

Yannis Ritsos  
was perhaps  
Greece's greatest  
contemporary  
poet.

A prolific writer, he was the author of over 50 volumes of verse, as well as plays, from *Tractor*, published in 1934, to the tenth volume of his *Poems* (1988). His poetic stature was legendary in his own country. Nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1975 and 1986, he was also widely celebrated and translated abroad, where he was the recipient of numerous awards, among them the Grand International Prize for Poetry awarded in Belgium in 1972, and the Lenin Prize (1977).

Born in the Laconian town of Monemvasia in 1909, Ritsos' poetic career was launched in the late 1920s with the publication of his first poems. This was the era of the so-called "Thirties generation" associated with the magazine *Ta Nea Grammata*. Reacting against the excessive rhetoric and lyricism that pervaded much Greek verse, and inspired by the poetry of Karyotakis and Cavafy, the early 1930s represents a turning point in Greek poetry. Apart from Ritsos, the early 1930s saw Elytis' debut, the publication of Sikelianos' last poems, and of Seferis' sequence *Mythistorema*.

Like many of his contemporaries, Ritsos' perceptions were profoundly influenced by the tense political and social situation that characterised the aftermath of the 1922 Anatolian calamity and the massive influx of destitute refugees into Greece. His commitment to socialist revolution was evident as early as *Tractor* which contains hymns to Marx and to the USSR, and which concludes with a diatribe against society's rottenness and the poet's moral outrage. In a manner reminiscent of Varnalis, whose work was an early influence on the poet, Ritsos also celebrates Christ as the archetypal social revolutionary.

Of all Yannis Ritsos' poems, perhaps *Epitaphios* (1936), an overtly political poem, is his best-known. It is an expression of outrage at the killing and wounding of hundreds of striking Thessalonian tobacco workers by the police, and was publicly burned and banned with other "seditious books" during the Metaxas dictatorship (1936-1941). Set to music by Mikis Theodorakis in the 1950s, *Epitaphios* reached an immense audience and was adopted as an unofficial "anthem" by the Left, becoming a rallying cry during periods of political crises.

To describe Ritsos as a political poet, however, is misleading. During his lifetime the poet himself denounced such reductive readings. For just as the diction of *Epitaphios* is influenced by Greek folk poetry, and alludes in its imagery and title to Greek Orthodox ritual, so Ritsos' verse is personal and metaphorical. In 1937 Ritsos published *The Song of My Sister*, another elegiac poem, but this time a lamentation of his sister's insanity. Like Vrettakos' *Epistle of the Swan* which appeared in the same year, *The Song of My Sister* was received as a forceful condemnation of the Metaxas regime. Thus, Ritsos' poetry is both personal and political. However diverse in content, it registers an awareness that only through evocation of specific experiences, can some relation to the universal be sustained.

*The Song of My Sister* marked Ritsos' departure from the rigid metrics and rhyme schemes that had characterised his previous volumes, and a tendency towards a more experimental lyrical free verse. Thereafter, although Ritsos

continued to exploit the possibilities of traditional metres such as the *dekapentasyllavos* (or fifteen-syllable iambic line), metrical conventions often gave way to a genre of aural poetry. His later verse makes ingenious use of vocal sound patterns, while the recurrence of musical motifs in many of the poet's titles after 1937 is also suggestive; from *Spring Symphony* (1938) to *The March of the Ocean* (1940), *Old Mazurka in a Rhythm of the Rain* (1943) and *Moonlight Sonata* (1956).

Ritsos' lyricism is often qualified by his attention to dramatic situation, relying on a third person dramatic narrative, as he evokes people and places, in scenes that are everyday. An analogy might be drawn in this context with painting: from 1926, when he began composing poetry and drawing, art remained a preoccupation. At the same time, discussing his volume *The Neighbourhoods of the World* (1957), Ritsos likened his poems to episodes in a novel, in which characters reappear and move through distinct but related fictional situations. In fact Ritsos' verse alternates between long, expatiatory poems, and the "miniature", at times epigrammatic, poetry collected in *Testimonies I* (1963) and *Testimonies II* (1966). In these volumes the poet describes scenarios such as a woman beating egg-whites in a bowl, a seamstress with her mouth full of pins, a couple drinking afternoon tea. Any reassurance elicited by the familiar, domestic milieu, is countered by persistent images of threat: knives, blood stains, sudden awakenings in the middle of the night. In such disjointed settings violence becomes as inconspicuous, and as routine, as the slitting of a water-melon.

Similarly an elaborate parallelism is sustained between historical periods. Images of locked rooms and shuttered buildings recur throughout Ritsos' writing. The space of the house with its corridors, stairs, and furnishings, becomes a locus for the interaction of personal reminiscences with history. Thus, in *Moonlight Sonata*, a woman in mourning sits with a young man in a large and shadowy room. In this instance, despite the oppressive introspection implied by the murky interior, the presence of two windows intimates a way out. As the poet expresses it elsewhere:

"The song's a high window. It looks out onto the road, it looks out onto the sky." *Trial* (1943)

In *The Dead House* (1962), contemporary and mythological narratives are inextricably bound up and the poem's narrator is both an old woman reminiscing about an elegant past in her now impoverished house and an Electra declaiming her father's death at Mycenae. It is precisely such temporal overlappings that imbue Ritsos' space with its resonant dimensions. Opposites are juxtaposed, giving his poetry a complexity that co-exists with what Ritsos called a "simplicity":

"I hide behind simple things so that you'll find me; if you don't find me, you'll find the things, you'll touch what my hand has touched, our hand-prints will merge." *Parentheses* (1946-47)

Throughout his life, Ritsos was made to pay for his political convictions and lasting commitment to communism. Arrested in 1948 for his involvement in the National Liberation Front (EAM), he was exiled first to Lemnos, and then to the prison camp on the island of Makronissos with the poets Karouzos and Livaditis, where he was obliged to bury his poems in bottles to preserve them. His published work was banned throughout Greece. After a period of intense creativity and relative freedom during the 1950s, in which he married Falitsa Georgiadis, a doctor on the island of Samos, Ritsos was once again arrested and exiled under the Papadopoulos dictatorship – to the island of Yaros, and later to Leros. This was an experience that had a permanent effect upon his health. He remained under house arrest on Samos until 1970.

There is no doubt that Ritsos will occupy a unique position in the history of twentieth-century Greek, and indeed, European literature. He was the heir to such distinguished poets as Solomos, Karyotakis, Sikelianos, and Palamas. Palamas himself acknowledged this as early as 1937 in a quatrain to Ritsos in which he concluded: "We step aside, Poet, that you may pass." It is significant, too, that Ritsos should have headed his volume *Vigil* (1954) with a quotation from Solomos' *The Free Besieged*: "Forever open, forever

vigilant the eye of my soul."

A poet of immense stature, Ritsos' bravery and relentless pursuit of poetry in the face of persecution, remained a poignant example for the Greek nation, who suffered many hardships during this period.

The day after he died all of Greece was in mourning, with many of the kiosks in Athens boarded up, as a sign of respect. "That's why the birds cry out," Ritsos once wrote, "to cover the defeat of serene death."