Myth, Tradition, and Ideology in the Greek Literary Revival: The Paradoxical Case of Yannis Ritsos

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I.

HOW, TODAY, should we look at the Greek heritage? How, indeed, define Hellas itself? Rational, reasonably objective thought and romantic idealization of temps perdu are by no means inseparable, though often (and sometimes with good reason) bracketed together. In the case of Greece, the views associated with British or German philhellenism have provided an easy target for deconstructionist and multicultural critics. A recent conference-workshop on Neo-Hellenism pinpointed this, complaining that "Greece’s image abroad has been tarnished," in a way it was not even under the Junta, when the concept of Hellas remained synonymous with resistance to oppression. The enskyment, often in hopelessly unreal terms, of Hellenic antiquity—offset by the systematic denigration, or neglect, of modern Hellas—forms the core of this fantasy. For a classic statement of it we cannot do better than look at the preface that in 1821 Shelley wrote to Hellas, surely one of the worst long poems in the English language, and doubly interesting through being stimulated by the outbreak of the Greek War of Independence. In it he wrote:

We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts have their root in Greece. But for Greece—Rome, the instructor, the conqueror, or the metropolis of our ancestors, would have spread no illumination with her arms, and we might still have been savages and idolaters; or, what is worse, might have arrived at such a stagnant and miserable state of social institution as China and Japan possess. The human form and the human mind attained to a perfection in Greece which has impressed its image on those faultless productions, whose very fragments are the despair of modern art, and has propagated impulses which cannot cease, through a thousand channels of manifest or imperceptible operation, to
ennoble and delight mankind until the extinction of the race. The modern Greek is the descendant of those glorious beings whom the imagination almost refuses to figure to itself as belonging to our kind. . . . If in many instances he is degraded by moral and political slavery to the practice of the basest vices it engenders . . . let us reflect that the corruption of the best produces the worst.3

There are several things that at once strike us about this passage. First and foremost, of course, is the classicizing hyperbole: when Shelley thinks about the Greeks of the fifth century BC, what he envisages is a race of heroes or demigods whose literature and art, like themselves, stand far above and beyond mere human criticism. This kind of exaggeration, coupled with the cavalier dismissal of two great Far Eastern cultures, offers an obvious target for criticism, and not only to apostles of political correctness. It is, however, perhaps worth noting in this context that the recently retired Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones, who spent four wartime years working on Japanese, in which he became very interested and from which, as he says, he learned much, nevertheless concluded that his education profited more “from my study of the Greeks and Romans, who were after all our own cultural ancestors and the founders of our own civilisation” [emphasis mine].4 This consciousness of cultural tradition is, I think, an important thing to remember today, not least since (to quote Sir Hugh again):

there exists in our time a kind of cultural egalitarianism which equates all cultures and all languages in a kind of mish-mash; this is especially rife among high-minded persons who appease their sense of guilt by flattering the self-esteem of those whom they describe by the loathsome euphemism “under-privileged.”5

Dealing with the legacy of foreign Philhellenism, we see, is not a simple matter. Old idealizing fantasies are matched by new ideological dogma, and it becomes hard to pick our way between them. Romance and contempt make bad extremities. In the end, as I hope to show, the only solution (one might have thought an obvious one, were it not for all the built-in historical prejudices militating against it) is to turn to the Greeks themselves, and above all to
the extraordinary creative efflorescence of the Greek literary revival. It is here, in the work of great poets such as Seferis, Elytis (both Nobel Prizewinners) and, supremely, Ritsos (who was not, but should have been), that the true Hellenic continuity is to be found.

Thus, if we are honest, we will be forced to agree, at a deep level, with Shelley’s basic tenet: yes, there was something extraordinary about this culture, Athens in particular, and yes, in the last resort we are all Greeks in that our literature and philosophy, to look no further, first germinated and grew in Hellenic soil. The most famous, and the earliest, formulation of this notion is the frequently cited passage in Herodotos (8.144) where the Athenians speak of “the fact of Greek consanguinity and common language, the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we share, our similar customs.” Less often stressed, however, is the context in which Herodotos places this claim: reassurance to Spartan envoys that Athens could be trusted not to Medize.

Indeed, every clause in the statement has, at one time or another, whether by Greeks or foreigners, been violently disputed. Worse, the snobbery, xenophobia, fantasy, and racism that from the eighteenth century long formed an integral element of classicism—German and British classicism in particular—make any reassessment a difficult business. It is remarkable how many Hells-worshippers, from Winckelmann to Werner Jaeger, never set foot in Greece: “Kennst Du das Land wo die Zitronen blühn?” Goethe asked, a question to which some of us have always felt like replying: “Yes, but you don’t.” As for the snobbery, nothing can beat the declaration of Thomas Gaisford, Professor of Greek at Oxford in the early nineteenth century, when he declared—during a Good Friday sermon!—that “the advantages of a classical education are twofold—it enables us to look down with contempt on those who have not shared its advantages, and also fits us for places of emolument not only in this world but also in that which is to come.”

Then there is the touchy matter of sex. Plato—treated always as a central, normative witness rather than as a powerful but marginal antinomian—was mined, especially in the late nineteenth century, for a good deal more than the care of the soul. From Winckelmann rhapsodizing over nude ephebes in the gymnasium to John Addington Symonds’s marshmallow vindications of Greek pederasty, the Phaedrus and the Symposium could always be
invoked by advocates of what was by some described, with gentle irony, as “The Higher Sodomy.” By a nice paradoxical twist, Plato had also been promoted, by liberals from George Grote to Benjamin Jowett, as an alternative source of transcendental authority to Christianity, while Gladstone and others were busy promoting Homer as revelatory of Christian truth. Jowett, incidentally, maintained Gaisford’s notion of classics as a paying concern by using Balliol College (of which he was Master) as a training nursery for “college fellowships, posts in the Foreign Office, and other glittering prizes.” Socratic sublimation bumped into the Fleshly School of poetry, with unfortunate results: Symonds was not the last critic to point out the dangerous illogicality of educating impressionable young men in the doctrine of Platonic Eros, while at the same time setting the sternest of legal and social taboos on homosexual activity of any sort. Not surprisingly, once again it is modern Greek writers who offer, not fantasy, but an articulated link to their own past in this field too, from Cavafy’s unforgettable amitiés particulières to Ritsos’s breathtakingly physical celebration of love in the three groups of poems that make up Εορτασμός (1981).

II.

What seems increasingly clear as we study the various examples of perceived or imagined continuities between ancient and modern Greece is that, for whatever reason, those extrapolated by external, non-Greek sources have to be regarded as the most suspect—in most cases through a determination to appropriate the experience, by what can perhaps best be described as the techniques of cultural colonialism. The effects of such a conviction were widespread: perhaps their worst consequences stemmed from the unquestioning assumption that foreign classicists, because of their superior education, should enjoy a monopoly over all Greek antiquities, including the right to their removal. Similar convictions were powerfully to support the political solution, after the Greek War of Independence was won, of an externally imposed Bavarian monarchy.

This is nowhere clearer than in the widespread, and well-documented, determination to establish a complete severance between ancient Greeks and their modern descendants, at every level: racial, social, linguistic. What classically educated outsiders
wanted was the Greece of their dreams: what they found instead were human beings like themselves, and they hated it. C. M. Woodhouse, a philhellene who (for reasons we shall see in a moment) did not share this particular kind of bigotry, describes, in vivid terms, how—prior to the Greek War of Independence, but many of the attitudes persisted—Hellenizing foreigners tended to regard modern Greeks:

Their connection with the classical Greeks was denied, their language was ridiculed, and even the fact that they were a Christian people under heathen rule stirred little emotion, since their Christianity was adjudged even more depraved than that of Rome. . . . Ignorant, superstitious, factious, venal, obsequious, lazy and dirty and ungrateful: such were the universal epithets applied by the travellers from the west to the decadent peasantry who presumed to live in the lands of classical history. What exasperated the milords most about these semi-literate serfs was that they expected undying gratitude for the greatness of their ancestors; and the proofs of that gratitude were to be addressed to themselves.17

Even so seasoned a metic as George Finlay, long resident in Greece and one of its great historians, could remark, apropos the non-repayment of the London Committee’s 1824 loan to the insurgents, that the loan was “as a small payment for the debt due by civilized society to the country that produced Homer and Plato.”18

These prejudices were not new. The Greeks encountered by travellers from the Renaissance onwards had several serious strikes against them, as Westerners saw it. To begin with, they had abandoned the language of Aeschylus and Demosthenes for a vulgar demotic. As early as 1553 we find Pierre Belon complaining that “they all speak a corrupted idiom of the ancient language,”19 a charge echoed by Spon, Voltaire, and every classicist whose training in Greek prose and verse composition made him, in his own eyes, not only an expert but a proprietary guardian of “pure” Hellenic diction. Don’t learn modern Greek, they said: it will ruin your prose style, spoil your appreciation of Plato.20 What can be said for Greek in which ὀπό is made to govern the accusative? Nicholas Biddle in 1806, though commendably unprejudiced about modern pronunciation (another scholarly subject of
complaint) could nevertheless lament the vanishing of "the dual number, the middle voice and the two aorists," to which he might have added the infinitive. But what else could be expected, it was argued, of these ill-educated victims of Turkish despotism, whose servile cunning was deployed in the fleecing of foreigners, whose highest ambition was centered on low commercial money-grubbing, and whose brains were permanently addled by the fanciful superstitions of Greek Orthodoxy?

These charges recur again and again: the leitmotiv runs unbroken through the early travellers, on to the Augustan humanists and the first Hellenic romantics, the heirs of Goethe and Winckelmann. No accident—as should by now be clear—that many of these preferred to keep their ideals intact by not actually setting foot in Greece, but instead constructing a dream-world out of previous literature and their own education in the classics.

The real turning point came only with the Greek War of Independence (1821–30). This brought a number of Philhellenes up against the brute facts of un-Platonic, non-Periclean life in a way that was impossible to ignore. The shock of such a revelation was so great that by and large they missed the invaluable lesson it had to teach: that in Greece, as Thucydides had seen all too clearly, political history tends to repeat itself. Here, all over again, were the patched-up compromises of the Persian Wars, the internecine stasis that devoured Corcyra, the Aristophanic farce created by rival demagogues. Things have not changed all that much in this century. C. M. Woodhouse, an English classical scholar who learned Greek realities the hard way, as a highly distinguished guerrilla leader in occupied territory during World War II, records that "every experience of the 1820s was then repeated, including torture, betrayal and attempted murder, but also including loyalty, generosity, and heroic self-sacrifice." It is the world of Themistocles and Pausanias, Marathon and Salamis, all over again, but stripped of its alien idealizing accretions. After 1830, as Olga Augustinos says, "there were no more heroics to be sung. What was left was a ravaged country whose war-devastated people bore little or no resemblance to the celebrated ancients. Now it was up to the Greeks themselves to fashion their own image."

If military involvement had brought a measure of reality to foreign fantasies about Hellas, the post-war settlement precipitated an ideological crisis, the consequences of which are still with us today. Nostalgia for classical Hellenism (however interpreted) was
a passion that animated not only European philhellenes, but also—and more importantly—a powerful nexus of intelligent and influential Greeks of the diaspora, most notably Adamantios Koraïs. It was they who insisted on Athens as the capital of an independent Greek state, who looked back to the great achievements of the Periclean Age, who were determined to purify and renovate the language by mass infusions of classical Attic. The movement, though not without its fill of national spirit (ἐθνικόμος), was intellectual (i.e., elitist) and secular. Yet what had won the Greek War of Independence—despite the support of foreigners such as Byron, Church, and Codrington—was that other nationalistic spirit embodied in such profoundly un-classical figures as Makriyannis, Miaoulis, and Kolokotronis. They regarded themselves as Romaioi, heirs to the Byzantine empire dismissed by humanists as a bigoted and retrograde theocracy; and they fought, side by side with its clerics, for the cause of Orthodox Christianity.

From that fundamental dichotomy sprang a good many of modern Greece’s troubles. A work like Makriyannis’ Memoirs shows, very clearly, how deep the division was. The priests and klepts and Souliotes, the Hydriote sea-captains and patriotic corsairs who had finally driven out the Turk from mainland Greece looked, not to Athens, but to Constantinople, στῆ Πόλη, to the City (no need to name it), to the Pantokrator of Aghia Sophia and the revindication of Orthodox Christendom after four centuries of heathen rule. About the classical heritage of Homer, Pericles, and Plato they knew little and cared less: no accident that for them the one figure to survive from pagan antiquity was the Macedonian conqueror Alexander, and he only as a figure of fun in the Karaghiozi shadow-theatre, that fascinating—and revealing—folk-tribute to artfulness in the face of foreign occupation.24 Their language was the vernacular in which Makriyannis wrote with such pride, and which bore scant resemblance—though more than its detractors allowed—to the Attic of Plato and Demosthenes. Between them and the followers of Koraïs, much less the foreign philhellenes who had supported their revolt, a deep and seemingly unbridgeable gulf was fixed.

The neo-classicists and idealizing appropriators were no less obstinate in their own views, which, as we have seen, tended to regard not only the Turkish occupation but the Byzantine empire that preceded it as periods of regrettable theocratic obscurantism,
deleterious to the true Hellenic spirit. Both sides thus had an immense investment in just how an independent Greece should define itself, and the quarrel between them was deep and endemic: it is by no means healed even today. Though some bones of contention (e.g., the foreign monarchy, or the uncontrolled rifling of antiquities) have been removed, others, most notably the politization of the language (δημοτική for left-wing progressives and populists, κοινοφυλόφιλόσωφα for ultra-conservatives and authoritarianism) still persist. Too many classicists continue to ignore the legacy of Orthodoxy, or, worse, dismiss it out of hand as a superstitious repository of ignorance, bigotry, and repression. Too many church-going Greeks, similarly, fear the classical tradition as a hotbed of subversive secularism, promoted by godless foreigners.

III.

Such is the complex heritage we have to confront when attempting to establish any true continuity between ancient and modern Greece. It is no easy task, and the analyst—caught between the fantasies of foreign appropriation and the historical oblivion blanketing the demotic tradition—cannot but wonder pessimistically, on occasion, whether such continuity really exists at all. Yet despite everything there are reasons for hope. One of the most striking points of contact has been that established by the experience of war. It is no accident that those foreigners who have best understood the perennial qualities of the Hellenistic spirit have been those, from Byron to Patrick Leigh Fermor, who have fought side by side with Greeks in their endless struggle to win, keep, or recover ἔλευθερία, personal and political freedom. Self-preservation and self-definition through warfare have been constant factors in Hellenic history.

There is surely no more extraordinary proof of the continuity involved than Dr. Jonathan Shay’s use of Homer to illuminate modern combat trauma: *Achilles in Vietnam* bridges the centuries with heart-wrenching conviction, establishing as no mere literary or sociological arguments could do the ancient epic poet’s deep understanding of courage and pride, stress and terror. Homer’s universality, indeed, has never really been in doubt, and extends far beyond Europe. Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*—its title a nice tribute by pronunciation to the Greek present in the Greek
past—reinvents Bronze Age myth for the Caribbean; while a few months ago I came across a review of Stephen Hardin’s *Texian Iliad*, which uses the Trojan War to lend perspective to the 1846 siege of the Alamo.27

It is certainly true that during the century and a half since the Greek War of Independence much has happened to clarify our understanding. Old misconceptions have been abandoned; universal communications have made the retrieval of the past easier than ever in recorded history. World War I and its aftermath dealt an ultimately fatal blow to that imperial spirit which had so long maintained the appropriative classical myth. By the Thirties the emphasis was already shifting away from the Golden Mean and upper-class English values to a more egalitarian, and realistic, uncertainty. In 1938 MacNeice—himself then a lecturer in Greek—could write:

> And when I should remember the paragons of Hellas
> I think instead
> Of the crooks, the adventurers, the opportunists,
> The careless athletes and the fancy boys,
> The hair-splitters, the pedants, the hard-boiled sceptics
> And the Agora and the noise
> Of the demagogues and the quacks; and the women pouring
> Libations over graves
> And the trimmers at Delphi and the dummies at Sparta and
> lastly
> I think of the slaves.
> And how one can imagine oneself among them
> I do not know;
> It was all so unimaginably different
> And all so long ago.28

He was also quite ready, when Director of the British Institute in Athens in 1951, to satirize Byron’s role in the Greek War of Independence with a brilliant poem mischievously entitled “Cock o’ the North”:

> Bad Lord Byron went to the firing, helmet and dogs and all,
> He rode and he swam and he swam and he rode but now he
> rode for a fall;
> Twang the lyre and rattle the lexicon, Marathon, Harrow and
> all,
Lame George Gordon broke the cordon, nobody broke his fall...

... Don John had fought Lepanto, Don Juan will dare it too; Knaves and slaves are burning Sappho—hubble-bubble, hullabaloo!

"Flies and lice and fleas and thieves," Jeremy Bentham and gin—

Scusi! Scusi! Entusymusy! How did I ever get in?

In among this waste of marshes, waste of muskets, waste of breath,

In with the rogues, the cranks, the pirates, in and under, in at the death...

World War II dealt the final blow to the fantasy, though conservative academics took a long time to understand what had happened: they should have seen the writing on the wall when in 1950 E. R. Dodds wrote a book called *The Greeks and the Irrational*.

More and more classicists, as post-war tourism developed, actually went to Greece, though it was still amazing how few living people featured in their photographs alongside the ruins. The grotesque English pronunciation of Greek and Latin, still detectable in the rhyme-schemes of some Victorian poems, was quietly dropped (though the Erasmian system that now came into use for Greek was only marginally better). Comparative and social anthropology further undermined the old imperial myth. Scholars began to look at phenomena such as the emergence of democracy (more like Tammany Hall than had been supposed), or the Periclean Funeral Oration (frigid and elitist) or the morality of the Peloponnesian War (geared exclusively to success or failure) with a less idealistic eye. The knowledgeable were even ready to associate classical Panhellenism with the Μεγάλη Ίδέα, the so-called "Great Idea" that dreamed—until 1923—of retaking Constantinople. A time actually came, at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, when not to have learned modern δημοτική was what marked you as socially unacceptable.

We can glimpse this change of mood today in a recent essay such as Bernard Knox’s “The Continuity of Greek Culture,” which homes in on two crucial elements: the landscape and the language. This is important. What with anti-elitism, anti-colonialism, and the blanket anathema pronounced over “dead white European males,” the reaction against the classicists’ appropriation has gone
so far that we need to remind ourselves today of the genuinely valuable elements it contained: above all, the excitement, the sense of something quite extraordinary happening in human history, defying all the odds, in a landscape capable of stirring the heart with unique intensity.

The *genius loci* is something central to the wider European Hellenism; and that at once puts it at odds with anti-European multiculturalists, whose obsession is with cultural singularity. Paradoxically, though the landscape, the *topos*, of Greece, and the particular, organic tradition arising from it may seem to be laying claim to universality, in fact it is not: that remains another myth wished on *Ur-Hellas* by Western romantics. Greece is Greece: unique, inimitable, with a word, metic (μετικός) for those resident aliens to whom she grants her hospitality, but whom she will never assimilate. Most of us live, at best, in the penumbra of that *genius loci*, not at its heart. Even so, it is high time to remember that the search for roots is a complex matter that cannot always be dictated by ethnic boundaries; that the present can *never* be rewritten without reference to the past (we all know what happened when totalitarians of the right and left tried that one); and that, like it or like it not, those dead white European males—and females—of Ionia and South Italy, Athens and Alexandria, *were*, even at several removes, the makers of our world. We may, as Eliot conceded, know more than they did (though sometimes I wonder about that); but they are, in a fundamental sense, that which we know. It is worth reminding ourselves today of what Eliot asserted in 1919:

... the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.31

Those words often recur to me when I turn, as I shall now, to modern Greek poetry in general, and the work of Yannis Ritsos in particular.
IV.

People often talk, and with justice, of a twentieth-century renaissance in Greek poetry: the extraordinary explosion of genius that began in 1880 with Palamas and the Parnassians; that set the fin de siècle scampering after Hellenistic and Byzantine models with Cavafy in Alexandria; that went back to ancient religious roots with Sikelianós; that stood Eliot, Mallarmé, and old concepts of myth on their heads with Seferis; that swallowed Marxism with Varnalis and Ritsos, and nihilism with Karyotakis; that finally—the most spectacular achievement of all—took the French Surrealism pioneered by André Breton, let Embirikos and Gatsos stretch it to, and maybe beyond, its limits, and then transmuted it (Elytis must get most of the credit here) into an integral and seemingly permanent element of the Greek poetic renaissance. The ferment has thrown up two well-deserved Nobel prizewinners in Seferis and Elytis; there have been at least two or three more first-rank candidates. All this in a country of less than ten million souls and what has been misleadingly labelled a “minority” language: in fact modern Greek bears considerably more resemblance to the koîné, or even to classical Attic, than contemporary Italian does to Latin. The continuity is amazing: as Bernard Knox recently said, “no other European language even comes close to claiming such a longevity; the only real parallel, in fact, is Chinese.”

Thus within this vast time-span a century or so may well suffice to repair the vicissitudes of history. Glance through the latter part of an anthology such as that of Constantine Trypanis, and it at once becomes apparent that since 1830 Hellas has been fully re-integrated into the European tradition, so that her poets can themselves once more appropriate the classical legacy—mythic, literary, religious, philosophical—to which xenoi had so long, and so impertinently, laid exclusive claim. In their different ways Cavafy, Sikelianós, Seferis, Elytis, and Ritsos all offer vivid proof of this process of reclamation. If I choose Ritsos as my concluding witness to the living continuum between past and present, it is, partly, because the others have already received exhaustive (even if not always right-headed) treatment from critics; but above all because Ritsos—like Engonopoulos in his great wartime poem Bolivar (1942–43)—learned just how, under the pressures of enemy occupation and totalitarian rule, to see past and present as a timeless, symbolic, and disarmingly surreal unity.
Yannis Ritsos was born in 1909, and was an adolescent when the long decade of the Balkan Wars ended with the débâcle at Smyrna in 1922. His always acute sense of continuity and recurrence (διάρκεια, ἐπανάληψις, Bergson's durée) made a comparison with the ten years of the Trojan War inevitable. In Greece more than most places, those repetitions of history that have stimulated writers ever since Thucydides' day\textsuperscript{35} produce a constant sense of more-than-Proustian temps retrouvé, of cyclical rediscovery. For Ritsos, as for many others, the grim decade 1940–50 simply reinforced the Homeric parallel, as invasion, famine, and bitter civil war took their toll.\textsuperscript{36} Interesting times indeed: Trojan Wars, and no lack of Trojan Horses.

At the same time Ritsos found himself drawn, from an early age, to another immensely potent ancient myth, centered on the curse-struck House of Atreus. His father was a dissolute and unstable member of the old landowning class. The family suffered from hereditary tuberculosis and mental instability: Ritsos lost a brother and his much-loved radical mother to the first, sister and detested father to the second. He himself was consumptive. Death and madness were woven into the fabric of his life. The family house on the great rock of Monemvasia—under the shadow of the mountain—had already begun its melancholy decline into dusty decay and wistful memories of lost greatness. For the poet the ghosts of past and present, Mycenae and Monemvasia, were to merge and blur in a stunning fusion when, in the great soliloquies of The Fourth Dimension, "Η Τέταρτη Διάσταση,"\textsuperscript{37} Electra and Chrysothemis, Agamemnon and Orestes wove the Bronze Age and Ritsos's own world into a timeless continuum.

It would have been easy for Ritsos, like Karyotakis, to sink into the Angst and ennui, the world-weariness and nihilism so characteristic of the Twenties. What saved him was his enormous natural élan vital, his sensuous delight in the natural world, and the passionate idealism that made him one of the most improbable Marxists of this century. Deprivation and suffering intensified his vision and his humanity. Like other literary consumptives—Keats, Richard Jeffries—he seems to have distilled intense physical awareness from his disease, an almost erotic perception of the sights, sounds, taste, smell, touch of the marvellous world around him. Of all the crucial elements in his work the most vitally sustaining—as for Sikelianós, as for Elytis—is the physical landscape, sun, sea, mountains, islands, of his Greek homeland: the unchanging foundation
linking past and present. This consciously anti-intellectual Aegeanism, what Elytis called the “new face of Greece” and memorably exemplified in the Διάλεξη του Άγιου Αξίων και Γεωργίου του Αγίου Σερβίου, 39 has played a key role in the reintegration of Greece’s ancient heritage into her on-going creative life. Sikelanós had sought out the mythic roots of that heritage; Kazantzakis had added an existential, Bergsonian sense of durée, of time regained; Ritsos was to unite the two.

He was also to combine with his sense of the timeless past two burning issues that foreign Hellenists had always, in embarrassment or contempt, very carefully avoided: social radicalism and Orthodox Christianity, closer companions in Greece than might be supposed. A Communist poet like Várnalis made no bones about presenting Christ side by side with Prometheus as a revolutionary leader, 40 thus deftly assimilating the Church to Hellenic myth. Ritsos’s own work contains as much Christian as Olympian symbolism, sometimes inextricably fused. Obvious examples are the Epitaphios—simultaneously a mother’s moirolognai for a murdered striker and a variation on the Orthodox ἐπὶ κάτω τοῦ θεοῦ, the ritual lament of Our Lady over the body of Christ—and “When the Stranger Comes,” with its matter-of-fact Resurrection epiphany (symbolized by the Stranger shaving, his face “simple, young, and sweet, like the morning moon”) in a Greek house of mourning. Religious liturgy and imagery are skilfully applied to secular ends, thus enfolding both striker and Stranger in a factitious, but surprisingly effective, aura of sanctity. 41 To many Orthodox Greeks this smelt of blasphemy. Others found it deeply moving. As with Várnalis (and indeed Kazantzakis and Sikelanós), Ανάγνωση and Ανάγνωση, Resurrection and Revolution, had achieved a profitable merger. 42

Ritsos also enjoyed one enormous advantage, in his quest for what we might term redemptive synchronicity, over poets—especially Marxist poets—of the industrialized West. There was no insuperable barrier, and never had been, between the landowning class to which his family belonged and the still largely agricultural, indeed peasant, workers with whom he sought to align himself. They shared a common demotic language, a common non-urbanized view of society and its basic values, an historical and mythic continuity 43 which—even allowing for a disruption such as the Turkish occupation—left the past alive in a way the heavily industrialized nations could no longer even begin to understand.
This non-urban quality is a key factor in understanding not only Ritsos, but the whole modern Greek poetic renaissance. After a few perfunctory gestures towards the machine age in his early poems, he reverts, with extraordinary thoroughness, to an ageless world of sea, rock, sun, harvest and ploughing, crumbling great houses and scoured harbor-fronts, peopled by fisher-folk, athletes, sad maiden ladies, muscular innocent army recruits:

The sea sparkles brilliantly, even at midnight, rosy or golden green.
The salt grinds, crusting the rocks. A boatman pisses into the sea from his caique. The sound can be heard amid a muted groaning of hawserstied to metal grapples—a tug-of-war between water and land in the same landing place . . . The air smells strongly of resin and sperm. You can’t breathe.

(“Persephone”)

All ours, more ours with the memory—said the Stranger more fortunate,
the secret olive trees on the little hills with their apostolic nightfalls,
the reed awnings of the villagers propped in trees lit only by the small eyes of birds,
the osier sheafs we softened for weeks in the brook to make baskets,
the soft dark figs, chilled from the dawn, when we took off our sandals
at the roots of the fig trees and climbed to heaven,
not with a ladder, not through the branches, but on steps of air.

(“When the Stranger Comes”)

Nights in the ships, when the weary private soldiers lay down, heaped like sacks on the deck,
adorable in the guilelessness of their youth,
in their ignorance, their animal purity, their physical beauty,
strong from their exercise at useful work, in the fields, in workshops, on the roads,
obeedient to necessity and facile hope,
with the eloquent generalizations of their own innocence,
like cattle
led to the slaughter for the profit of others, and yet
smiling in their sleep, muttering, snoring,
cursing a dream cow or, half naked, murmuring over and
over
a woman’s name to their nocturnal erection,
spilling the secret perpetuity of oceanic starlight—
(“Philoctetes”)

Ash-gray mice fall into the wells and drown,
dense constellations slowly turn; down inside there
they toss the trash from banquets—pitchers, cups, mirrors,
and chairs,
animal bones, lyres, and clever exchanges. The wells never fill
up.

... and around the horses, ears of corn, oil lamps, mule
drivers
and reapers beside the hayricks, with the moon’s head on
their shoulders,
hearing the bulls piss among willows and brambles,
the thousand feet of the millipede on the jar,
the slithering of the quiet snake in the olive-grove,
and the cracking of heated stones as they cool and contract.
(“Orestes”)

It is this thoroughgoing, and gently surrealistic, version of Aegean-
ism that does most to make his timeless anachronisms work: not
all that much had changed, Homer and the andartes inhabited
virtually identical worlds; and as J. C. Lawson unforgettably dem-
onstrated, a whole slew of nymphs and centaurs, not to mention
echoes of Pan, Demeter, Persephone, and Charon, continue to
haunt the rural outback and popular culture, coexisting very
nicely with Christian saints and martyrs. Ritsos’s Ajax can com-
pare the darkness and mockery with which he is surrounded to
being “inside a big gloomy church” where “the pallid lofty icons
were whispering about you to each other,” and a very odd collec-
tion they are: alongside the severed head of John the Baptist and
the great snake symbolizing St. George or St. Demetrius we find
the gouged-out eyes of Oedipus and Polyphemus, while Byzantine
bells are accompanied by Delphic burnt laurel,⁴⁷ all fused in a timeless flux.

Ritsos's treatment of the dead, viewed as omnipresent ghosts, calls for special comment in this context. Like the existentialists, he explores the shift in consciousness which accompanies our confrontation with the fact of our own mortality. But he also deals in something very much his own, a kind of eschatological retrieval process, in which the dead seem to have as much vividness, presence, "being," as the living. They may not speak; but that, as Iphigenia remarks, merely serves to thicken the silence. Their presence is natural, unquestioned. They are not, in the conventional sense, spooky, but highly domesticated, going about their (insubstantial) business as usual, settling in under tables or behind closets. "Yes," Helen muses, after a tall revenant has silently smacked his forehead into the door-lintel, "they're just as stupid as we are. Only quieter."

I don't know why the dead stay here when no one pities them;
I can't think what they want,
trajsing from room to room in their fine clothes, their fine shoes,
well polished, smooth and silent—as though not treading the ground.
They clutter the place, they flop anywhere, in the two rocking chairs,
down on the floor, in the bath; they leave the faucets running,
leave the perfumed soap to melt away in the water. When the maids pass among them, sweeping with their big brooms,
they don't even notice them. Only sometimes, a hint of constraint
will show in one maid's laughter—it doesn't float free, out the window, it's like
a bird with a string tied to its leg, jerked down by someone below.⁴⁸

In Ismene's down-to-earth description of life chez Oedipus "they fill the whole house, you can't find a corner to put yourself in." The narrator of "The Dead House" talks matter-of-factly about the practical problems the dead would cause if she tried to sell the house, to move on. Who would buy them? But the prospect of
lugging them off elsewhere is “so exhausting and dangerous.” The dead, in realtors’ terms, clearly do not convey. Low-profile yet ubiquitous, they crowd almost every page of *The Fourth Dimension*. As the Stranger says, death is an addition, not a subtraction.

I would like to close with a Thucydidean reflection. What drove Ritsos, in more than one sense, to explore the timelessness of the past were, above all, those grim political realities—the Metaxas dictatorship, Nazi occupation, the Colonels’ seven-year regime—that condemned him to spend a substantial part of his life in prison or exile. More tragic still was the unacknowledged conflict between ideal and reality for Ritsos in his Marxist faith. The enemies on the Right, the forces of reaction and fascism, presented no moral problems. But the corruption of Communism, the creeping totalitarianism of the Left, was a very different matter. Qualms about the Bukharin trials and the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1940 had been stifled by the necessities of war. But during the Fifties they resurfaced. Most intelligent Greek radicals knew that they had been betrayed by Stalin during the civil war.49

To those, like Ritsos, whose Marxism was in effect a religious creed, this came as the bitterest blow of all. The cumulative evidence of his own work suggests that Ritsos’s loyalties were severely tested during this period. His period in partisan-controlled Macedonia with the Popular Theater (1945–46)50 had already introduced him at first hand to the savage habits of ELAS in the field. Worse still was to come. In 1956, the year of “Moonlight Sonata,” Russian tanks rolled into Budapest. As a final irony, it was while in island detention, on the order of the Colonels, that Ritsos learned, in 1968, of the brutal repression of Dubcek’s “Prague Spring.”

Thus the phase of his writing career that most sought icons for the present from Greece’s ancient past was marked by severe inner conflict and stress over his most fundamental beliefs; while the central dilemma he faced, that of reconciling his poetic honesty with a life of public political self-committal and action, put an almost intolerable strain on both his integrity and his loyalty. Yet it was, precisely, the formidable pressures to which he was subject that elicited his finest, most deeply felt poetry, just as carbon atoms, under an inconceivable intensity of force and heat, will coalesce to form a diamond. He understood, as few others have done, the bleak implications of Thucydides’ Melos and Corcyra. In his “Philoctetes” it is hard not to see Ritsos himself in the
wounded hero, embittered by petty rivalries and betrayals, yet bitten (as the narrator Neoptolemos suggests) by the serpent of wisdom, and courted for his special weapons, i.e., the gift of poetry such as the *Epitaphios* or *Romaiosyne*, that could be used as propaganda in the unending political struggle:

I understand your own gallant withdrawal, respected friend, with a commonly accepted pretext—a wound in the body, not in the mind or the spirit—a good excuse that serpent’s bite (perhaps the serpent of wisdom?) to let you stay alone and exist—you, and no one else—or even not exist, coiled in a circle like the serpent biting its tail. (Often I too have wished it.)

And perhaps to meditate, in your solitude, on some revenge, some recognition of yourself or, at least, the recognition of the importance of your weapons. And see how you’ve been vindicated—

I make no secret of that—it’s for them I have come, as you guessed—

they will give victory to the Greeks at last, (the oracle’s clear): your weapons, with my own hand.51

(“Philoctetes”)

Both “Philoctetes” and another Mycenaean soliloquy, “Orestes,” were completed during the politically fraught period between 1960 and the Colonels’ coup in April 1967. In both poems the central theme is the challenge to action faced by a reluctant protagonist, who finally accepts the challenge, and prepares to act—with what success, we are left to guess, or supply from myth. In these two soliloquies particularly Ritsos uses a “distancing” technique to grapple with his own personal and political problems. It is “Ritsos the modern Orestes who stands before present-day Mycenae, wrestling with questions of love, death, and freedom.”52 Discussing “Philoctetes,” Peter Bien53 identifies in it a series of timeless conflicts: between young and old, between intellectual withdrawal and demotic involvement, between endless petty divisiveness and an ultimately indomitable sense of cultural unity. Most importantly, Pandelis Prevelakis54 points out that in February 1964 Ritsos was finally persuaded to stand, unsuccessfully, for Parliament as an EDA (Communist front) candidate, so that his
agonized meditations on the duty to act, in both poems, have an urgent and unmistakable ad hominem relevance. Poetic isolation and communal endeavor are once more at loggerheads.

Yet amid all the betrayals, false ideals, self-delusive beliefs and bouts of dark destructiveness, that fundamental hope for mankind, that perennial resilience of the human spirit, evident throughout Ritsos’s work, persists regardless—optimistic, compassionate, unquenchable even in adversity. With subtle skill, and using, as Peter Bien reminds us (and no translator is likely to forget), “a language which can draw freely from any and all periods of its long evolution,” Ritsos has forged, from myth, family memories, his own life, and the hard unchanging core of Greece itself, a timeless stage on which “the mask of the classical persona (taken largely from Greek tragedy) alienates events, distances them from the poet’s own experience, and then objectifies them.” But he has achieved more than this. His richly resonant humanism, embracing past and present, intellectual and populist, classical and Orthodox, Hellenism and Romaisyne, myth and history has opened our eyes to the true dynamic of the Greek heritage. I began my essay with a question: how should we look at this heritage? Ritsos, unforgettably, shows us.

Watching the tense events of 1974–75 as he put the finishing touches to “Phaedra”—the expansion of Turkey in Cyprus, the reemergence in Athens of the yellow press and gutter politics, the apparent slowness of “dejuntafication,” the political swing to the right—Ritsos surely reflected that freedom, from his committed viewpoint, was not all that much more certain a commodity now than it had been in 1972. That is a position Thucydides would have understood all too well. What remained constant, unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable, was the Manichaean struggle within him between poet and activist. That his indictment of solipsistic humanism should have inspired one of his very finest poems (superbly embodying all the features it attacked) is just one more paradox to add to the rest, and a fitting conclusion to the creative balancing-act that The Fourth Dimension represents: the most sustained, brilliant, and original proof offered in this century of what George Steiner wonderingly described as “the unbroken authority of the Greek myths over the imagination of the West.”
NOTES

1. On this difficult (and often inflammatory) topic see now the erudite and stimulating monograph by Artemis Leontis, *Topographies of Hellenism: Mapping the Homeland* (Ithaca 1995), together with my review (*TLS* no. 4854, 12 April 1996, 4–6).

2. Program of “Whither the Neo-Hellenic?,” a conference-workshop organized by the Modern Greek Program at Ohio State University, 30–31 March 1996. The organizers’ statement is worth quoting at length: “Rather than a beacon of freedom [Greece] is [today] condemned as an oppressor of its minorities and a threat to its neighbors, dismissed as an unreliable ally, ridiculed as a belated and recalcitrant partner on the path to modernization. In the realm of culture, the discourses of multiculturalism and postcolonialism have shifted [the] focus to other societies, which they declare cases of globalization, the fight against imperialism, the manifestation of otherness or hybridity, that is, qualities or configurations which are not felt to apply to Greece.”


5. Ibid. 230.

6. τὸ Ἐλληνικὸν ἕκον ὁμαμόν τε καὶ ὁμόγλωσσον καὶ θεόν ἱδρύματα τε κοινά καὶ θυσίαι ἣθεά τε ὀμότροπα . . .

7. In the last half-century world events have seen to it that this attitude was very largely eradicated: thus to a great extent critics such as Martin Bernal and the Afrocentrists, whose case as regards earlier times was strong (and indeed had already been well made by many less partisan scholars—and generally accepted—long before these latter-day anti-European Savonarolas got into action), are flogging a dead horse.


15. Brilliantly translated by Kimon Friar as *Erotica* (New York 1982). Like the earlier Ἐκλογή Συμφωνία (Spring Symphony), written in 1937–8 (Collected
Works 1.215–56), to which it bears some resemblance, this work reveals, behind its passionate intimacy, the shadow, as Friar says (Erotica 9), of “greater urgencies.”

16. Olga Augustinou, French Odysseys: Greece in French Travel Literature from the Renaissance to the Romantic Era (Baltimore and London 1994), 86, 88, 303 n. 76. As she says, Europeans “were convinced that their pilfering fulfilled the higher ideals of humanity and that any and all means to attain this end were permissible.”


20. For some amusing anecdotes of this sort see B. Knox, The Oldest Dead White European Males, and Other Reflections on the Classics (New York and London 1993), 110–12.


22. Woodhouse (note 17), 168.

23. Augustinou (note 16), 289.


26. Derek Walcott, Omeros (New York 1990): see in particular ch. LVIII, 289 ff., where Walcott creates a Nekuia, a descent to Hades, from a combination of Homer, Dante, and local Caribbean folklore.

27. Stephen Hardin, Texian Iliad (Austin 1995). It is interesting that Hardin took both title and idea from a French writer who made the connection between Troy and the Alamo as early as 1839.


29. Ibid. 291.


35. See, e.g., Thuc. 1.22.4 for his decision to write for those concerned τὸν τε γενομένων τὸ σοφές σκοπεῖν καὶ τῶν μελλόντων ποτὲ αὕθις κατὰ τὸ ἀνθρώπινον τουτούτου καὶ παραπλησίους ἔσεθαι.

38. O. Elytis, during an interview with Ivar Ivask, Books Abroad 49.4 (1975), 631.
41. It remains, however, extraordinarily difficult to cite specific passages illustrating this characteristic of Ritsos’s poetry, all-pervasive though it is. Ritsos here worked by arte allusiva, in ways often hard for a non-Greek to appreciate. In his Epitaphios he depended on a close familiarity with the Orthodox dirge; and this would be true, as Rick Newton points out in the introduction (5) to his translation [Journ. of the Hellenic Diaspora, xiii 1 and 2 (1986), 5–51], for “men and women, young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, of all political persuasions.” Every phrase that echoed Christ’s suffering, when applied to this dead youth, would make its unspoken point for those who knew. To take a single example (Epitaph. xvii 1–2: “You have set, my star. All of creation has set/ and the sun, a pitch-black ball, has taken in its glow” exactly matches the blackening and eclipse of the sun, in the Orthodox dirge (Stas. ii, 7, 30) at the moment of Christ’s crucifixion. Similarly in “When the Stranger Comes,” the covering and uncovering of the mirrors, so prominent a feature of the poem, only makes sense when we know its significance as a religious symbol of the beginning and end of a period of private or public mourning.
42. For an interesting excursus on the exploitation of Christ and Christianity by the Greek Left see P. Prevelakis, Ο Ποιητής Γνώνης Ρίτσου: Συνολική θεώρηση του έργου του (Athens 1981), 23 ff.
43. See Robinson (note 39), 134, who points out how this quality facilitated the availability, for Greek surrealists, in their own natural surroundings, of that otherness, that sense of which “Breton and his disciples had to invent . . . out of the hostile environment of an urban society.”
44. For the quotations that follow see Fourth Dimension (note 37), 187, 303, 243, 76, and 77.
45. It is a debatable point whether the poems of The Fourth Dimension could have been written thirty years later: mass satellite-dish television, saturation tourism, and the transistor radio have done their malign work all too well.
47. Fourth Dimension (note 37), 219 = Greek ed. 233.
48. Ibid. 258–59.
49. C. M. Woodhouse, The Struggle for Greece, 1941–1949 (London 1976), writes: “Greek Communism was vulnerable to the vagaries of Stalinism, which had little regard for any consideration other than the security of the Soviet Union . . . The rank and file of the KKE, and in particular its leaders, were expendable. Without a trace of compunction, Stalin let them go to their doom.”
51. *Fourth Dimension* (note 37), 233.
52. Myrsiades (note 36), 455.
53. Bien (note 36), 18–19.
54. Prevelakis (note 42), 356, 360 ff.
55. Bien (note 36), 19.
57. It is a matter for regret that Artemis Leontis (note 1), who in *Topographies of Hellenism* so subtly analyzes the great contributions to our awareness of Hellenic continuity made by Seferis and Elytis (see Pt. II, sections 5–6, 132–217), should only mention Ritsos briefly in a footnote (195 n. 58).
59. George Steiner, *Antigones* (New York 1984), 300. His explanation of the dominance of Greek myth in the West, incidentally, is that it might have something to do with grammar. *Verb. sap.*

A somewhat different version of this text was originally delivered, in March 1995, as the eighth Thomas E. Leontis Lecture in Modern Greek Studies at Ohio State University. I would like to record the extraordinary kindness and hospitality shown me on that occasion by the distinguished Hellenist Professor Vassilis Lambropoulos and his wife (and equally distinguished scholar) Dr. Artemis Leontis. I must also thank my co-translator of *The Fourth Dimension*, Dr. Beverly Bardsley, for countless wise suggestions made during the original composition of material that subsequently found its way into that lecture and, now, this essay; and Dr. Herbert Golder for more constructive and perspicacious editorial advice than I had any right to expect. For the faults that remain it is no mere convention to say that I am solely responsible.