

The presentation of place and space in the poetry of Yiannis Ritsos, 1934-1947

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In an article on "Greece and the Poetry of Place, 1880-1945", I argued that evocation of place in Greek poetry of that period relies on a number of stylised elements, developed differently according to the poetics of the writer concerned, but used in set ways which have more to do with cultural identity than spatial reality.¹ What I want to do in this paper is to examine the early poetry of Ritsos in the light of these conclusions, to see how far he continues the same tradition and how far he departs from it. Critics are agreed that place, and the pictorial representation of place, are important elements in Ritsos's work, but they are neither specific nor coherent in their treatment of the issue, which is sometimes incorporated under the general label of Ritsos's *realism* and sometimes handled independently of it. Thus Crescenzo Sangiglio talks of the first phase of Ritsos's work – i.e. up to 1955 – as having a purely lyrical element "worked with a concentrated realism", but also claims that it is only in *Romiosyni* (written 1945-47) that "for the first time in Ritsos the landscape appears, clearly, in all its naked open-handedness".² Sangiglio sees *The Lady of the Vines*, written at the same period, as displaying a "much broader scene-setting presentation". Indeed, a propos of this poem, Sangiglio goes so far as to say that the poet's inspiration "is identified with the landscape, takes its lines and colours, its cadenzas and rests [...]". The critic's images here are drawn from art and music, but he also stresses the *temporal* function of Ritsos's place references, maintaining that the poet underlines the "geographical historicity of the landscape". Place, it would seem, is essentially a

¹ See *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* 2.2 (1992) 183-95.

² Originally in Italian, *Ritsos*, Florence: La Nuova Italia 1975, but I translate from the Greek edition, *Μύθος και ποίηση στον Ρίτσο*, *Μελέτες για τον Γιάννη Ρίτσο* 2, Athens: Kedros 1978.

pictorial element, and yet space and time are being joined together *through* place. Peter Bien appears to concur in the view that the pictorial predominates, when he acknowledges the importance of a pictorial realism in Ritsos, which he defines initially as "an album of snapshots, not so much of things especially photogenic as of people, places, and events that are completely ordinary and prosaic [...]", an approach he later endorses in the phrase "many of the poems are graphic scenes from Hellenic life". But Bien then radically reconsiders his photographic metaphor:

I called them "snapshots" earlier, but they are much more like paintings than photographs because Ritsos's language adds texture, and because he is able to arrange line and colour to suit his own aesthetic needs, his aim never being simply to reproduce external reality as such.³

Representations of place are therefore representations of the *personal perception* of place, for purposes *other* than the purely pictorial. They are in fact part of what Bien calls a system of "visual metaphors", using physical reality to suggest something beyond itself. A third critical approach, that of Prevelakis, acknowledges the degree to which Ritsos's poetic language delights in "naming" – equatable with Sangiglio's reference to realism – but claims that the language itself is the meeting point between physical reality and the special perceptions of the individual. Ritsos's descriptions of place are therefore more important as *language* than as *representation*.⁴

Now, these three approaches clearly overlap. I wish to show that, while all three have some validity, there is a way of describing and accounting for the representation of place in Ritsos's work which gives a more efficient account of the main lines of these individual approaches within a *single* inter-

³ See his introduction to *Yannis Ritsos: Selected Poems*, translated by Nikos Stangos, Athens: Efstathiadis 1981, pp.12 and 15. Bien is referring to a selection of poems mostly written post-1960, and therefore after the period of the work which interests us here, but his remarks reflect a view of Ritsos's technique as a whole.

⁴ Pandelis Prevelakis, *Ο ποιητής Γιάννης Ρίτσος: Συνολική θεώρηση του έργου του*, Athens: Kedros 1981.

pretation. Much play has been made critically with the co-existence of two types of writing within Ritsos's *oeuvre*: short lapidary poems and long lyrical outpourings, or what have been rather crudely seen as poems within the respective poetic traditions of Cavafy and Palamas.⁵ This stylistic division is a superficial manifestation of a phenomenon which I think to be fundamental in Ritsos's early poetry, and nowhere more so than in his representation/use of place. This phenomenon I would define as *dialogue with the existing literary traditions*. I hope to demonstrate that, across a period of time, Ritsos constructs a dialogue with three ways of representing place: a) Cavafy, Karyotakis and the representation of private space and interiors; b) Seferis and the representation of space as time and time as space; and c) Palamas and the way in which he represents place on three levels in his "three lyricisms" – as relating to the "I" or private space, to the "We" or public space, and as conveying something abstract ("the totality") which synthesises both the personal and the public. Ritsos constructs this dialogue through his use of, and implicit reference to, the various literary traditions, and to the language of place associated with each. For him, place in any pictorial manifestation is not so much representational, or even a vehicle of evocation or metaphor, as part of a system of reference through which inner and outer realities can be linked. In that sense Ritsos's technique of place reference, and its play with the opposition private/public, can be tied in with his whole theory of language as a meeting point between the subjective and the material world. The opposition functions on three levels which overlap but are not simple equivalents: a) literally – private space = interiors (houses, rooms) as opposed to public space = exteriors (landscapes); b) metaphorically – private space = memory, as opposed to public space = history, politics; c) culturally – private space = an individual poet's literary practice, as opposed to public space = a/the literary tradition.

⁵ The interesting essay by Massimo Peri, "Καβάφης/Ρίτσος", in *Αφιέρωμα στον Γιάννη Ρίτσο*, Athens: Kedros 1980, pp. 258-75, makes the initial wrong assumption that there is a simple basic antithesis between Cavafy = solitariness, brevity of expression and Ritsos = public concern, verbal profusion.

The earliest Ritsos poems make little use of a sense of place of any sort. Those that do, give it a limited symbolic significance. Thus, the last three poems of *Tractor*, i.e. "ΕΣΣΔ" (Soviet Union), "Γερμανία" and "Επίλογος", invoke geographical references for political purposes. These poems provide good, if crude, examples of the invocation of place as "public space" for metaphorical purposes (here, political):

Ράγες των τραίνων φεύγουνε στη Σιβηρία. Την
 ανθρωπιά,
 φορτίο λαμπρό, με τα βαγόνια στέλνεις στα λευκά
 σου
 τοπία, που χιόνι τάβαβεν, ω ΕΣΣΔ, και δένει τώρα
 πια
 δίχτυ φιλίας το Λένινγκραντ με τα όρη του
 Καυκάσου.⁶

The individuality of Siberia, Leningrad and the Caucasus is not mobilised poetically – the names stand for fixed values as emblems of Soviet geography, history and society combined. In the following collection, *Pyramids*, we begin to find, in "Φυγή" and "Ανάμνηση", examples of place as an ostensible function of memory – in the former, childhood memory of village life, in the latter a world remembered through a filter of classical images. In each case it is easy to see that we are dealing with a "literary" reminiscence – the world of demotic song and the world of Palamas respectively, though as yet Ritsos is doing little to develop or personalise either tradition. In *Επιτάφιος* section XV, however, Ritsos actually articulates the issue of the relationship between private and public space, as the picture of the room is translated into an image of a ship, such that the death of the son/steersman leaves the mother to drown in the wreck of her house/ship. The metaphor explicitly unfolds in the third and fourth couplets:

⁶ Throughout this paper I give fairly literal translations for the major quotations, indicating by an oblique the approximate points at which line-breaks fall. This passage is from "ΕΣΣΔ", st. 5: "Train tracks leave for Siberia. You send/ a bright cargo of civilisation off in the train carriages to your white places,/ buried in snow, o USSR, and now at last it links/ Leningrad with the Caucasus mountains in a network of friendship."

Κ' είχαν το παραθύρι μας η θύρα όλου του κόσμου
κ' έβγαζε στον παράδεισο που τ' άστρα ανθίζουν,
φως μου.

Κι ως στέκοσουν και κοιτάζες το λιόγερμα ν' ανάβει,
σαν τιμονιέρης φάνταζες κ' η κάμαρα καράβι.⁷

This unfolding of private space into a wider image is, of course, essential to a poem whose message is social, private grief standing for public loss. But it is not until *Spring symphony* (1938), *The march-tune of Ocean* (1940) and *Old mazurka to a rhythm of rain* (1943) that we meet any important developments as far as the treatment of *private* space is concerned. Across these three long poems we can identify a perceptible progression.

In *Spring symphony* a stylised landscape, built mainly around the elements of land and sea, is presented as the idealised landscape of childhood memory. But this landscape is also the internal landscape of the adolescent heart, transformed by its first experiences of love, such that the creativity of spring, the creativity of sexual awakening and the creativity of artistic awakening are all part of the same experience. The final section of the poem (XXVII) articulates a Cavafean view, the justification of the past by its contribution to the aesthetic creation of the present:

Φεύγει το θέρος
μα το τραγούδι μένει.⁸

Ritsos articulates the moral dilemma passed over by Cavafy: that it is only the artist who can find some justification for life through art:

Όμως εσύ που δεν έχεις φωνή
πού θα σταθείς ν' απαγγιάσεις;

7 "And our window was the door of the whole world/ and, o my light, it opened onto paradise where the stars bloom./ And as you stood and watched the glow of sunset/ you seemed like a steersman and the room like a ship."

8 "Summer goes/ but the song remains."

Πώς θα σμίξεις το φως με το χύμα,⁹

But the poem offers no solution to the problem, simply ending on a re-assertion of the kind of landscape details on which it has fed throughout, but in a form which suggests the boundless possibilities of *future* creative experience, in terms reminiscent of early Elytis:

Νίβομαι στο φως
βγαίνω στον εξώστη
γυμνός
ν' αναπνεύσω βαθιά
τον αιώνιο αγέρα
με τ' αδρά μύρα
του νοτισμένου δάσους
με την αλμύρα
της απέραντης θάλασσας.¹⁰

The march-tune of Ocean moves out of the timescale of personal reminiscence and the evocation of the family home to which it is tied, and explores the same land-and-seascape in a "historical" or mythical perspective explicitly established by the references to Homer created by images of the sirens, of "the girls/ who got engaged to Odysseus" and of the moon secretly painting "scenes from Troy on the Greek earthenware pitchers". But just as the preceding poem seems to refer not so much to a specific sense of place as to a Cavafean view of the relationship between memory and art and to an Elytean assertion of the need to continue to find creative inspiration in the experience of the physical world, so *The march-tune of Ocean* seems to play with a *Seferean* representation of place and time, rejecting Seferis's notion that the voyage will go nowhere, and asserting the validity of the experience for both the physical and the creative future. Ritsos specifically contrasts the "old sailors"

⁹ "But you who have no voice/ where will you stand to shelter from the wind?/ How will you mix light with earth?"

¹⁰ "I wash myself in the light/ I come out onto the balcony/ naked/ to breathe in deeply/ the eternal air/ with the plentiful scents/ of the damp forest/ with the saltiness/ of the boundless sea."

who merely sit on the rocks "and smoke in their pipes/ journeys shadow and repentance" with the speaker and his world:

Όμως εμείς δεν ξέρουμε τίποτε
απ' τη στάχτη στη γεύση του ταξιδιού.
Ξέρουμε το ταξίδι
και το γλαυκό ημικύκλιο του ορίζοντα
πούναι σαν τ' άγριο φρύδι
θαλασσινού θεού.¹¹

The poem then moves from its base in a Seferean "geographical historicity" to a closing series of images similar in effect to those of *Spring symphony*. Invoking light (the sun) and sea again, the poet offers himself naked as a primal creative force:

γυμνός προσφέρομαι στη φλόγα σου
να φωτίσω τα μάτια των ανθρώπων.¹²

Because he has rooted his exploration of his powers in *collective* experience (the myth) this time, he is able to present himself more specifically as a voice of, and for, the collectivity:

Αδέλφια μου
ακούστε τη φωνή σας, τη φωνή μου
ακούστε το τραγούδι του ήλιου και της θάλασσας.¹³

The third poem to which I referred, *Old mazurka to a rhythm of rain*, is actually subtitled "Distant period of adolescence", and dedicated to the poet's mother. Prevelakis makes plentiful connection between *Old mazurka* and painting, but the parallel is not entirely helpful. Pictures *fix*, above all things, our sense of place: the pictorial in *Old mazurka*, in contrast, is essentially fragmentary, not least because it deals

¹¹ "But we experience nothing/ of the dust in the taste of the journey/ We know the journey/ and the blue-green semicircle of the horizon/ which is like the wild eyebrow/ of a sea-god."

¹² "Naked I offer myself to your [i.e. the sun's] flame/ that I may bring light to the eyes of men."

¹³ "My brothers and sisters/ listen to your voice, my voice/ listen to the song of the sun and the sea."

with psychological time and its refraction through memory. At one level the technique is particularly reminiscent of Jules Laforgue's *Derniers vers* in this respect.¹⁴ Take the opening eight lines. They revolve around three physical elements: *place* – the muddy road, the walls; *sound* – the piano, the voices, the barrel-organ; and *sunset*. The use of "θαμπή" (indistinct) and "σκοτισμένη" (dusty) to qualify *mazurka* links the music to the "λασπωμένο δρόμο", transferring to the sound a greater degree of tangibility. The description of the evening as "rusty" ("σκουριασμένο") prepares for the theme of rain already mentioned in the title. And the natural and human worlds – here equivalent to public and private space respectively – are linked through the image of evening closing the day with double doors and a golden padlock. When we look at the descriptive elements in these lines, we can see that they are entirely subordinated to mood functions. Dust, mud, rain, rust, dying light, a piano dully played, a barrel-organ, the same song sung every evening – these are Laforguean images of *ennui* of the sort which some of the Greek symbolists – Chatzopoulos for example – use, and which carry over into the work of Karyotakis.¹⁵ The poem thus inserts

¹⁴ I use Laforgue, the quintessence of the French decadent tradition, which influenced many of the poets whom the young Ritsos particularly admired, to make the point that this cannot be a genuine definition of an exclusively Greek space, when it is borrowed from a foreign literary tradition. For further details, see note 15 below. Yiorgos Veloudis, in his essay "Ο Καβαφικός Ρίτσος" in *Αφιέρωμα στον Γιάννη Ρίτσο* (see note 5 above), pp. 173-94, lists the first influences on Ritsos (in the period 1924-28) as Polemis, Porphyras and Agras, the second influences (1930-36) as Palamas, Karyotakis and Varnalis.

¹⁵ Laforgue's *Complaintes* use barrel-organs and pianos dully played as symbols of *ennui*, along with references to sunsets and dying light. In the first of the *Derniers vers* alone, there are references to rain, wind, dead leaves, dying light, rust and telegraph wires, all of which Ritsos also uses symbolically to convey the same sort of mood. Similar motifs abound in the Greek symbolists. They are also present in Karyotakis, but what is more important in his case, as in Cavafy's, is the treatment of private space itself: for example, the equation established between empty enclosed space and the cancellation of the private past in "Όλα τα πράγματα μου έμειναν..." (*Elegies*). We can compare the memories of enclosed spaces in Cavafy, where interiorisation of the past within the memory and thence

itself into the "public space" of this literary tradition, while employing its images of *private* space, the metaphorical language of moods on which the tradition relies.

To approach tradition in this way is to risk a loss of creative identity. The dangers of obliteration of the individual poetic voice consequent upon this poetic method are articulated in lines 24-28 of *Old mazurka*. There are two ways to read these lines, but they converge in significance. In the first, the second person singular verb forms have no clear referent: later in the poem they may become attachable to the mother figure who is directly addressed there, but in these early lines they are equally valid as an address to the *self*:

Αποστηθίσαμε όλα τα ποιήματα. Ποιός τόπε αυτό;
 Ποιά είναι τώρα η δική σου φωνή;
 Ανάμεσα στις φωνές της βραδιάς ποιός είσαι;
 Το πιάνο κ' η μαζούρκα. Ο λασπωμένος δρόμος, θέ
 μου.¹⁶

Read like this, the lines suggest that the voice which has absorbed existing literature loses its own identity, and becomes identified instead with the emblems of monotony. The second reading treats the second person forms as an address to the mother throughout. The poem then represents the cancellation of the poet's individuality of memory by the *language* of the literary tradition. His mother (who belongs to private space), in "becoming" the piano etc., becomes the language and images of the tradition (i.e. is incorporated into public space). In an attempt to escape the danger of losing his individuality/identity implicit in either reading, the poet activates his memory to provide greater pictorial detail: "We had a flowerpot and a sunset in a window". But the detail of childhood Christmases easily reverts to images rooted in the Decadent tradition – dull purple clouds in the west suggesting the setting

within the poem is parallel to the necessary enclosure of private acts *within* the rooms – necessary, that is, in order to exclude a disapproving society.

¹⁶ "We learnt all the poems by heart. Who said that? / Which is now your voice? / Who are you amid the voices of evening? / The piano and the mazurka. The muddy road, by god."

sun, the distant voices of children compared to cracked mouth-organs, the closed bedroom doors. Note again how private space is linked to public through simile and metaphor too: e.g. the mother's eyes are "two distant harbours without caiques". In all this, private space is too readily swallowed up by the public space of literary tradition or absorbed into public space via metaphor.

From here on, the poem continues to unwind through a series of pictorial fragments which coalesce around childhood scenes, but what is constructed is neither a narrative nor a coherent exploration of space and time, but an exploration of *memory* as the place in which, through the use of psychological time, public and private space, both literal and metaphorical, can be synthesised. The initial images of piano, dust, rain etc. are interwoven with a recurring set of motifs – the wind, swans, the grandfather with his encyclopaedia – with whole phrases returning to underline the sense of repetition of experience. At the end of the poem, the determination to go down into the city, and the representation of doors as "τα μεγάλα εικονίσματα του δρόμου", signify a passing from private to public space in a *political* sense (doors are "the pictures of poverty") and, concurrently, in an *emotional* sense (doors are also "the pictures of goodness or of grief, anger or fear"). The poet has come to terms with his memories, can express his responses to them without self-censoring: "At last we learnt to read/ and even to write with fewer *points de suspension* or even none at all" – in the same way that he has mastered the influence of existing literature and can free his own individual voice to explore the world around him.

The same treatment of public and private space can be found in a roughly contemporary poem, "Άνεμοι στα δειλινά προάστια" (1941),¹⁷ but with a much more explicit attention to the function of poetry. The poem begins on an image of rejection – rejection of public space in favour of private:

Κλειστήκαμε νωρίς στο σπίτι. Βουίζουν οι διαδρόμοι
των ανέμων.
Όπου και νάναι θ' ακουστεί στα προάστια

¹⁷ From the collection *Ordeal*. The title means "Winds in the suburbs by evening".

το βήμα της βροχής. Μαντατοφόροι
φτάνουν απ' το νοτιά. Βρίσκουν κλειστές όλες τις
πόρτες.¹⁸

The Laforguean context – suburbs in the rain – is confirmed in the second paragraph of the first section, with its wind, rotting leaves, telegraph wires, the "corpses" of paper kites (cf. the boys who have no paper kites in lines 6-8 of *Old mazurka*), dead birds, empty baskets. These images of *ennui* are continued in the opening lines of section II, where the wind brings down the last of the dead leaves and slams the shutters. As in *Old mazurka*, Ritsos is not offering pictures, so much as inserting the reader into the Decadent-Karyotakis tradition. Having achieved this "insertion", in section III he embroiders upon that tradition with a detailed vignette of run-down closed cafés (note the generalising plurals), where the absence of the human element is emphasised precisely by the personification of dawn:

σ' αυτά τα τζάμια που προχτές κοιτάζονταν η αυγή
για να φτιάξει χωρίστρα τα μαλλιά της.¹⁹

Section IV continues the ornamentation of the theme with fragments of childhood memory. And then, in section V, Ritsos consciously explores the identification of memory with private space²⁰ through parallel images: "Because it is very cold in the

¹⁸ "We shut ourselves up early in the house. The corridors of the winds give out a dull roar./ Anytime now in the suburbs the footsteps/ of rain will be heard. Messengers/ arrive from the south. They find all the doors closed."

¹⁹ "in these window-panes where, the day before yesterday, dawn was looking at herself/ to straighten the parting in her hair."

²⁰ It is interesting to compare and contrast Cavafy's use of both affective and physical detail in the context of the power of memory in "Ο ήλιος του απογεύματος". Veloudis, who is looking at influence in a narrowly verbal way, identifies the first "echo" of Cavafy in Ritsos's work as the line "There is no smoke or Ithaca" in *The march-tune of Ocean* (1939-40). But he thinks that Ritsos was only influenced significantly by Cavafy *after* his own poetic technique had been formed, namely in the second series of *Testimonies* (see Veloudis, op. cit. pp. 189-90). This stylistic argument has nothing to do with the point I am making: that there is a way of conceiving

rooms/ very cold in the memory and in the hands", and through the application of the language of place (the image of unlocking) to a past which is preserved through memory: "whenever you unlock your childhood years". The physical images of sections I-IV are turned into symbols/ideas (memory, childhood etc.) in section V, which is constructed around a running image of preserving both literal and metaphorical embodiments of the past in mothballs, the whole image serving to define the process of internalising the experiences of private space in the internal space of the memory. Sections VI and VII question how mothballing the past in this way can have relevance – how will the past survive or help the poet to survive in the face of an alien future. And here Ritsos turns the poem back on itself, in section VII stanza 3, by restating the opening scenario – the wind banging at the doors and shutters of a closed house. Here Ritsos affirms the need to come *out* of one's private space into *public* space:

Δεν είναι τρόπος να μείνεις κλειδωμένος.

[...]

Παράτα το σακκάκι σου. Έβγα γυμνός στον άνεμο.²¹

Note how nakedness in the wind gives an image parallel to that of nakedness in the sun at the end of *Spring symphony*:

Νίβομαι στο φως
βγαίνω στον εξώστη
γυμνός²²

and again at the end of *The march-tune of Ocean*:

Ήλιε, Ήλιε
που βάφεις μ' αίμα τη θάλασσα

of, and treating, place/space, much of which is in fact common to Cavafy and Karyotakis, and that this conception/ treatment is one which Ritsos and his readers could instinctively recognise as part of a particular Greek tradition, and which Ritsos then harnesses for his own purposes.

²¹ "There is no way to stay shut in /[...]/ Abandon your jacket. Come out naked into the wind."

²² "I wash myself in the light/ I come out onto the balcony/ naked."

γυμνός προσφέρομαι στη φλόγα σου
να φωτίσω τα μάτια των ανθρώπων.²³

The nudity, a stripping of the limitations which private space imposes on us, does not necessarily seem to involve a complete rejection of the private self. Read as indicating the exposure of the individual poetic self to the public space of literary tradition, the image seems even more an assertion of the importance of the private and individual elements in the creative process. Hence section IX, the final section of the poem, asks wistfully for a drug to ensure the dual preservation of internal space and public space, and of the poetry which can be the vehicle for that preservation:

Ω, ένα φάρμακο δεν είναι και για τ' όνειρο
ένα φάρμακο για τη δόξα για το θάνατο
ένα φάρμακο για να μην πεθάνει ο ήλιος
να μην πεθάνει ο ήλιος πάνου από τη νιότη μας
να μην πεθάνει το τραγούδι κάτου από τον ήλιο
μας;²⁴

We can see in this poem quite clearly how the sense of place which critics label "realism" in Ritsos is used not pictorially but to reflect different sorts of *poetic practice*. Ritsos uses the Decadent tradition to evoke private concerns, as against traditional public/generalising images of the sort to be found in Seferis or indeed Elytis. By the end of the poem the death of the private *and* public experience of Greekness is being cautiously subordinated to the necessity of the survival of poetry/the poem. In pursuit of an answer to the question: "how is the poetic voice to survive as both individual and public voice?" Ritsos harnesses the so-called "realist" or "pictorial" elements as parts of an appeal to his reader for sensitivity to different aspects of the Greek poetic tradition.

²³ Sun, Sun/ who dyes the sea with blood/ I offer myself naked to your flame/ to bring light to the eyes of men."

²⁴ Oh, is there no drug for dreaming/ a drug for glory for death/ a drug to stop the sun dying/ to stop the sun dying over our youth/ to stop the song dying beneath our sun?"

How does the approach to place/space which I have been developing apply to poetry with a more evidently *public* message? Up to now I have been dealing with poems which are unashamedly personal/autobiographical in tone, drawing through memory on images of childhood and adolescence. This type of poetry predominates in the pre-*Romiosyni* period, the only notable exception being *Επιτάφιος*. If I have had little to say about this latter poem, it is because, for my purposes, it has little of relevance. The fifteenth section is the only one which deals with images of space, and this section, as I said earlier, by its expansion from private space (the room) into public space (the room becomes a ship, the window becomes "the door of the whole world"), mirrors the poem's dual function as a vehicle for images of private grief and public/political sorrow. To this I want only to add that by casting the poem in fifteen-syllable couplets and thus inserting it very obviously into the public space of the folk-song tradition, an insertion strengthened by some of the poem's diction, Ritsos wants to underline at a formal level this passage from the private to the public.

It is really only with *Romiosyni* that Ritsos tackles a long poem whose *primary* focus is non-autobiographical. It is customary to cite lines 5-8 of the opening section to show that the poem is firmly placed in a Greek setting:

Ετούτο το τοπίο είναι σκληρό σαν τη σιωπή,
σφίγγει στον κόρφο του τα πυρωμένα του λιθάρια,
σφίγγει στο φως τις ορφανές ελιές του και
τ' αμπέλια του,
σφίγγει τα δόντια. Δεν υπάρχει νερό. Μονάχα φως.²⁵

Interestingly, Prevelakis, who does just that,²⁶ and goes on to describe the setting as "a Greek landscape", qualifies this with: "but also Mediterranean, such as we come across not only in Italy, Spain and Provence, but also in the poetry of those regions (Salvatore Quasimodo, Jorge Guillén, Paul Valéry, Seferis and

²⁵ "This place is harsh like silence,/ it clasps its burning-hot stones to its breast,/ it clasps its orphan olive trees and its vines to the light,/ it clenches its teeth. There is no water. Only light."

²⁶ *op. cit.* p. 137.

others)". The landscape is not so much Greek (or indeed Mediterranean) as *literary*; to a Greek reader it suggests the barrenness, light, heat, stoniness, dryness of a *Seferean* landscape. Yet at the same time it departs quite clearly from Seferean landscapes in its personification (representation in terms of the human body), in its choice of detail (olives and wine rather than pines), in the detail of its language (e.g. "πυρωμένα" for "καμμένα"); and unlike Seferis or Elytis, it makes no mention of the sea (though sea references do appear later in the poem). The initial landscape is conceptually Seferean in its *basis*, and the use of the repetitions and parallel syntax to emphasise the repetitiousness within the scene evoked is a recognisably Seferean technique too. But the deliberate humanisation via the choice of the verb σφίγγει, the references to breast and teeth, and the adjective "orphan" help to establish a relationship between man and landscape which will be strengthened in lines 15-16 by the reverse process of applying a natural simile to a description of the inhabitants:

μια βαθειά χαρακιά σφηνωμένη ανάμεσα στα φρύδια
τους
σαν ένα κυπαρίσσι ανάμεσα σε δυο βουνά το
λιόγεμα.²⁷

Thus, while keeping a margin of individuality (the function of which I shall consider shortly) the poem offers just enough Seferean reference in the initial landscape to transfer the reader into the world of geographical historicity, of space as time, which characterises Seferis's presentation of place; and there are later Seferean motifs and echoes to enhance the effect: e.g. in section II: "κι ο ναύτης πίνει πικροθάλασσα στην κούπα του Οδυσσέα", and in section V: "Δυο κουπιά καρφωμένα στον άμμο τα χαράματα με τη φουρτούνα", the latter recalling the pictorial image in the fourth section of *Mythistorema*: "Their oars/ mark the place on the shore where they sleep". One can also identify a recognisably Seferean vocabulary in the detail – references to whitewash, burnt houses, marble – references, that

²⁷ "a deep groove carved between their eyebrows/ like a cypress between two mountains at sunset."

is, which suggest Seferis because they come in the context of heat, dryness etc., e.g. (section VI): "Burnt houses which look from afar, their eyes removed, at the marble sea". But whilst this reference to a Seferean world brings with it the concept of a Greece in which different levels of time co-exist, the identification which Bien sees:

...this tribute sees the men who fought against the Germans and afterwards in the first Civil War as national heroes easily equated with the free besieged of Missolonghi during the War of Independence; with that legendary stalwart of medieval times, Digenis Akritas; or with the epic giants celebrated in folk song...²⁸

is emphatically *not* achieved through a Seferean co-existence of levels of time reference within a given unit of poetry (i.e. within any one of the seven sections in which *Romiosyni* is constructed). At best it is a highly implicit comparison of references in *different* sections, and of references to *literary traditions* rather than to temporal moments as such. Thus the references to the War of Independence are in practice references a) to the folk song tradition and to kleptic ballad, through mention of Liakoura (section III) and in the lines (section V):

Μέσα στ' αλώνι όπου δειπνήσαν μια νυχτιά τα
παλληκάρια
μένουνε τα λιοκούκουτσα και το αίμα το ξερό του
φεγγαριού
κι ο δεκαπεντασύλλαβος απ' τ' άρματα τους.²⁹

where the invoking of fifteen-syllable metre makes the literary connection more overt, and b) to Solomos's *Free Besieged* (particularly fragment 7 of the second draft), in the combined image of women feeding starving children and of warlike determination (section III):

²⁸ op. cit. pp. 28-9.

²⁹ "In the threshing-floor where the lads dined one night/ there remain the olive-stones and the dried blood of the moon and the fifteen-syllable verse of their weapons."

κι αργά κατηφοράνε να ταΐσουνε τα εγγόνια τους με
το μεσολογγίτικο μπαρούτι.³⁰

And, of course, reference to Digenes Akrites (whether the epic or the Acritic songs) is by definition literary, as in section II: "στ' Αλώνια τα ίδια αντάμωσαν το Διγενή και στρώθηκαν στο δείπνο". In the light of this I think that we should conclude that Ritsos's presentation of place in *Romiosyni* is not as such Seferean. He is making a reference to Seferis, and to his view of Greece, alongside references to other aspects of Greek literature. I would suggest that, in the context of a poem celebrating heroic resistance, the point of the reference is to *challenge* the Seferean picture of a modern world without heroes, just as the title *Romiosyni* is a challenge to the traditional exemplary status of *Ancient Greece*. The landscape of the poem may be identifiable with that of *Mythistorema* in significant respects, but it is one peopled by the heroes of epic, of folk song, of Solomos. The humanising of it, through metaphors, is another aspect of this revaluation, a stressing that, culturally, the land is its people. Consequently, both the values of the poem and the techniques of evocation of place which contribute to their expression, are distinctly personal to Ritsos himself.

What does this mean in practical terms as far as the issues of private and public space are concerned? In *Romiosyni*, images of private space are annulled – houses burnt, doors torn down, prickly pears growing within the walls of the "kastro", "the ruined house of the governor patched with sky" (section VI). Indeed, public space has invaded private space to the point where people are expelled from it and forced to become part of the landscape: "και τριγυρνάνε έξω απ' τα τείχη της πατρίδας τους ψάχνοντας τόπο να ριζώσουνε στη νύχτα."³¹ At the same time, public space is given a degree of intimacy, brought down in some sense to a more human dimension, by enclosing it in images drawn from private space: "night as big as the big round baking-tin on the tinker's wall". Furthermore, neither sort of

³⁰ "And slowly they [i.e. the old women] go down to feed their grandchildren with the Misolonghi gun-powder."

³¹ "and they wander around outside the walls of their fatherland seeking a place to take root in the night."

place is presented through description in any strict pictorial sense: a sense of place is compounded out of fragmented details, many of them metaphorical. Where a sequence of lines does appear to create a particular place and moment, its details in fact fracture that focus by referring outward to other levels of place and time. Take for example, in section III:

Όταν ξεφτάει απόμακρα η μινωική τοιχογραφία της
 δύσης
 και σβήνει η πυρκαϊά στον αχερώνα της ακρογιαλιάς
 ανηφορίζουν ως εδώ οι γριές απ' τα σκαμμένα στο
 βράχο σκαλοπάτια
 κάθονται στη Μεγάλη Πέτρα γνέθοντας με τα μάτια
 τη θάλασσα
 κάθονται και μετράν τ' αστέρια ως να μετράνε τα
 προγονικά ασημένια τους κουταλοπήρουνα
 κι αργά κατηφοράνε να ταΐσουνε τα εγγόνια τους με
 το μεσολογγίτικο μπαρούτι.³²

In these lines the place/picture is not in fact the focal point, but the *base* from which geographical references (Crete, Misolonghi) which are also temporal references (pre-Homeric civilisation, the War of Independence) are developed to extend the theme of heroism (implicit in the reference to "Misolonghi gunpowder"), all of this being linked back by motifs of weaving ("γνέθοντας", "ξεφτάει") and stars to a passage in section II:

Α, τι μπρισίμι αστέρι ακόμα θα χρειαστεί
 για να κεντήσουν οι πευκοβελόνες στην καψαλισμένη
 μάντρα του καλοκαιριού «κι αυτό θα περάσει»
 πόσο θα στίψει ακόμα η μάνα την καρδιά της πάνου
 απ' τα εφτά σφαγμένα παλληκάρια της

³² "When the Minoan fresco of sunset begins to unravel in the distance/
 and the fire dies out in the grain-store of the shore/
 the old women climb up here by the steps carved in the rock/
 they sit on the Great Rock spinning the sea with their eyes/
 they sit and measure the stars as if measuring their ancestral silver spoons and forks/
 and slowly go down to feed their grandchildren with the Misolonghi gun-powder."

ώσπου να βρει το φως το δρόμο του στην ανηφόρα
της ψυχής της.³³

In that passage, the outer world/public space is being enclosed in images which customarily belong to private space/the domestic world – the stars as a silk thread, the singed enclosing wall of summer, the light finding an upward path into the mother's soul. The original passage, as we saw, works in a precisely parallel way. There, the domestic world – a wall painting, a barn for straw, steps, weaving, spoons and forks – has been appropriated by the outer world : sunset, the shore, the sea, the stars. At the same time, in a mirror image of this process, the poet has "appropriated" the public space of existing literary tradition (at least as far as the representation of place is concerned), in this case the implicit reference to Solomos's *Free Besieged*, and has woven it into a personal expression of public issues.

*

If I am correct in arguing that, in his early poetry at least, place is not of interest to Ritsos *in itself*, but that it stands for him as representation of vital aspects of the Greek literary tradition which need synthesising in his own work if it is to express what is valid both personally and publically, then why, you might ask, is some of the evocation of place so vivid in its detail. Look, for example, at "Κλειδωμένα πόρτα", the seventh section of *Guard duty by the light of the evening star*, written 1941-2. At a certain level the poem has the detail of a genre-painting, with its barrel-organ on the corner, of a Saturday evening, the muddy road, then the lamps with mauve cords, the adults talking in a dining-room with a patch of light under the door, though the poem overlaps exterior and interior scenes and uses sub-scenes in its metaphors, e.g. the wet clogs in the corridor of the refugee shack, and the tiny hands of the child buried alive and pushing

³³ "Ah, what silk-thread star will be needed/ for the pine-needles to embroider 'this too will pass' on the singed wall of summer?/ How much more will the mother squeeze out her heart onto the bodies of her seven slain heroes,/ before the light finds its way onto the upward slope of her soul?"

against its coffin lid. Elements of public space – the details of the neighbourhood – have been blended with elements of private space – references to interiors in their own right and in metaphors. *Some* of the description refers to the public space of literary tradition (barrel-organ, muddy road, sunset, the relentless passage of time marked by the old clock). All of this has been filtered into one vision through the private space of memory, and this then forms the basis for a poem in which the idea of enclosure/isolation is emphatically rejected in favour of a unity/community which breaks down private space in favour of group values:

Πρέπει να σπάσουμε την πόρτα. Θα τα καταφέρουμε.
Γιατί η αγάπη μας είναι πιο πολλή απ' τη μοναξιά
μας.³⁴

The vividness of detail is necessary to the tangibility of the experience. Both private and public space need to suggest the *reality* of lived experience if they are also to have the full metaphorical power to suggest the kinds of abstract notion with which Ritsos is playing.

To get at the "theory" behind the practice, I want to conclude by juxtaposing two poems, "Μια νύχτα" from *Testimonies 1* (1963) and "Το νόημα της απλότητας", the opening poem of *Parentheses* (written 1946-47). The first I see as itself a metaphor for Ritsos's perception of the meaning of place in literary representation; the second is acknowledged as a central statement of Ritsos's view of the nature of language and the relationship between text and reader.³⁵ In "Μια νύχτα" Ritsos treats the house as an example of space as a limited specific reality, its decay reflecting its absence, or loss, of meaning, in that *empty* space is deprived of its potential for private meaning. The

³⁴ "We must break down the door. We shall achieve it./ For our love is greater than our loneliness."

³⁵ Edmund Keeley, in "Ο Γιάννης Ρίτσος μέσα σε παρενθέσεις" in *Αφιέρωμα στον Γιάννη Ρίτσο* (see note 5 above), pp. 469-84, sees the poem as simply expressing the desire for the reader to find the poet who is "hidden" in his words. This oversimplifies the image at the centre of the poem.

illumination of the second floor, with its eight uncurtained windows and two open balcony doors, restores this space to a potential public reality, but it cannot confer on it any greater degree of signification. What does *that* is the antique mirror –

[...] ένας γερτός, παλαιϊκός καθρέφτης,
με κορνίζα βαρειά, από μαύρο ξύλο σκαλιστό, κα-
θρεφτίζοντας
ως ένα απίθανο βάθος τις σάπιες, συγκλίνουσες σα-
νίδες του πατώματος³⁶

– which turns the same space into a limitless general reality, by making it an unrestrained metaphor for itself. The mirror, like literature or the poet or language itself, turns the space into a perspective, and thus creates a potential for meaning out of it. The recording of place/space is thus for Ritsos the creation of a private perspective out of space, which can be viewed inwardly (as private space) or outwardly (as public space). This is, I think, the equivalent of Palamas's "three lyricisms", with the mirror of literature/language performing the function of the generalising "lyricism of the totality".

This interpretation sits neatly with the ideas expressed in the second poem I referred to above, "Το νόημα της απλότητας". This short poem promotes, in its first stanza, the idea that the poetic self is "behind" things/objects. The reader, in making contact with objects "touched" by the poet, achieves a degree of communication with him – "the traces of our hands will mingle". The second stanza exemplifies this process with a brief description which contains elements of both the external and the internal world:

Το αυγουστιάτικο φεγγάρι γυαλίζει στην κουζίνα
σα γανωμένο τεντζέρι [...]
φωτίζει τ' άδειο σπίτι και τη γονατισμένη σιωπή του
σπιτιού –

³⁶ "an old mirror, tilted at an angle/ with a heavy frame, of carved black wood, mirroring/ to an incredible depth the rotten converging floorboards."

πάντα η σιωπή μένει γονατισμένη.³⁷

The third stanza glosses the function of language – every word is a "way out" towards a meeting between poet and reader, even if that meeting is not necessarily achieved. The "truth" of such poetic language lies in its power to suggest such a meeting. The word can take the reader to a perception of an *inner*, psychological truth or can lead outward to what Bien calls "an external reality validated by the poet's touch".³⁸ The process is mirrored in the passage from public to private space – from moon to empty kitchen in stanza 2 of this poem, from lit windows outward in "Μια νύχτα", or from mirror to rotting floorboards. Descriptions are both fragments of place and symbols of public realities, and the interrelation of fragments of description of public and private space forms a mutual commentary between the two dimensions. But in so far as those descriptions are also references to existing literary conventions/traditions, they create a passage between private and public space at the stylistic level too. Indeed, it is through his dialogue with tradition, as we have seen, that Ritsos is able, by the late 1940s, to integrate his different levels of vision within a poetic voice which is both his own and yet recognisably related to the "public" space of twentieth-century Greek poetry as a whole.

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³⁷ "The august moon shines in the kitchen/ like a tin-plated cooking-pot [...] it lights up the empty house and the kneeling silence of the house/ – silence always stays kneeling."

³⁸ *op. cit.* p. 18.