

Fall 1978

Yannis Ritsos and Greek Resistance Poetry

Kostas Myrsiades

West Chester University of Pennsylvania, kmyrsiades@wcupa.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/eng_facpub



Part of the [Byzantine and Modern Greek Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Myrsiades, K. (1978). Yannis Ritsos and Greek Resistance Poetry. *Journal of the Hellenic Diaspora*, 5(3), 47-55. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.wcupa.edu/eng_facpub/25

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Digital Commons @ West Chester University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ West Chester University. For more information, please contact wcressler@wcupa.edu.

Yannis Ritsos And Greek Resistance Poetry

by KOSTAS MYRSIADES

While a literature of resistance can be considered a staple of the Greek people since the Byzantine empire, its resurgence during the period of the German occupation of Greece at the time of the Second World War has to be seen as its most unified expression both in theory and practice. The Society of Greek Writers, founded in 1932 by Ioannis Gryparis and guided in 1943 by Angelos Sikelianos, became a literary resistance movement numbering 110 members sympathetic to the aims of EAM. But the organization, far from what is commonly believed, was not a left-oriented group. Indeed, its rules resulted in the exclusion of known radicals and communists from membership, paving the way for the unification of Greek writers of varying persuasions and established reputations in a common national cause.

Greece's men of letters expressed their resistance through the assimilation of ideas intended to keep the spirit of the resistance alive in a universal way. They advanced their ideas through topical and occasional speechmaking and writing designed to boost morale and keep alive the struggle against the German oppressor; members of the Society were, for example, among the first to take their work to soldiers at the front. On November 29, 1940, the anniversary of the death of a fellow writer, Lo-rentzos Mavilis, gave the society the opportunity to initiate a series of speeches (National Lectures of the Society of Greek Writers) which lasted for a period of over six months until they were forcibly ended by the new Greek government just ten days after the fall of Athens in May 1941. Dividing themselves into groups or teams, members met regularly in different homes to exchange ideas and to develop means of spreading their message to the public at large. The first team formed included Markos Avgheris, Ilias Venezis, Konstantinos Dhimaras, Giorgchos Theotokas, and Angelos Sikelianos. Expanding its function, the team founded the literary publication *Eleutheria*, a mere four issues of which appeared before the printer was apprehended. Other teams were created, identified by the area in which their meetings were held or the publication for which they were responsible. Teams such as these produced the journals that carried the society's writings to the general public, journals such as *Eleutheria*, *Rizospastis*, *Sovietika Nea*, *Kallitebnika Nea*, and *Piraika Gbramata*, later known as *Gbramata*.

During the four year period of the occupation, these literary journals brought wide recognition to resistance writers, who were publicly cheered

as the Gorkys of Greece when they paraded on special occasions carrying placards reading "Writers in the Service of the People" and "Art from the People for the People." Many of the books written at this time (such as Angelos Sikelianos's *Akritika*, among the first to be circulated) had to be distributed in manuscript form and passed from hand to hand. As the movement spread, such works were to be printed outside of Greece and smuggled into the country. A hundred copies of Sikelianos's work, for example, were reprinted in Cairo, and secretly sent to Athens by a team headed by George Seferis.¹ In spite of German efforts during this period to discover and destroy surreptitious printing shops and to interrupt the smuggling trade, works continued to proliferate. Of poetry itself, a first effort during this time to collect resistance poets under one cover yielded seventy poets; a second attempt in 1971 by the German Academy included sixty-one poets, many of them not represented in the first collection.² In Athens alone, between May 1941 and October 1944, over twenty major works of poetry were published, among them Yannis Ritsos' *Dhokimasia* and *Palia mazourka se rythmo vrobis*, Kostis Palamas's *Vradhyni fotia*, Angelos Sikelianos's *Antidhoro*, Odysseus Elytis's *Ilios o protos*, Nikiforos Vrettakos's *Iroiki symfonia*, Nikos Gatsos' *Amorghos*, and Nikos Engonopoulos's *Epta Piimata* and *Bolivar*.

Liberal critics and literary historians of this period saw this coming together of writers to use their art in the service of the liberation of their nation as a new era for literature and, more specifically, for poetry. Nikos Pappas, in his history of modern Greek literature, speaks of the period as the beginning of a new realism,³ a description echoed by a number of other contemporary critics. For Pappas, while Greek poetry before the resistance was a poetry without substance or emotion, the later banding together of writers in the service of a single cause provided Greek letters with the raw, naturalistic, and emotionally charged material necessary for a literature of substance, a literature rising from the depths of one's being. The resistance, in his eyes, freed Greek poetry from a superficial subject matter, and made possible a committed poetry of the people. Accepting Pappas's premise, Markos Avgheris, perhaps the most seminal of resistance theoreticians, concluded that Greece could now boast of a truly sociopolitical poetry where previously its social themes had been relegated to mere political satire.

During this period of national distress, sociopolitics became a subject for serious consideration and resistance became an ethical questioning of a way of life which poetry could both embody and express.⁴ Giorghos

¹ Hr. Ghaniaris, "Η έκδοτική δραστηριότητα στην κατοχή," *Επιθεώρηση τέχνης*, 87-88 (1962), 323.

² Elli Alexiou, "Οι συγγραφείς στην αντίσταση," *Επιθεώρηση τέχνης*, 87-88 (1962), 312.

³ Nikos Pappas, "Αντίσταση και ποίηση," *Ελεύθερα γράμματα*, 52 (1 Oct. 1946), 293-294.

⁴ Markos Avgheris, "Η ποίηση της εθνικής Αντίστασης," in *Θεωρήματα* (Athens: Ίκαρος, 1972), pp. 108-121.

Valetas referred to this new poetry as one of national yearning, of anti-fascism, of a belief in justice, victory, and spiritual strength. Its themes, he asserted, came from the great masses and the laic heroes who gave their lives in defense of their nation. It is a poetry arising not out of individuals, but out of the masses themselves, a poetry with a collective and anonymous character.⁵ If the movement was to see in its poetry a creation by the masses, as Yannis Kordhatos explains in his literary history, resistance poetry and literature could then be taken as an aesthetic expression of the psychology of the people.⁶

Byron Leontaris, in an article appearing in 1960 in the literary journal *Kritiki*, best summarized the characteristics of resistance poetry as it was practiced:

Resistance poetry expresses acts and not spiritual tempers. The ideas and the ideals that inspire it are expressed with a rare clarity and energy. It is an explicit poetry without the slightest obscurity or vagueness; we could characterize it as expressively pure.⁷

Leontaris goes on to praise this as a poetry in which, for the first time, objects and events are seen in their true light, and the common man is presented as an active member of his society rather than being a mere presence.⁸

Resistance poetry of this period suffered, however, from a number of shortcomings which in themselves indicated the direction in which poetry would have to move if it was truly to become a people's poetry. As Leontaris recognized, although resistance poetry aspired to being a poetry of social orientations, it had too listless a class character.⁹ Addressing this lack, Kordhatos and Avgheris defined the genre in broader terms in an attempt to influence its growth into a true social poetry. Kordhatos's definition indicates the general direction such attempts took:

When we speak of resistance poetry we mean not only that poetry which expresses the patriotic thrust against the conquerors, but generally the poetry which expresses the aspirations and struggles of the people for its liberation from every new conqueror or absolutist regime. And more so the poetry in which hatred and struggle are mirrored as well as every type of protest against imperialism. . . .¹⁰

⁵ Giorgchos Valetas, "Η λογοτεχνία της αντίστασης," *Ἐλεύθερα γράμματα*, 21 (28 Sept. 1945), 10.

⁶ Yannis Kordhatos, "Η αντίστασιακή και αντιπολεμική ποίηση," in *Ἱστορία τῆς νεοελληνικῆς λογοτεχνίας* (Athens: Βιβλιοεκδοτική, 1962), pp. 683-743.

⁷ Byron Leontaris, "Ἱδεολογικοὶ προσανατολισμοὶ τῆς μεταπολεμικῆς ἐλληνικῆς ποίησης," *Κριτική*, 7-8 (Jan.-April, 1960), 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹⁰ Kordhatos, p. 683.

Theorists demanded that not only must the nation be liberated from its oppressors, but that the masses must be freed from social injustice in its largest sense, providing an impetus for the perpetuation of a resistance attitude long after resistance literature as a movement ceased to exist. This more substantial attitude was fed by manifestoes issued by Angelos Sikelianos, Kostas Varnalis, and Markos Avgheris, among others, which codified, in some rational way, the true objectives of the resistance writer. Such statements enhanced the theoretical strength of the movement as they defined the directions in which the practice of a true resistance poetry should move. The first of these manifestoes, Angelos Sikelianos's "Our Present Greek Oriented Intellectual Demand," appeared in *Nea Estia* on May 1, 1941, and was shortly thereafter followed by a series of articles by Kostas Varnalis in the newspaper *Proia*. But the most influential manifesto was Markos Avgheris's essay, "Thought for Life," which appeared August 1943 under the pseudonym M. Stefanidhes in the first of five issues of *Protopori*, the monthly literary journal of the organized literary resistance.¹¹ Here Avgheris asserts that

[i]n the historical period through which we are passing, the mission of art is to include within a larger synthesis the feelings and desires of the people, to become the epic poem of its struggle, to bring forth the heroic spirit which inspires them, to spell out the immense movement of the masses ascending from the shadow of obscurity into the sun of history, to express their creative activity for the glorification of national and human life.¹²

Art, he argues, is a public act which expresses the spirit and the will of collective life.¹³ Yet the resistance works produced during this period prove disappointing; furthermore, Avgheris continues

[they] lack internal justification, they are uprooted and loose, they are personal instances, servile foreign imitations or fanciful and groundless creations, without relation to large masses and the more general urgent demands of the period; they are without a national foundation.¹⁴

Avgheris reiterates that, while the first priority of the intellectual is to take his place in the struggle of his country and to embrace the people's struggle for the nation's freedom, he must respond to a still higher and greater obligation: to assure the people's freedoms after the peace has been won. Such a precept, once adopted, would assure the continuation

¹¹ Tasos Vournas, "Οι 'πρωτοπόροι' Αδγουστος—Δεκέμβριος 1944," *Επιθεώρηση τέχνης*, 87-88 (1962), 319.

¹² Markos Avgheris, "Η τέχνη για τη ζωή," *Ελεύθερα γράμματα*, 21 (28 Sept. 1945), 5-6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

of resistance writing, for one's freedoms can only be made certain by constant rededication and perpetual safeguarding.

In spite of Avgheris's plea, the organized resistance movement of the occupation ended for most writers precisely when the Germans left Greece. The Society of Greek Writers had led them to the discovery of a new reality for Greek literature, new social themes that needed the voice of their art, and a new cause for poetry. They had seen in poetry of this period a single purposefulness of mind—the struggle and suffering of the masses. They saw poetry turn from its earlier romantic preoccupations to consider the social aspects of common life in a realistic setting, and using the demotic tongue to do so. They saw free verse, already in use in the thirties, become firmly established as the dominant mode of poetic expression, replacing with finality the traditional fifteen syllable line of folk poetry. But a handful of writers, those who were to adopt the resistance attitude as a lasting personal commitment, saw in resistance theory a means of developing a much more incorporative view. The theory and practice of resistance literature did not disappear for them with the withdrawal of the German forces, even if, as a movement, it cannot be said to have survived intact. In one individual in particular, Yannis Ritsos, and through the influence he exerted on postwar poetry, the effect of the movement continued and its force was redefined. For him, resistance poetry was not an isolated movement which occurred during the four year period of the occupation, but a unique statement of purpose to which he would dedicate, in one form or another, his life's work. The defeat of the Germans was no more than the end of one battle in a much more inclusive war. Like Mayakovsky, who became so completely identified with "futurism" that the movement could only be truly understood through the man, Ritsos was to become synonymous with resistance poetry after the war; one defines the form by his work and theory because it is his work and theory that fulfills the form.

In Yannis Ritsos' poetic theory, more than in that of any other contemporary Greek poet, one becomes aware of a continuing interest in the aims of resistance poetry as outlined by the literary critics and historians of the occupation period. Although that theory can hardly be termed a systematic metaphysics, since it consists of merely a handful of comments and essays over a period of twenty years (from the mid-fifties to the mid-seventies), it does indicate a continuing growth and refinement of attitude, a growing interest in and self-consciousness towards an aesthetic which could express the resistance attitude.

Moving beyond the bounds of the occupation proper, Ritsos refuses to limit the resistance attitude to one period or movement; rather, he makes it clear that it represents for him an attitude which "in every period and time one should reveal who feels and serves poetry."¹⁵ Building on the broad outlines laid down by Avgheris and the literary critics of the occupation

¹⁵ Yannis Ritsos, "Σάν εισαγωγή στις 'Μαρτυρίες'," in *Μελετήματα* (Athens: Κέδρος, 1974), pp. 101-102.

period, Ritsos assumes the social role of the poet, as he indicates in a statement originally made in 1956 in which he defines poetry as that which

fulfills the poet's highest priority, which is: to bring together fraternally human strengths and to organize them against tyranny, injustice, and vileness. Such a mission always leads the true poet. And the greatest honor for such a poet is to carry his social responsibility on his own shoulders to the end. It is in this way that the masses find worthy spokesmen and leaders.¹⁶

What must be accepted without question and without expectation of gratitude is that the poet's duty is to serve the people as one of their own, and to purge egocentricity and personalism from his work.¹⁷ He makes ours what is already ours, unhurriedly and simply, Ritsos asserts, belittling his art if he expects any more recognition than that received by the analogous mother who, like the poet with his poetry, gives birth to and nurtures her progeny.¹⁸ He subordinates himself to the people because, as Ritsos suggests in his essay on Ilya Ehrenburg (1961), the individual cannot be saved alone and for himself, and, even if he could, it would not make any difference.¹⁹ This would be an exception without meaning, an exception without consequence for the wholeness of things. Thus the poet must become more substantial for society, for the historical period in which he finds himself, for his nation, and for the problems that afflict that nation. In the end, the poet who turns out of his private world into the social realm has, for Ritsos, achieved universality, while the poet who sings of the self wails only of his own misfortunes. To lay aside the private and take on society's burdens is to speak with the voice of one's people and, ultimately, with the world's voice.

The entire world begins to speak through [the poet's] mouth.
That is why his voice deepens, widens, and strengthens. Isolated,
specific, and private feelings are not served by a strong voice.
They are only ridiculed by it.²⁰

The poet's role is most fully explored by Yannis Ritsos in six seminal essays gathered together in *Studies* (1974). Four of the essays, treating Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nazim Hikmet, Ilya Ehrenburg, and Paul Eluard, are transparent attempts by the poet to reflect on his own poetry through analysis of the works of others. Recognizing in his essay on Paul Eluard (1955) that he will discover no more than he already knows, he finds

¹⁶ Yannis Ritsos as quoted by Stelios Gheranis, *Τὰ μικρά μου θαύματα* (Athens: Κέδρος, 1974).

¹⁷ Yannis Ritsos, "Σκέψεις για την ποίηση του Πώλ Έλυαρ," in *Μελετήματα* (Athens: Κέδρος, 1974), p. 93.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁹ Yannis Ritsos, "Η ποίηση του Έρενμπουργκ," in *Μελετήματα* (Athens: Κέδρος, 1974), p. 72.

²⁰ Ritsos, "Σκέψεις για την ποίηση του Πώλ Έλυαρ," p. 85.

represented in these poets his own thoughts, experiences, and aims. His affection for these poets (all of whom he has translated into Greek) rests upon their devotion to the people. Stressing their simplicity and their insistence on the present tense, Ritsos views them as laic artists of an advanced state, moving in conformity with their immediate era and the people in whose midst they live. This concern for the immediate present, the expression of that concern in terms of the mode of the times, and the insistence on the laic constitute greatness in poetry in Ritsos' eyes, greatness reduced to the immediacy, directness, and usefulness of poetry to the masses. Being aware that a poet may limit himself too strictly to his own times, Ritsos nevertheless finds in the immediate present and in material reality a springboard to leap the gap to the realm of the universal. A poet who roots himself in the people, in their persistence and in their pain, can create a "wonder" that serves, as he states in his essay on Vladimir Mayakovsky (1963),

if not as a synthesis and a union of natural, ethical, and social contrasts, at least as a bridge between the individual and the masses, between man and the world, between life and dream, in each case of hardship and personal drama.²¹

Ritsos' own use of material reality and the present tense to leap the gap to the universal leads him away from the literal message of occupation poetry. While we find a carry-over from the earlier period of a concentration on daily life, on collective sources, on material reality, such elements are increasingly used without resort to the stereotypes, sentiment, and hyperbole characteristic of the wartime resistance. Rather, Ritsos relies on the world of menial tasks and repetition of detail to force us to see his figures concretized without pretense or illusions; they become part of a larger collective spirit which never elevates them to a higher plane than that on which they actually exist, but which, at the same time, universalizes them in their most essential aspects. Like Mayakovsky, Ritsos uses the common, the everyday as a bridge between the vague and the fixed, between the infinite and the limited in his poetry. Deriving from the customs of the nation, such details act as small shocks universalizing and dramatizing the commonplace to overcome an overbearing and tragic loneliness, to humanize the inhuman in the ontological struggle of the individual.²² Repeated words have a similar function, they both carry meaning and become centers of memory and musical interludes in the poem. A single word, repeated often,

is characterized definitively and characterizes us—it points out our preference, the receiving angle of our perception, our

²¹ Yannis Ritsos, "Περὶ Μαγιακόβσκη," in *Μελετήματα* (Athens: Κέδρος, 1974), p. 20.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

thought's locality of concentration, that which concerns us. And it is worth our time to seek its sources, its roots, its origins.²³

Ritsos' wartime poetry of common concerns and rhetorical hyperbole inevitably gives way to a human poetry of small icons of human suffering emphasizing loss, privation, and destruction, the final meaning of which, as Ritsos states in his essay on Ehrenburg,

is not the destruction and abandonment of pain, but the tree, steadfast in its place, overbearing, determined, upright—upright throughout its life, upright even before death.²⁴

Recognizing that while poetry must, in times of despair, teach man to resist oppression, it must, in Ritsos' view, also provide a basis for the future which will follow; it must also teach him hope. In Eluard's poetry, for example, Ritsos admires the ability to find beauty in suffering, a smile on the lips of a wound. In Mayakovsky's poetry, on the other hand, he sees not only the hope of strength, a gun in the hands of the people, but that of glory and a kind of faith. In an essay in 1962 on his own short poems, *Testimonies* (1963, 1966), Ritsos reveals that their final quality is "their silent gratitude toward human life, thought, and art, before all trials and death—perhaps even in spite of them."²⁵ While Ritsos continues his pre-occupation with poetry as the weapon of the masses, a weapon with which they can carry on the struggle against injustice, he insists that it must ultimately transform the negative into the positive, the most absolute negativism into a catholic indefinite affirmation.

From this broad premise, Ritsos defends a people's poetry of believability and honesty which leads to truth. Initially, this truth is that of material reality, but it turns after the war to that of the imagination, the only realm in which, finding release from objectively physical, moral, and social pain, the dominated can become the dominator. Here an "optical immobilization of the nightmare,"²⁶ as Ritsos calls it, can occur, representing a transformation of the real world, a release, a liberation which objectifies the tragic. The result, as the poet notes in his introduction to *Porter's Lodge* (1972), is a poetry of *komikopiisi* or a comic poetry, "a debasement and exploitation of every nightmare and daydream and, more importantly, of death."²⁷ Ritsos' view is consistent with the theory of comedy that sees the comic function as that which presents an imitation of common errors and the humors of humble characters, which provokes and undermines order, exposes the decay of order, explores the unnatural, minimizes superiority, and ignores rules by alienating or distancing to

²³ Ritsos, "Σκέψεις για την ποίηση του Πόλ Ελνάρ," p. 78.

²⁴ Ritsos, "Η ποίηση του Έρενμπουργκ," p. 71.

²⁵ Ritsos, "Σάν εισαγωγή στις 'Μαρτυρίες,'" pp. 101-102.

²⁶ Yannis Ritsos, "Ξαναδιαβάζοντας τις ποιητικές συλλογές 'Ο τοίχος μέσα στον καθρέφτη' και 'Θυρωρετό'," in *Θυρωρετό* (Athens: Κέδρος, 1976), p. 107.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

create a sense of relief from the unbearable. Ritsos sees the function of poetry as objectifying reality and presenting a picture of injustice through controlled irony, the necessary result of the disordered historical perspective of our times. In the end, the reality of knowledge prevails over fantasy, finding the right, "even the authority for the naturalization of this imagination in social art and indeed in sociology."²⁸

Subordinating the individual to the will of the people, embodying the message in the medium, subordinating the analytical to the synthetical faculty, utilizing the everyday and creating out of it a sense of wonder, undermining order and objectifying the present dilemma by alienating it, maintaining a sense of present-orientation and at the same time liberating the reader from the determination of material reality by providing access to the world of imaginative reality, are the characteristics of resistance poetry that Ritsos deals with in his theory and which he extends in his own poetry of the post-occupation years. In his postwar poetry, Ritsos moves away from the literal and the direct, transforming the conventions of resistance theory into an approach more uniquely his own. The concrete realm in which he had buried himself gives way to memory and the world of the spirit. Leaving behind the narrow theoretical confines and chauvinism of the occupation period, and eliminating in his poetry the use of actual events or situations, Ritsos continues his preoccupation with themes of oppression and liberation, but in a poetic world which, while it remains cluttered with an abundance of objects, has become abstract and dreamlike. Throughout his classical cycle of poems (begun in the late fifties and continued through the seventies), his poetry treats the psychology of man immersed in reverie and submerges itself in a vast reserve of freely interchanging past and present events and figures. In this nightmarish realm, images, disconnected and piled on top of one another, border on the absurd. The reader, detached from the poem as he is from the poet, indeed as the poet is from his own poem, perceives more clearly, impersonally, the poet's view of the real world: a universal horror infused with the tragic and the real.

In his postwar period, Ritsos leaves behind the pathos and sentiment of a culture of rooted commonplaces and enters a nightmarish world of tragedy, an abstraction of the commonplace with roots in the real. The pragmatic effect of his art continues, its high relatedness to the world of the peasant and the urban worker and to this world's ties to the past, but its wonder grows, as does its style, its irony, its fluidity, its universality. The importance of his later poetry, contrasted to that of the occupation period, does not lie in its message nor entirely in its style. Rather, it is the transmutation of message into style that one finds so surprising in Ritsos: his ability to see through his role as a social poet and revolutionary to a poetry of instinct and inspiration which waits to be detected, as he says in *Scripture of the Blind*, in "an untouched suspension of studied

²⁸ Ritsos, "Περὶ Μαγικαὸςκη," p. 20.

silence,"²⁹ his ability to trap a circus of effects in a form which controls without inhibiting. He surprises us because we were led in his earlier poetry to expect politics and pain of a literal and direct nature, while he offers us in his maturity an attitude of refusal that passes through all aspects of life, a resistance that is, in the end, much larger than the merely literal, and that penetrates into the fantastic and the grotesque, a resistance that uses for its material the mundane grown monstrous, inescapable because it is so much a part of the "everyday." Having initially seen poetry as a means of survival, subservient to political purpose and without poetic perspective, Ritsos has come to create works which serve a much greater usefulness, a poetry built upon a suffering which detaches itself from its most immediate meaning to permit a universal statement that is like a "tiger's tongue in a cage,"³⁰ an inspiration that provides relief by rising from the common to the wonderful.

Kostas Myrsiades

²⁹ Yannis Ritsos, "Έμεϊ," *Γραφή τυφλού* (unpublished MS.), p. 108.

³⁰ Yannis Ritsos, "Τὸ ποίημα κι ὁ ποιητής," *Γραφή τυφλού* (unpublished MS.), p. 45.