will lead them to the house where the Passover will be celebrated. Those who follow "the first potter" will meet Christ in the Passover and in the resurrection through which mortals pass from death into life.

⁹ George Pilitsis, "Yannis Ritsos: A Poet of Resilience and Hope," *Journal of Modern Hellenism* 17-18 (2000-2001), 91-105, esp. 102. See also the introduction to George Pilitsis, *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems (1935-1989)* (Brookline, Mass.: Hellenic College Press, 2001), 1-34.

¹⁰ See Pilitsis, "Resilience and Hope," 104.

¹¹ George Pilitsis, *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems*, 16, cites a statement by Kimon Friar on the ultimate mysticism of the poet's message: "[The im-

ages and thus the message]...must often be vague, necessarily, because the sources or inspiration from which they arise are themselves vague, having their origin in the inexplicability of life itself. In such verses, the poem does not reside in any one line or image or symbol but in an interplay between all elements that set up correspondences and incongruities and connote more than they denote." See Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades, *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems 1938-1988* (Brockport, New York, 1989), 434.

Classical Roots of T.S. Eliot's Christian Odyssey

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A circular pathway illustrating the journey of a soul through time winds through both pagan and Christian sources. For both Homer and T.S. Eliot, for example, using the pattern of a circle to signify a spiritual odyssey proceeded out of both authors' perception of the soul as a map to be read and followed from the beginning to the end of the journey, for both of whom the points of departure and return are the same. The odyssey of a modern individual bears parallels to the odyssey of Homer's ancient traveler in such a way as to reveal the psychological point of homecoming on the map of the mythical journey as the unconscious depths from which myth arose. Ancient Greek and Christian sources overlap when narrators tell the story of a traveler through time as the representation of the soul yearning for the home that reunites self with meaning. Centuries before Eliot published his *Four Quartets* in 1944, Homer wrote of Odysseus' return to Ithaca as a return back in time to the ground of his being. His journey is repeatedly diverted by god-sent worlds of pain and pleasure, each intermixed and borne within the other, the pleasure heavy with the threat of death to the soul, and the pain, conversely, offering life if overcome.

The point for both travelers of the pagan and Christian narratives is to avoid the temptation to lose faith in the goal, to continue to endure the process of getting there no matter what experiences have transpired along the way. In Book 13 of *The Odyssey*, entitled "Ithaca At Last," Odysseus cries out