

Yannis Ritsos, *Chronicle of Exile*. A selection of his poetry, Translated and with an Introduction by Minas Savvas, Foreword by Louis Aragon, San Francisco, Wire Press, 1977, pp. 93.

On the list of publications of Yannis Ritsos there appear some more than fifty volumes of verse produced since 1934. Some of these volumes may contain only a single longish poem, but others contain a large number, and the overall quantity is scaring indeed. One can hardly avoid thinking of the inescapable human limits and the law ruling them. As a rule, quantities are in inverse proportion to quality; quantities almost always involve some qualitative sacrifice. But laws, no matter how universal, are absolutes, and have always their exceptions, still proportional to some extent. Each individual case should deserve its consideration, especially when the human element is involved and when some genius is the central factor. Gifted people, although they may have yielded to a tempting necessity for quantities, one assumes that they must have preserved quality from a total sacrifice, for the sake of a proportional balance between the antipodes.

Such has been the case of Yannis Ritsos. His accomplished balance was to serve the poet's personal necessity as well as his concept of the purpose and function of poetry. He has unquestionably been able, abiding with his temperament, personality, frame of mind, ideological convictions and commitments, to sail round the reef of technical or other perfectionism or even intellectualism, which has always counted several souls among its victims. In order to let his message reach a wider public. There are some few exquisite ones among his poems safeguarding his and their futurity, but there are also, naturally, several less exquisite, less ambitious ones serving their instant, temporal purpose as pebbles in a wider mosaic, wavelets in a stream. The disparity makes his overall production quite humane.

He is certainly not the poets' poet; he is the people's poet. His aspiring at the wider appeal, which, he thinks, is the poet's obligation, made him sacrifice what would serve that purpose and what would allow his voice to keep up more easily with his inner as well as with the external callings, those of life. There is not perhaps much variety of elements, image, word, emotion, technique, even individuality in most of his hundreds of short poems. There is repetition, reiteration, even stagnation in their insistent homogeneity. It is as if he has produced endless versions on one or just a few haunting themes springing out of his circumstance and experience of human suffering, deprivation, persecution, oppression, cruelty, inhumanity. It is as if life and word have become one, and both of them one with silence expressing itself in mute fragments of people and things. In another sense, it seems as if poetry is not different from breathing, a vital necessity. Such seems to have been Ritsos's human and poetic case: a mutual identification.

And how could it be otherwise? In considering his poetic quantities one would be inclined to ask: has he had the time and privilege to live? Any account of his life, even the shortest, would have shown that on the whole life itself, for what he was—an ideological fighter for the rights of the poor or the oppressed—has not allowed him to stay out of it. Its circumstances, as combined with his militant commitment, brought him physical and mental suffering, losses, hardships, incarceration, exile, deprivation, persecution and what not, conditions and feelings he often shared with others, his fellow men. There is much bitterness in his verse often expressed with remarkable calm and restraint, especially in his shorter poems of his later production, as if not he but the things themselves speak through his voice. Were we to remark that human suffering on the whole has not been the exclusive "privilege" of a particular class, as historical materialism tends to believe, but that it affects the

whole of humankind in numberless ways, that would lead into endless debate. In his verse Ritsos reports what he has known best and felt most intensely.

In his very inspired, inclusive and revealing Introduction Minas Savvas gives a series of perceptive and revealing remarks as to the motives and the motifs, the manner and the essence of Ritsos's art, focusing mostly on the poet's later, his post-war poetry. He succinctly states that his short poems are mostly,

vignettes revealing a mode which is pictorial rather than narrative. With skill and precision, he delineates recognizable objects through which he reflects, with exquisite restraint, on inexplicably painful commonplaces. Sometimes, prosaic and ordinary artifacts are personified so as to enhance the loneliness and agony of the people surrounded by them.

He remarks that "Man and the objects around him encroach with impunity upon each other and, though both emerge as meaningful, it is Man and his plight that must be depicted; it is Man and his place in the world that most concerns Ritsos". He correctly states further that several of his poems produce "a bleak landscape full of injustice, loneliness, pain, old age, boredom and death", that despite some surrealistic touches and some apparently "unrecognizable meaning", there is, for the most part a lucidity combined with immediacy, and that life has interested Ritsos "above and beyond eschatological reasons", that "metaphysics without the physics of human experience does not preoccupy him".

Savvas's selection of some thirty five poems limits itself to six of Ritsos's several later collections, these dating from 1948 to 1964. None of his earlier and longer poems is included, none of those poems which caused both the warm praise of some and the critical reservations of others. The poems in the selection range in length from four to twenty-one lines each, except for the "Smoked Earthen Pot" which runs to more than eight pages in this volume. The choice itself might possibly raise a number of questions as to its representative value in light of the quantities that the poet has produced and the manners of expression he has used. There were his "Epitaphios" of 1936, his "The Song of my Sister" of 1937, "The Moonlight Sonata" of 1956 that won the First State Prize, the "Romiosyne" of 1966 which reached an unprecedented and unsurpassed height, to mention just a few of the most outstanding previous collections and poems, which, however have been widely translated. When it comes to choosing from among his numerous later poems, the selector's job is not easy for among these short poems there are those brilliant and kaleidoscopic, the "happy" ones, but there are also the several less brilliant and less faithful to their poet's best. After all,

On the whole Minas Savvas did well with his selection and its transubstantiation, except perhaps in some few parts not worth listing. A more comprehensive representation of Ritsos's later poetry might have required some additions which we hope to see coming again and again and futurity, only time will be the judge. At the present it fulfils its purpose and aspirations.

Fairleigh Dickinson University  
Madison, New Jersey

ANDONIS DECAVALLES

Antonio Bellusci, *Canti Sacri, raccolti in San Costantino Albanese, S. Sofia d'Epiro e in alcune comunità albanesi di Grecia. Raccolta di canti tradizionali albanesi*, S. Costantino Albanese 1971, pp. 80.

The same, *Materiali e documenti di culture analfabete*. Vol. I. *Il Telaio nei testi originali arbëreshë. Ricerca etnografica tra gli Albanesi di Calabria, di Basilicata e di Grecia*, Cosenza 1977, pp. 162.