

George Andreiomenos (ed.), Γιάννης Ρίτσος, *Πρώιμα ποιήματα και πεζά*. Athens: Kedros 2018. Pp. 288.
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‘Born to be a poet’ was the title under which George Andreiomenos initially presented a section of his introduction to the present volume. This admirably conveys the impression created by Ritsos’ first poems and prose pieces.

In presenting previously unpublished works from the period 1924–1934 A. has done readers and students of Ritsos’ vast oeuvre a great service. We now have the prehistory of the poet’s first collections, which appeared in the mid-1930s (*Τρακτέρ* and *Πυραμίδες*) and signalled the beginning of a creative outpouring that exile, hardship, dictatorships and ill health could not stem.

In his introduction, A. considers Ritsos’ first writings through the prism of the events that marked the poet’s life from childhood (Ritsos was born in 1909) up to 1934. This biographical approach is fully justified, since the poems are so closely related to the poet’s personal circumstances. These include deaths, illnesses, the financial ruin of Ritsos’ paternal family, the young poet’s own fight against tuberculosis, and the squalid conditions prevailing in some of the sanatoria to which he was confined.

A. draws on the testimonies of the poet’s sister Lula and other contemporaries; the Ritsos archive, and the poet’s own fictionalized autobiography, composed in the 1980s. A major resource for his research, as he acknowledges, is Aikaterini Makrynika’s *Bibliography of Yannis Ritsos 1924–1989* (1993), a Herculean task, undertaken with unflinching dedication, extensive research, and methodological rigour, to the great benefit of all Ritsos scholars.

A.’s edition is indicative of the recent steer away from the Scylla and Charybdis of ‘right-wing’ and ‘left-wing’ critical approaches to Ritsos’ poetry. The fact that Ritsos was a communist and that some of his work bears the hallmark of political engagement has led to readings of his poetry that have left out the poems themselves. Right-wing critics have been either openly hostile (Andreas Karandonis paved the way as early as the 1930s), convinced that no communist would ever be capable of writing good poetry; or, at best, politely condescending. (Despite his communism, Ritsos has actually written some good poetry: this more or less sums up Petros Haris’ reception of Ritsos.) Left-wing critics, on the other hand, have focused on Ritsos’ overtly political poems, ignoring the greater part of his work, which deals with existential questions and, far from conforming to the rules of socialist realism, includes poems that can be cited among the best examples of modernism. These poems are actually, one could argue, deeply political precisely because of their existentialist character: the questions they pose and the poet’s evident engagement with everything human. There are of course pioneering critics who, avoiding both traps, have offered excellent insights into Ritsos’ work, such as Pantelis Prevelakis, Chrysa Prokopaki, Christos Alexiou, Yorgos Veloudis, Peter Bien and Crescenzo Sanzilio. A. follows in their

footsteps. The research that underpins his introduction and the edition itself elucidate the literary tradition from which Ritsos springs.

In this review, I shall focus on the poems rather than the prose collected in the volume, since it is mostly as a poet that Ritsos is known. A first question that arises when reading these early pieces is: do we recognise Ritsos' voice? The answer is in the negative. This was only to be expected, since Ritsos is a poet who, like Cavafy, matured late. Ritsos would experiment with different voices for many years to come, before finding his own. His first published collections owe much to Karyotakis and display a rather over-eager endorsement of socialist realism. Later, Ritsos experimented with compositions whose elevated tone surprises, less by its difference from that of contemporaneous compositions such as *Επιτάφιος* and *Το τραγούδι της αδελφής μου*, than because the political situation in Greece in the late 1930s would scarcely permit anyone, least of all a communist, to claim that *γελά ο καιρός γελάει/ κυλάει ρυάκι υγείας*, as the poet does in *Εαρινή συμφωνία*, possibly in rather clumsy imitation of the Elytis of *Προσανατολισμοί*. In any case, he is not yet Ritsos. These early poems resound with echoes of other poets' voices, mainly those of the Greek Symbolists, such as Gryparis and Porfyras, and Post-Symbolists, like Karyotakis, Agras, Filyras and Lapathiotis. (Chief among his non-Greek influences, without a doubt, is Oscar Wilde.) These voices were to prove long-lived. Reduced to a whisper for many years, while Ritsos' primary goal was opposing oppressive regimes and bearing witness to executions, torture and social injustice, they eventually resurface, creatively assimilated, to form a crucial strand in the rich intertextuality of Ritsos' mature poetry.

Ritsos' early influences reflect his early experiences, placing him squarely among the *poètes maudits*. The poets he imitates express his own reality. His love poems are awash with clichés and lack real feeling, as Veloudis has pointed out; and yet somehow their atmosphere rings true. The endemic frustration and hopelessness pertains not only to the life and experiences of the Post-Symbolists and Ritsos himself but also to the inter-war years. T. S. Eliot summed it up in 1925: 'We are the hollow men'. And Karyotakis, responding to accusations of 'egocentric melancholy and despair', asked whether the critic could seriously believe that optimism, and not pessimism, chimed with the reality of the time (1927).

Thus, phrases and images such as *χαμένη χαρά, βουβά παράπονα, σβησμένα όνειρα, σκλάβες ψυχές [που] τρελά χτυπούνε τα φτερά τους και ματώνουν* are on the one hand ready-made clichés and, on the other, expressions of authentic feeling. The poem dedicated to Maria Polydouri («*Σπασμένα φτερά*»), ends with the lines: *και σβύσαν τ' άνθια στα νερά και με σπασμένα τα φτερά/ γέρνει στ' αγκάθια το πουλί που μόνο έχει απομείνει.// Κι όταν η μπόρα πια περνά και γέλαε μι' Άνοιξη ξανά,/ μέσα στ' αγκάθια τα φτερά είχε διπλώσει.../ κι αν ποτέ τ' άνοιγε στο φως, τα δίπλωνε ο παλιός καημός/ που 'ξερε πως μια χειμωνιά ξανά θα τα ματώσει.* We recognise Karyotakis' voice (*έχω κάτι σπασμένα φτερά* or: *σκλάβο πουλί τ' ανώφελα πηγαίνω σέρνοντας φτερά*), and also that

of Gryparis: κι ανατριχιάζουν τα φτερά τα λαβωμένα.// Κι ήρθε κι εστάθη η μια ψυχή σ' απόψηλη κορφή/ και τις ζυγές φτερούγες δοιμάζει,/ ξεχνώντας που τις λάβωσε – ψυχή, πικρή αδελφή!/ τ' αστροπελέκι το παλιό και το χαλάζι. The two images blend to create a new one, in which sparks of originality as well as a quest for form are discernible. The rhythm, despite some glitches, works; and some of the phrases do capture the reader's attention.

In these early poems, enduring symbols and motifs of Ritsos' *oeuvre* make their first appearance. Two such examples, noted by both Veloudis and A., are the mirror and the silent piano. The poem entitled «Πώς κλαιν» (1927) echoes two of Porfyras' best known poems: «Lacrimae Rerum» and «Έρημο μονοπάτι»: objects shed tears and a crystal mirror is depicted as closely linked to the poet's fate. This may be imitative, but it is through imitation that Ritsos discovers mirrors, which gradually come to acquire rich multiple symbolism in his own work. To give but one example (from the collection *Χάρτινα Ι*: 1970): *Μες στον καθρέφτη/ στη δεξιά γωνιά/ Πάνω στο κίτρινο τραπέζει/ άφησα τα κλειδιά./ Πάρ' τα./ Δεν ανοίγει το κρύσταλλο./ Δεν ανοίγει.* The poet is permitted to visit the world inside the mirror but only briefly before it closes again, barring entrance. It contains the keys to authentic life and existential fulfilment, but does not surrender them. If the mirror symbolizes poetry, then it is poetry itself that offers the keys to the poet, only to reclaim them immediately. Both poet and readers experience a sense of exclusion, arising from the rules and whims of that realm and also our own hesitation about wandering behind the looking-glass, in the wonderland of our thoughts and feelings.

Similarly, though the *ίσκιοι θαμποί μες στους καθρέφτες τους βαθειούς* in «Στο παλιό μας σπίτι», echo Porfyras, both the shadows and the dark, closed rooms with the *βουβό* piano are exactly what the poet must have seen when he briefly returned to his abandoned paternal home in Monemvasia, in the hope of recovering his health. Symbolist and Post-Symbolist poetry offers Ritsos subject matter and imagery that correspond to his own life and continue to appear in his best poems; here we might recall, for example, the 'Moonlight Sonata', where *ένα δάχτυλο αχνό γράφει στη σκόνη του πιάνου/ λησμονημένα λόγια.*

In the latest of these early pieces, Ritsos' preoccupation with social injustice is manifest. This dual orientation – towards society and towards the inner self – will mark his later poetry. The link between the two becomes apparent in the prose piece Ritsos addresses to Karyotakis: *Ένοιωσες βαθεία τη ζωή, ένοιωσες βαθεία την ψυχή γιατί πόνεσες βαθεία. Αντιπροσώπευσες όσο κανείς άλλος την εποχή μας. Έκλεισες μες στα τραγούδια σου όλη τη μεταπολεμική ψυχική ανησυχία. Η αγωνία σου κι ο πόνος μάς δίνουν την πιο ειλικρινή συγκίνηση γιατί μας ερμηνεύουν πιστά.* By 1931, Ritsos has read and understood Karyotakis as no other poet of the Generation of the 1930s would ever do. Personal depression and the expression of a collective angst co-exist. As his subsequent *oeuvre* shows, the militant poet and the poet-clown or the poet-acrobat are not perceived by Ritsos as incompatible. In another prose piece he laments the acrobats' fate: risking their lives in front of indifferent, laughing spectators. He speaks

of the clowns' sadness, their tiredness and their false smiles. This piece can be seen as a precursor of some of his most beautiful poems in which, focusing insistently on the difficult friendship between the poet and his public, Ritsos seeks our *μυστική φιλία με τον ωραίο σκοινοβάτη*: the person who *περπατά μόνος και μοναχικός ψηλά στον αέρα, / κοιτάζοντας αλλού σ' ένα σημείο άγνωστό μας*, imperceptibly leading us towards a *σιωπηλή κατάφαση πιο πάνω απ' όλες τις αρνήσεις*. The 'secret' friendship between himself and his readers is what Ritsos began to cultivate already in these first attempts, which, uncertain and clumsy as they sometimes are (and this is probably why he left them unpublished), are most assuredly the work of someone "born to be a poet". In collecting and presenting them with such meticulous scholarship here, A. has provided scholars with an invaluable resource.

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Marjorie Chambers, *Yannis Ritsos Among his Contemporaries. Twentieth-Century Greek Poetry Translated by Marjorie Chambers*. London: Colenso Books, 2018. Pp. xvii, 233.
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It is with a mixture of sadness and delight that I take up the last volume published by Marjorie Chambers, who died on 9 January 2019. The book in question is an attractively produced collection of her translations of modern Greek poetry, with her own brief introductions to the poets and three essays on Ritsos (previously published separately).

The bulk of the present volume is occupied by Ritsos (121 pages as against 69 for the five other poets represented) plus the three closing essays: 'Ritsos and Greek Mythology', 'Ritsos in Belfast' and 'Ritsos in Dublin'. For each of the six poets, the translator has created not only a representative sample but above all a personal anthology. As the essays, especially 'Ritsos in Belfast', make clear, this poet's tempered optimism and commitment to world peace struck a deep chord with the translator.

Although the Ritsos selection includes a sequence of eight short love lyrics, most of the poems translated here are relatively long. It is a testimony to the translator's achievement that she has risen to the challenge of some seemingly intractable material (not least because long-windedness is neither fashionable nor readily adapted to anthologies) to produce lyrical passages that I found extraordinarily moving. The selection, like almost all the other selections presented here, is largely elegiac. It is characterised by two aspects not everyone immediately associates with Ritsos: grief and religious imagery.

I last saw Marjorie in Belfast in 2002, over coffee with that other distinguished translator of Greek literature, David Connolly. As I read her translations of Kondos in the present volume and compared them with his, I could not help feeling that the