

YANNIS RITSOS

TRANSLATED BY EDMUND KEELEY

Ritsos in Parentheses



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Ritsos in Parentheses

TRANSLATIONS AND INTRODUCTION BY

Edmund Keeley

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INTRODUCTION

THE title I have given this selection of translations is not as playful as it may seem. Two of the three groups of poems by Ritsos from which the selection is made actually carry the title "Parentheses," the one written in 1946-47 and first published in volume two of the 1961 collected edition, the other covering poems written from 1950 to 1961 and still to be published in Greek. The third source, a volume called *The Distant*, written in 1975 and published in March 1977, was chosen by the poet to accompany these versions from the two "Parentheses" groups, presumably because he considers the poems from this recent volume to be in the same general mode as the earlier "parenthetical" works. It is in any case a consideration worth exploring, because the relation of this volume to its two predecessors, and the poet's development in mode and perspective between the three groups of poems, allow us to place his current voice in an illuminating context that seems to have been indicated by the poet himself.

In what sense are these three groups of poems from different periods "in parentheses"? They are not really an interlude between those longer works that were primarily responsible for shaping Ritsos's reputation in Greece—for example, "Epitaphios," "Romiosini," and "Moonlight Sonata"—because shorter poems of the kind found in these three groups have been important from the beginning and have now come to dominate Ritsos's oeuvre. One might call them parenthetical to those poems—early poems, on the whole—that promoted political themes directly and that helped to establish Ritsos as a leading Communist poet; but to regard them as an "aside" in this sense is to give too much weight to the ideological aspect of Ritsos's work and too much credit to his more blatantly political, rhetorical, and sometimes loquacious exercises. In my opinion, each of the three groups considered here reveals subtleties that are not found in more famous works, and though each group is uneven, the three combine to make a statement at least as important as that of any of the longer poems which served most to create Ritsos's reputation in his home country, in particular those that were assisted by the musical settings of Mikis Theodorakis.

xiv ◇ My use of “parentheses” has more to do with metaphor than with judgment in any case. I am not sure what Ritsos himself has in mind when he offers the term, but certain metaphoric possibilities suggest themselves if “parentheses” are seen in the context of mathematics and symbolic logic, that is, as a way of designating separate groupings of symbols that form a unit or collective entity. The analogy underlines one aspect of these three groups of poems: a unity of symbolic vision or sensibility, both within the individual groups and progressively linking the three. Each shapes its own parenthesis, enclosing a particular way of viewing reality at a particular moment in the poet’s career. At the same time, the three groupings, the three parentheses, are part of a developing vision that distinguishes these poems in terms of stance, mode, and perspective from other works—especially the longer ones—that make up Ritsos’s vast oeuvre. The developing vision can be seen as an expansion of the space within the parenthesis representing each of the separate groups. In the case of each, the two signs of the parenthesis are like cupped hands facing each other across a distance, hands that are straining to come together, to achieve a meeting that would serve to reaffirm human contact between isolated presences; but though there are obvious gestures toward closing the gap between the hands, the gestures seem inevitably to fail, and the meeting never quite occurs. In terms of the poet’s development, the distance within the parenthesis is shorter in each of the two earlier volumes. By the time we reach *The Distant* (the title especially significant in this context), the space between the cupped hands has become almost infinite, seemingly too vast for any ordinary human gesture that might try to bridge the parenthetical gap.

But before attempting to summarize the progress of the poet’s vision, I want to consider the three groups in chronological order, using several representative poems from each to review the particular mode and perspective that distinguish the separate stages of Ritsos’s development in these shorter works. The opening poem of *Parentheses, 1946-47*, “The Meaning of Simplicity,” serves to introduce several of the poet’s central preoccupations. The stance is that of a poet-persona who is hiding and who assumes that the reader will search to find him, will reach out to meet him and to touch if not his hand, at least his hand-print. A certain distance is taken for granted—the gap within a parenthesis, if you will—and at least the

possibility of a failure to meet. But also taken for granted at this stage is the necessity of the attempt. The poem reads almost as though it were a credo: "Like Cavafy, I can be understood only from hidden things, but the things I hide behind are simple, and there is access to them through words when the words are true. Reader, try to find me through my words, because I want a meeting, no matter how difficult it may be for us to reach each other—in fact, I insist on the meeting."

This poem is one of the very few seemingly personal statements among the twenty-one that make up *Parentheses*, 1946-47. The first-person voice does not appear again until the last poem in the volume; between the first and the last we find poems that make use of the second person, the third person, first-person plural, second-person plural, any grammatical strategy for avoiding the simple "I" of lyrical or subjective statement, further evidence of the poet's impulse to hide, in this regard behind an objective stance.

The best poems in this volume are those that offer a dramatic context to supplement Ritsos's calculated—not to say programmatic—objectivity in mode of narration. The best poems are also far from simple, for all their apparent focus on relatively simple things. "Miniature" is a case in point, among the subtlest and finest of the many hundred shorter poems that Ritsos has written. The simple things in this poem are an unidentified woman, an unidentified officer, some thin slices of lemon, an old armchair, a match, a cigarette, a teacup. And the action is really an absence of action: a visit that could lead to a meeting of some kind, a coming together that finally does not take place. Yet what a complex miniature drama it is. And those simple slices of lemon become a beautifully complicated metaphor that is the heart of the poem. The woman and the young officer face each other across their basic furniture with some expectation in their undefined relationship, enough expectation anyway to keep the visitor from looking at the woman and to make his hand tremble as it holds the match. Is it a purely erotic possibility, a potential meeting of lovers at the most fundamental level? It would hardly seem so when those simple slices of lemon that the woman's sad hands are preparing for tea shape a small carriage that invokes a distant fairy-tale world of childhood and, by extension, the mother-son aspect of this encounter between a woman of unidentified age and an officer specifically designated

xvi ♦ as young, with a “tender chin.” In any case, before this ambiguous expectation of love can be realized, the clock holds its heartbeat for a moment, time is suspended, then the meeting at whatever level is postponed, and the moment of possible touching, whether physical or emotional or both, passes and is gone. And in its passing, the lemon-slice carriage of a child’s fairy tale is replaced by an invisible carriage bearing death. The death of the moment’s possibilities? The death of such ambiguous expectations? Or more literally, a foreshadowing of the officer’s death in battle and the doom of any future for him (these poems written between 1946 and 1947 sometimes give strong hints of the larger historical context, the ruthless civil war, that the dates of their composition evoke)?

The several questions raised by the poem are beyond simple things, and the poem implies each question without offering a precise answer to any one. We know only that the carriage bearing death has come and gone in the moment of mystery when the clock stopped its heartbeat, that the expectation of more than a meeting over tea has been postponed, that it is now too late for a consummation of this trembling encounter between woman and man sometimes playing mother and son. There can be no further challenge to death now, temporary or otherwise. Their attention returns to the tea table, left now with only that lemon-wheel carriage parked on its unlit side street—its street of lost hopes and impossible expectations, perhaps—and soon not even that but the dwindling life of a song diminishing to a little mist and then to nothing.

The poem that follows “Miniature” in *Parentheses, 1946-47*, “Women,” is one of the two selected from this volume for inclusion in George Veloudis’s recent “chronological anthology” of Ritsos—preferred, I suppose, because the surface of it has an immediate appeal that seems to place it closer than others to what is normally regarded as the mainstream of Ritsos’s verse, at least that current in it having to do with the poor and their burdens. But below the surface there are further subtle strategies and ambiguities that link this poem to the previous one and to others that show us failed gestures which are meant to establish some contact between more or less isolated people, failed attempts to break out of loneliness or aloneness and—in terms of our metaphor—to shorten the distance that separates the two cupped hands that face each other in a parenthesis. The title is generic, and so is the opening line: “Women

are very distant." It is not "the" woman of the previous poem or of later poems where the definite article serves to make the term almost purely symbolic. To begin with, it is women in general who are distant, whose sheets put one off with the kind of "good night" that suggests a turning of the back—and this use of the generic term itself establishes distance, impersonality, as does the responding "we" of the second line, an attempt by the poet initially to bring us into this conspiracy of gestures, the first of which suggests rejection by "women" but which is soon followed by a gesture on their part that seems an attempt to fill the distance, the gap between "them" and "us": "they set bread on the table" so that their absence is less painful to us. And we respond with a like gesture by offering to light the lamp, because we recognize our role in the creation of this distance: "it was our fault." As we strike the match, women in general suddenly become a single, more personal "she," turning away from our gesture with a bitter burden of death on her back, including, unnervingly, "your own."

By the end of the second stanza not only has there been a grammatical movement from the general to the more personal in the woman's case, but the first-person plural identifying the general male protagonist has shifted to the second-person singular, again a grammatical gesture toward the more personal, one that now includes not only a more specific protagonist but the reader as well, the "hypocrite lecteur," if you will. Then, as the woman turns away again and moves farther into her private world of sorrow where the dishes cry in the rack, you—you, me, and the poet's persona—see that her sorrow is perhaps not so personal as we have begun to take for granted, occasioned not so much by our role in her life and our failed gestures or even by the family dead and our own death that she bears as by the fate of those soldiers on their way to the front and by the woman's symbolic role as grieving lover, wife, mother to them all—what we carry to this poem from the ambiguous confrontation in the poem that precedes it. The allusion to the soldiers on their way to battle has turned the rhythm of our little drama right back to the general context from which it started and from which the poet's subtle grammatical gesturing in the second stanza seemed about to save us. Women *are* very distant in the end, and they have good reason to be, given the tragic roles we and the times force them to play. And that distance, though bridged occa-

xviii ◇ sionally by gestures on both their part and ours, seems as sadly inevitable and inexorable by the time we reach the last line as the poet suggested it was in the first.

My bringing into the discussion of this poem implications established in the previous one may appear arbitrary, but it is consistent with the poet's mode in these poems, which is to build a collective statement through the repetition of related motifs from one poem to another, a mode that becomes even more obvious and dramatic in its effect in Ritsos's latest collections. A few lines from other poems in the volume will illustrate the collective aspect of one central theme we have been exploring, that of the lonely or alone aspiring, and usually failing, to meet another isolated presence, and with the failure, sometimes settling for self-sufficiency. From "Maybe, Someday": "But I'm going to insist on seeing and showing you, he said, / because if you too don't see, it will be as if I hadn't— / I'll insist at least on not seeing with your eyes— / and maybe someday, from a different direction, we'll meet"; from a poem called "Self-sufficiency?": "Under the trees two chairs. Why two? / Ah yes, one to sit on, one for stretching your legs"; from "Understanding": ". . . To be able to look / outside yourself—warmth and peacefulness. Not to be / 'only you' but 'you too' . . ."; and from "The Same Star": "That man suspects that in every mirror / there's another, transparent woman, locked in her nakedness / —much as you may want to wake her, she won't wake up. / She fell asleep smelling a star. / And he lies awake smelling that same star."

It would be hard to argue for the same kind of thematic coherence in the case of *Parentheses*, 1950-61, which is really a sampling from a larger group of unpublished poems written over a much longer period of time. Yet there are related preoccupations and strategies in this second group, as the poet's choice of title emphasizes. Failure of contact and recourse to self-sufficiency are there again in one of the few first-person exercises, a rather wry little poem called "A Wreath," where the isolated persona decides to crown himself with a wreath made of the leaves that have successfully kept him from finding the person he has been trying to reach. A more insistent theme is that of our failure to cope with the realities of both civilization and nature, of our being at a loss in an environment that does not comprehend our sometimes misdirected or awkward intentions—and I say "our" because this theme

is usually expressed in the first-person plural, presumably in order to establish a more general relevance and again to solicit the reader's complicity. In "Delay" we find ourselves arriving late at the theatre—"we're always late"—stumbling over the knees and the insentient feet of an ugly old woman, suddenly feeling that we're the ones on stage because the lights go on and the clapping seems directed at us. And in "Message," the message has clearly not gotten through to us that nature is preparing for planting and rebirth while we go on putting in a heating stove and ignoring the obvious signs of blue skies ahead: the plumber's blue overalls, the new pipes shining like the trunks of trees, and most of all, the sturdy blue eggs that the chickens have begun to lay beside the wine barrel and the plough. ◇ xix

But the most persistent theme in this group focuses not on our misdirected actions that seem to go contrary to nature or on our stumbling attempts to find our place in a perverse environment but on our not being able to act at all or on our obsession with things that don't happen and places that are empty and closed. One poem is called "Inertia"; another is called "He Who Didn't Dance." And in "The Only," it isn't enough that what has been anticipated for some time doesn't in fact happen—the "what" never even identified—but those who have anticipated something happening find, as they take the flags down, that they are left with only one prop to sustain them in place of action, only one substitute for the once expected but now missing barbarian solution in this neo-Cavafian world: the lack of any excuse. In the same poem we learn that "the walls smell strongly of unfamiliarity," as well they might in such alienated circumstances. At other times in *Parentheses, 1950-61*, the surroundings smell of emptiness, of absence, of the wrong season, because, as "Autumn Expression" puts it, "The great dampness has set in. The vacationers have left." From "Desk Calendar" we learn that "everyone has gone abroad" in midwinter, leaving us with "Desperate gestures by the wind / in front of the closed hotel's glass door."

Ritsos doesn't designate precise sources or reasons for the sense of dislocation and absence, of inertia and silence, that pervade the landscape he paints in this second group of poems, nor does he offer clear indication of what might bring about a change in his country of suspended possibilities and aborted expectations—a

xx ◇ stance here and elsewhere that gives the lie to his being simply a propagandist for extreme political solutions, as he was sometimes accused of being by the Greek literary establishment during the fifties (when he was acknowledged at all). The only clue we have to his vision of the future, of the way things may turn, in this admittedly incomplete image of his perspective during the decade emerges from two of the more substantial and complicated poems in *Parentheses*, 1950-61, both of which suggest the possible advent of new gods to replace the old—and a new attitude toward gods however defined—in Ritsos's contemporary landscape. The first, "In the Ruins of an Ancient Temple," places the old and the new in direct juxtaposition: "The museum guard was smoking in front of the sheepfold. / The sheep were grazing among the marble ruins." One might be tempted to see the poem as simply an ironic treatment of the relation between antiquity and a modern sensibility, a kind of mock pastoral, say: the shepherd and even the guard seem to accept the ancient marble ruins as ordinary, everyday objects in their bucolic landscape, as though the ruins have been drained by time of any godly association whatsoever and are now as much a part of this world as the very earthly sheep gamboling among them—in fact, at one point sheep and ruins cannot be distinguished from each other: "... The sheep ran to him / as though the marble ruins were running." And the woman with her washing, of the first stanza—I suppose the best that we can get for a nymph in this modern landscape—is wonderfully casual toward the ancient gods, not to say downright sacrilegious, in hanging her husband's underpants on Hera's shoulders. Also, in the second stanza, in place of the old procession honoring a goddess, we have fishermen with baskets full of flashing, multicolored fish—even worse, the goddess's richly embroidered veil has been cut up to make curtains and tablecloths. But is it really worse? Is the poet's stance ironic? The poem seems to offer a contrary, anyway an ambivalent, implication: there may be good reason for these new primitives to submit to practical necessity when the old gods have lost their godly relevance and when the houses people are supposed to live in have been emptied. Rather than simple irony, one gets the sense of territory being cleared—or more to the point, of air being cleared—for new beginnings. In treating the ancient gods so casually, with such familiarity, in turning them from agents of mystery into useful