

# *A Small History of Statues: Yannis Ritsos and the Monuments of History*

Liana Theodoratou

*New York University*

*Is it just a crisis of creation or rather the end, the demise of thought,  
the desertion amidst irrevocably torn symbols and images that echo  
like empty masks?*  
—Vyrion Leondaris, *The Crypt*

*I open my mouth to speak and I suddenly realize that I am mute and  
they can hear me.*  
—Yannis Ritsos, “Miracle”

What does it mean to write or speak in a moment of terror and censorship? How is it possible to resist the silencing, the muteness, the blindness that takes place under the banner of these two experiences, and especially when the punishment for such resistance is imprisonment, torture, exile, and dispossession? These questions – central to any reflection on the contemporary political climates within which, after September 11, we now live – are at the heart of the nearly twenty collections of short poems that Yannis Ritsos wrote during the dictatorship in Greece, including his remarkable collection of poems, *Scripture of the Blind*, written in a kind of white heat during the last four months of 1972 and the early days of 1973, and some of the longer poems and dramatic monologues, also written during these years, that would later become part of his collection, *The Fourth Dimension*. Written while he was imprisoned in several detention camps after his arrest in 1967, but also, after his release, while he was still under surveillance and observation, these poems bear the traces of his personal experiences of terror, displacement, censorship, and death, but also the signs of the intimidation, dispossession, and disfiguration that touched and defined so much of Greece during this period of historical trauma. They present, like a series of photographic snapshots in verse, the geographic and psychic landscape of fear and violence against which Ritsos seeks to delineate a mode of poetic resistance that might, in the face

of this terror and uncertainty, trace a path of opposition, however discreet, tenuous, and silent it may be. They therefore offer a kind of testimony to Ritsos’ troubled understanding of the capacities and incapacities of poetry in the face of violence, death, and displacement – at the same time that they enact, in the movement of their language and figures, the difficulty, if not the impossibility of testimony in general – and perhaps especially when, at the very moment the poet opens his mouth to speak, he registers his muteness (his inability to describe, to respond to the terror and catastrophe before his eyes), but a muteness that can still be heard, since, in a certain sense, this muteness bears testimony, in its silence, to the very terror that has produced it. This is why, we might say, it is not an accident that one of the collections Ritsos wrote during this period is entitled, simply, *Mute Poems*.

In what follows, I would like to trace the features of this poetic strategy of resistance – a resistance to the nightmare of dictatorship, but also (and in this lies the strength of Ritsos’ poetry) to poetry’s conviction in its capacity to bear witness clearly and transparently. I want to think about what happens as Ritsos moves through the several figures that repeatedly punctuate his poems – figures of abandonment, disorientation, dislocation, loss, dissociation, and the absence of sense in general. In particular, I wish to trace the way in which these figures and experiences are most often represented by the many blind, deaf and mute men and women that inhabit these poems, but also, and perhaps most significantly, by the statues that, like them, figure the death, disfigurement, paralysis, and ruined and fragmented memories of a past that survives in the present without providing any clear answers for either the present or the future. Nevertheless, it is perhaps in relation to these strange statues, in all their seeming immobility and indifference, that Ritsos asks his most difficult and disturbing questions about what it means to be human in a world that gives way to the violence and oppression of dictatorship. That what is at stake in these poems is indeed nothing less than the question of our humanity is revealed in the way in which these statues are always more than just statues, are never simply statues – they walk, observe, listen, act, weep, get mutilated and decapitated, and, in the end, giving benedictions, bear witness and respond to the devastation around them. This is why I wish to suggest that, for Ritsos, it is precisely within the context of this interplay between blindness and sight, between immobility and action, between paralysis and movement, between muteness and bearing testimony, and between following and resisting, that responsibilities form. If blindness therefore names our inability to see, to know, or to be fully awake to history, if immobility names our inability to know how to respond or move

Liana Theodoratou, “A Small History of Statues:

Yannis Ritsos and the Monuments of History”, *Culture & Memory*.

Special Issue of *Modern Greek Studies* (Australia and New Zealand), 2006: 118-128.

in relation to terror, if together they point to the uncertainty and incalculability that structure our existence, and not only in moments of fear and anxiety – they also tell us that all political responsibility must be thought in relation to the darkness of every lived moment. This is why these poems so often point to the urgency and terror of our having to respond, to act, and to decide, without knowing how. They suggest that our political responsibilities must emerge – and perhaps must especially emerge – in the context of this dark night of immobility, indecision, and uncertainty. In his poem, “Silent Praise,” Ritsos calls this suggestion the “secret of the statue.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to hear this secret, in order to trace its contours and consequences, it is first necessary to register the ways in which these poems bear testimony to the strange transformations, the monstrous elements of human nature, and often do so by anthropomorphising nature, things, and animals, and even by incorporating surrealistic elements within an almost Kafkaesque world in which everything is distorted and mutilated, in which nothing is as it seems – a world in which things and objects see, hear, express feelings, act and move, and become human, in which all sorts of strange forms appear: monsters, conjurers, magicians, gypsies, madmen, and especially the handicapped, the deaf, the blind, the sick, the wounded, the dead, the ghosts, the puppets, and the statues. Each of these figures and forms are the “mask” of a mutilated and disturbed world, seen through the distorting “mirror” of dictatorship. Indeed, Ritsos seems to suggest that these disfigured figures – living as they do in a land under siege, and finding themselves dispossessed and disoriented – have been disfigured by the effects of the Junta. Of all these figures, though, it is that of the immobile, deaf, and blind statue that moves, hears, and sees that dominates one poem after another – and especially since what the poems so often present is the process whereby humans are transformed into such statues. Haunted by death, and having lost their power to function as sentient human beings, the innumerable figures that circulate through Ritsos’ poems during this period are, in the wording of Edmund Keeley, “not merely terrorized” but “petrified” and “turned into statues” – even as the statues are in turn transformed into “animated human beings moving cautiously through abandoned city streets emptied by undefined forces of evil” or through devastated landscapes that bear the memories and traces of a life

<sup>1</sup> Yannis Ritsos, “Silent Praise,” in *Scripture of the Blind*, trans. Kimon Friar (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1979), p. 141. Citations from poems within this collection will be inserted parenthetically by *SB* and page number.

that is no longer present.<sup>2</sup> In Ritsos’ nightmarish landscapes, the Junta has mutilated the living, who now live a kind of death, which is why these poems, populated by cripples of every sort, point to the mutilation and destruction of Greece itself.

But there are of course other more immediate signs of the dictators’ presence. As Kimon Friar reminds us, Ritsos’ poems during these years are punctuated by

firing squads, handcuffs, night arrests, betrayals, oppression, guards, gallows, death, exile, rubber hose, identity cards, desertions, revolts, confessions behind which confessions are hidden, and the bitterness and emptiness of a menaced land. Oppression is also revealed in the details of domestic life: the pall that hangs over the simplest family gathering, unmatched shoes, the red eggs of Easter and resurrection alongside bread riddled with bullets, a vacuum cleaner turned on to cover the sound of shots, knives wrapped in bandages.<sup>3</sup>

The signs of violence and oppression are so pervasive that they can no longer be considered exceptional. Rather, oppression becomes its own norm – it is what now rules the landscape and peoples of Greece and it is what accounts for the sickness and devastation that Greece experiences.

Ritsos’ association between the Junta and sickness, between the Colonels and mutilation, not only forms part of his diagnosis of the dictatorship years but also responds directly to the rhetoric and language of the Colonels. Early in his regime, for example, Colonel Papadopoulos compares Greece to the body of a sick woman who, having undergone surgery, is now entirely encased in plaster from her head to her toes. “And we shall keep her body in plaster,” he warns, “until we decide she has become healthy and well.”<sup>4</sup> In response to the Colonels’ self-description of themselves as healers – curing the populace from the sickness of communism – Ritsos appropriates this figure and turns it against them: for him, the Colonels are the source of Greece’s maladies rather than its remedy. In “Wisdom,” for example, Ritsos follows the dictator’s simile to its cruel end by similarly encasing a coughing old man in plaster: “on the third day we encased him completely in plaster, / leaving only his toothless grin showing” (*SB* 19). Exhibiting a form of compassion that exposes its

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Keeley, “Introduction,” in Ritsos, *Exile and Return: Selected Poems 1967-1974*, trans. Edmund Keeley (New York: Ecco Press, 1985), p. xvii. This collection of poems will hereafter be referred to as *ER*.

<sup>3</sup> Kimon Friar, “Introduction,” in *SB*, xii.

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Friar, “Introduction,” *SB*, p. xii.

retaliatory and unforgiving underside, Ritsos goes on to suggest that, having been petrified with fear into statues – figures unable to see, to listen, to act, and especially to resist – we must now, as he puts it elsewhere, “justify the fact that we are still living” (SB 35). The moving statues in his poetry therefore ask us to remember what it means to resist this process of petrification and paralysis, what it means to live on, even in the face of terror and fear, even in the face of an evacuation of meaning, but also to think about the need for the poet to justify his own survival and practice in the face of all the death and ruin around him. As he tells us in “The Return of Iphigenia,”

Tell me, then, why all this business?  
What was it, what is it? Murders,  
expeditions,  
reprisals, sunken ships, ruined regimes,  
and above the ruins a towering marble column  
... and on the column  
a standing figure in marble, blind with a lyre.

Underlining, you feel, with his blind directness  
the absence of all meaning.<sup>5</sup>

Evoking, among so many other things, the violence, the vengeance, and reach of the Colonel’s regime, Ritsos also suggests that the figure of the poet – and here he refers particularly to Homer, but to Homer as the figure of all poets – is already a kind of statue, frozen not only in time, but also within the very poem he is writing. Identifying himself with the blind Homer – his double question, “What was it, what is it?”, confirms the relay between the past and the present here, a relay that also enables the association between the violence and devastation experienced by the blind Homer and that experienced by him – Ritsos suggests that he, too, becomes one of the statues that populate his poems, one of the statues that ask us to think about our responsibilities in a world where we seem to be entirely unprovided for, but nevertheless compelled to speak, with “blind directness”, even within the muteness of a poem.

That poetry itself is essentially linked to statues – it is most itself perhaps when it encounters statues, when it almost becomes a statue, when, like a statue, it seeks to speak within its muteness and silence – is confirmed in Ritsos’ “Traffic Policeman”, when he tells us that silence is “the most appropriate expression”. “Words then / become roots”, he goes on to say; they “dig the ground, pierce the stone, / learn the secrets of the

<sup>5</sup> “The Return of Iphigenia”, in Ritsos, *The Fourth Dimension*, trans. Peter Green and Beverly Bardsley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 110-111.

dead, the secrets of life, the underground darkness, / they can postpone, endure, wait,” they become “hidden words / which have met the buried statues.”<sup>6</sup> Taking these sentences as a kind of protocol for reading Ritsos’ almost obsessive concern with statues, we can perhaps begin to elaborate more carefully the ways in which the relays between statues and humans within the poems that concern us here open onto questions about the relation between life and death, and about the possibility of a mode of questioning that, excavating the ground of our existence, would pursue a thought of the relation between the past and the present, between sight and blindness, and between knowing and uncertainty. In his poem, “Unanswered”, Ritsos stages this process of questioning within the context of the experience of a man who, in the process of being arrested, and perhaps on the way to his own execution, fails to receive a response to his encounter with terror, identifies the naked corpses of tortured prisoners with statues, and suggests that, because of the violence and brutality of the dictatorship, death is experienced even before the death of the body:

Why are you taking me this way? Where does this road go?  
Tell me.

I can’t see a thing. This isn’t a road. Just stones.

... At least if I had

that cage – not this bird cage but that other one  
with the heavy wire netting, with the naked statues. Back  
then

when they threw the dead bodies down from the roof  
terrace...I gathered up those statues – felt sorry for  
them. Now I know:

the last thing that dies is the body. So speak to me.

Why are you taking me this way? I can’t see a thing”

(ER 53).

Like the man who, in the poem “Awaiting His Execution”, standing “against the wall, at dawn, his eyes uncovered, / as twelve guns aimed at him”, wonders if he has already “become the statue of himself”,<sup>7</sup> the man in “Unanswered” anxiously anticipates his own transformation into stone. This association between statues and death is reinforced in “Known Consequences”. There, the narrator of the poem tells us that:

For years and years he fretted; he undressed  
before small or large mirrors,

<sup>6</sup> *Trohonomos*, in *Gignesthai* (Athens: Kedros, 1977), p. 264.

<sup>7</sup> “Awaiting His Execution”, in *Gestures and Other Poems 1968-1970*, trans. Nikos Stangos (London: Cape Goliard Press, 1971), p. 60.

before any pane of glass; he tried out carefully  
 first one and then another position in order to choose, to  
 discover  
 the one most his, the one most natural, that he might  
 become  
 his own finished statue – although he knew  
 that statues were most often prepared  
 for the dead (*ER* 109; translation modified)

But if, in this era of the Junta – what Ritsos elsewhere refers to as the “age of the deaf and dumb” – we can become statues, even before our death, then we are also asked to think more precisely about the relations between statues and the living, between statues, that is, and the living who, even as they live, already have experienced a kind of death. As the narrator of “Copies of Copies” states:

Night after night...we are transferred from the loneliness of  
 one person to that other loneliness  
 of the many – and the choice is not ours... I half open a  
 crack in the two folds of my overcoat, catch sight  
 of one of my eyes in the mirror, begin a secret friendship  
 with it,  
 grow heated, cast off my clothing, and remain stark naked  
 beside my naked statue ... I now  
 have nothing more to do than to remain clumsily  
 motionless,  
 playing the part as well as I can of my statue’s statue  
 (*SB* 171)

What this poem makes clear, however, is that the narrator does not, strictly speaking, become one with his statue: not only does he claim to be “beside” his “naked statue”, but he also seeks to play the part of his “statue’s statue”. In other words, beyond this process of becoming like a statue, he suggests that he becomes like several statues, which is why, I think, the poem’s title speaks of multiple copies. It is as if the self proliferates and metamorphoses into several statues at once – all of which have the potential to move, to overcome their immobility, to experience or mime a kind of life. But we should be clear here: a living statue, even if it is no longer quite simply a statue, is not human, except insofar as humans tend to the condition of statues – that is, at least within the world of Ritsos’ poetry, insofar as they both speak and do not speak, move and do not move, hear and do not hear, see and do not see. It is precisely within, and in relation to these oscillations, that responsibilities form and indeed multiply

– and especially because this transit between the living and the dead, between statues and the human is ubiquitous within Ritsos. Indeed, as I have tried to suggest, statues are everywhere.

Like the Elpinor who, in Seferis’ “Thrush”, seeks to persuade Circe that statues can move, bend, desire, kiss, and weep, that they are not, as she continues to insist, “only in the museum”, Ritsos suggests that we remain haunted by the statue, that, in a strange way, we are perhaps more statues than the statue itself, more the fragmented, broken, relics of a past that survives in the present and therefore prevents the present from ever being simply itself. It is perhaps useful to recall Seferis’ record of the exchange between Elpinor and Circe:

“Listen. There’s this too. In the moonlight  
 the statues sometimes bend like reeds  
 in the midst of ripe fruit ...”

“It’s just the light ... shadows of the night.”

“Maybe the night that split open, a blue pomegranate,  
 a dark breast, and filled you with stars,  
 cleaving time.

And yet the statues  
 bend sometimes, dividing desire in two,  
 like a peach; and the flame  
 becomes a kiss on the limbs, then a sob,  
 then a cool leaf carried off by the wind;  
 they bend; they become light with a human weight.  
 You don’t forget it.”

“The statues are in the museum.”

“No, they pursue you, why can’t you see it?  
 I mean with their broken limbs,  
 with their shape from another time, a shape you don’t  
 recognize  
 yet know ... Really, those statues are not  
 the fragments. You yourself are the relic; they haunt you  
 with a strange virginity ... in the unconfessed terror  
 of sleep;  
 they speak of things you wish didn’t exist  
 or would happen years after your death,  
 and that’s difficult because ...”

“The statues are in the museum.”

Good night.”

“... because the statues are no longer fragments. We are. The statues bend lightly ... Good night.”<sup>8</sup>

If Ritsos follows Seferis’ suggestion that we cannot elude the statues, that we must think our relation to them, and especially since they are not restricted to the museum but are rather everywhere – a suggestion that, given Elpinor and Circe’s “good nights”, coincides with a movement toward darkness, toward the night of a certain blindness or indetermination – he elsewhere defines another relation to poetry than the one he believes motivates Seferis. This revision of Seferis becomes more legible when we register that one of Ritsos’ brief “Paper Poems” responds, in however an encrypted way, to Seferis’ “Mythistorema”, and indeed we should not be surprised that the critical figure around which this response is organised is that of the broken, fragmented statue, a statue which is explicitly linked to the poetic enterprise. “I woke with this marble head in my hands,” Seferis writes,

it exhausts my elbows and I don’t know where to put it  
down.

It was falling into the dream as I was coming out of the  
dream

so our life became one and it will be very difficult for it to  
separate again.

I look at the eyes: neither open nor closed  
I speak to the mouth which keeps trying to speak  
I hold the cheeks which have broken through the skin.  
That’s all I’m able to do.

My hands disappear and come towards me  
mutilated.<sup>9</sup>

There would be much to say about these extraordinary sentences – and, in particular, in regard to everything they have to say about Seferis’ extraordinary attentiveness to the weight of the past, to the inability to overcome this past, to the possibility and impossibility of sight and poetry, to the relation between life and death, and to the relation between the act of writing poetry and the mutilation of its subjects – but, for now, I simply wish to cite Ritsos’ response: “This severed / marble hand (from your

statue?)”, Ritsos writes (and I cannot help but think that Ritsos is addressing this question directly to Seferis, and to the statue the latter has become), “you still hold in your arms / like a dead baby – / it weighs you down / this severed hand / which pointed with its outstretched / forefinger / up, up, ever higher / perhaps to the kite / to the cloud / or to you.”<sup>10</sup>

Turning Seferis’ “marble head” into a “severed marble hand” that weighs the poet down, Ritsos seeks to accomplish several things. He suggests that this hand is a fragment of the past that so often kept Seferis from believing that his poetry could match anything that was produced in that past, that this hand – pointing not only at the sky but also at Seferis himself – nearly accuses the poet of focusing on the past at the expense of the present and the future (and perhaps even of being responsible for the baby’s death), and that this hand is also Seferis’ own hand, severed from the statue into which, since his death, and also as a result of the reverence, acclaim, and canonical status he has achieved, he has been transformed. If Seferis’ hands disappear under the weight of the marble head and, mutilated in this way, are unable to better the artistry of the past, Ritsos tells Seferis that our responsibilities include the future and not simply the past, but that this responsibility is also central to poetry. There can be no poetry that is not a poetry of the future, Ritsos seems to suggest, even if its gesture toward the future emerges, as it always must, from an engagement with both the past and the present: too many people have been mutilated into statues, and poetry has an obligation to redress this mutilation, in whatever way it can. Ritsos repeats the urgency of this point in his poem, “The Meaning of Art.” There, his narrator notes that:

For hours he gazed at the statue’s severed hand – only one  
hand

stopped in a quiet gesture toward the reconstruction  
of its entire body. Perhaps in this way he had learned  
the deep secret not even he must reveal. And besides,  
who would be able to reveal it, and how? Poetry – he said –  
always begins before the words or after the words. It was  
then

we saw the bird as it emerged out of the severed hand and  
sat

on a loaf of bread (*SB* 93).

If poetry here is said to begin either before or after the words, it is because it can never occur within the present: it can never remain in the present,

<sup>8</sup> “Thrush”, in *George Seferis Collected Poems* (Revised Edition), trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 163-165.

<sup>9</sup> “Mythistorema”, in *George Seferis Collected Poems*, p. 5

<sup>10</sup> “This severed marble hand...” from *Paper Poems (1970-1974)*, in *Yannis Ritsos Selected Poems 1938-1988*, trans. Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades (Brockport, NY: BOA Editions, Ltd., 1989), p. 353.

since it must always look forward to what exceeds it, to a future that cannot be predicted but which perhaps promises a future that could be otherwise, that would not be the continuation of pasts but would, for the first time, expose the claim of these pasts to another time – a time other than the time of the brutality and cruelty of a dictatorship. This is why this severed hand appears in another form in “Portraits of an Ancient Rain”, and I would like to close my essay with this small poem. Although it was written nearly ten years before Ritsos’ arrest in 1967, it already brings together nearly all the figures with which I have been concerned – blindness, sight, uncertainty, pain, and stone – and thereby suggests that the origin of the statue’s – and thereby poetry’s – responsibilities lies in blindness, in what I have referred to as the darkness of the lived moment. There, then, in a poem that asks us to bear witness to a future, to remain open to it, however uncertain it may be, he tells us that the poet holds

a long, harsh and tender song  
like a magician’s wand wishing to transform life  
like a blindman’s stick searching for a way to enter the  
world.

The blindmen’s vision concentrates on  
the tip of their walking sticks; the tip of the sticks  
is their eyes, deep, familiar with darkness. The blind  
strike their sticks, test the air, the silence, root, and stone,  
they strike their own eyes against every stone and they hurt.

Where they hurt, they see and know.  
Where they see and know, they point.

A poem is a stretched finger out in the rain;  
it trembles as it points toward the sun.  
Poets have conquered blindness.<sup>11</sup>

If the poet has conquered blindness, however, it is only because he asks us to imagine what the world has never offered us: absolute freedom, justice, and equality – not oppression, injustice, and violence. This is why we must always, at every moment, invent the world anew, in all our blindness, in the midst of a life that is always touched by death. We must invent a world instead of being subjected to one, or dreaming of another – we must recognise a world where blind statues see and act responsibly toward one another, where the mute sing, and where, as in Ritsos’ “At the Harbour’s Edge”, “with such obscurities”, we may “seek to escape the dark” (*SB* 45).

<sup>11</sup> “Portraits of an Ancient Rain”, in *Yannis Ritsos Selected Poems (1935-1989)*, trans. George Pilitsis (Brookline, MA.: Hellenic College Press, 2001), p. 173.

*On Nikos Kazantzakis’  
statement that “We do not fight  
our dark passions with a sober,  
bloodless, neutral virtue which  
rises above passion, but with  
other, more violent passion”*

Vrasidas Karalis

*University of Sydney*

This moral injunction by Nikos Kazantzakis can be found in his brief philosophical creed translated as *Spiritual Exercises* (Kazantzakis, 1960: 117), in one of its culminating chapters on “The relationship between Man and Man”. Unquestionably it stands out as one of the most interesting ethical statements contained in the book, expressing almost a complete reversal of a substantial tradition of Western moral theory. Since reflection on ethics as the study of interpersonal conduct began with the Greeks in an attempt to correlate facts and values, passions were to be understood as negative alterations of the human soul leading to behavioural wrong-doing, religious sin or existential inauthenticity.

The Greeks had a rather ambivalent understanding of how passions (*pathe*) influence consciousness. Passions decentre the self-reflecting subject from its own [proper?] goal by making it dependent on external objects or the approval of others. Detachment (*apatheia* and *ataraxia*) from passions can be found at the heart of Platonism, Stoicism and Christianity as the only remedy to the self-consuming excess of emotions that distort intellectual reason and moral dignity. In the Oriental traditions also, as

Vrasidas Karalis, “On Nikos Kazantzakis’ statement that ‘We do not fight our dark passions with a sober, bloodless, neutral virtue which rises above passion, but with other, more violent passions’”, *Culture & Memory*. Special Issue of *Modern Greek Studies* (Australia and New Zealand), 2006: 129-141.