**The form of Dramatic Monologue as perfected by Ritsos’ poetry.**

Yannis Ritsos is widely regarded as one of the most significant figures in contemporary Greek poetry. He managed to revolutionise the idea of a dramatic monologue and create not just beautiful poetry, but also a multifaceted art form that has depth on psychological, social, and philosophical levels throughout all of his publications. The dramatic monologue form was popularised by Victorian poets such as Robert Browning, but Ritsos revitalised it and many poets to this day still use his style as inspiration. His ability to construct identities and characters that the reader can genuinely sense and almost experience is skilful. He has various poetry volumes, but his collection "The Fourth Dimension" comprises seventeen long poems, in which all but one are dramatic monologues and it is his best-known work which involves many examples of the technique that he developed. Ritsos’s poetry therefore brings the past to life in a variety of ways. Greek History is perceived as existing concurrently because historical events, mythical characters and historical individuals are frequently combined and purposefully compounded with modern history.

Ritsos' skill in creating rich, complex characters that function as windows in which to examine a broad range of human experiences demonstrates his grasp on the fundamentals of the dramatic monologue. Whether they are prisoners awaiting release, mythical figures or lonely women, they are all working to serve as miniature versions of larger social narratives. Ritsos himself had a difficult and eventful life; he was a lifelong member of the Greek Communist Party; in 1936, the Metaxas dictatorship burned his writings at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens. He was then also imprisoned for four years after the Civil War on the concentration camp islands of Lemnos and Makronisos. The social context of Greece during the time period, mixed with his life experiences created a unique take on many situations with which the reader can resonate. This can be seen in almost all of his poems, however in terms of writing style he “abandoned rhetorical self-indulgence or subjective lyricism at some point in his career in favour of the dramatic and symbolic expression of a tragic sense of life that came to each with a mature vision of the human predicament”(Keeley 1983). The dramatic monologue in its final form was developed later in his career. He began with First-person dramatic monologues that were inspired by cords of classical ancient dramas. The remarks, which appear at the start of the monologues, include stage directions written in metric, rhyming singles, and long-worded lyrics. In general, protagonists are not identified by their names in the actual monologue, however, most are named in the title. Although the pieces are monologues in structure, they are unique in the fact that they always involve two (or more) characters who appear only in the remarks. The protagonist no matter who they are, always speaks to the character who is mentioned in the remarks. However the secondary characters remain mute throughout the whole speech. I believe that this is an important factor as to why the monologues seem to resonate with those who read them because the silence of the secondary characters makes the rambling speeches of the protagonists more poignant, and it also allows the reader to fully immerse themselves into the emotions as we are always aware that the speaker is intending for someone to listen.

Ina Beth Sessions, in an article from 1947, came up with classifications for the components that create the perfect dramatic monologue. She labelled seven elements: ‘speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action, and action which takes place in the present’(Sessions, 1947).

These components can be identified in almost every poem in ‘The Fourth Dimension’( Ritsos, 2016). Most of these poems follow a common formal scheme, with each monologue being proceeded and followed by a narrative prologue and epilogue, given as stage directions. In the prologues, we are always given a speaker, an audience, and an event. Interaction between audience and speaker is evident to varied degrees—in Helen and Phaedra, the audience appears to also be trapped, while in Ajax, the audience is more unassertive and you don’t feel as though you are being directly spoken to —but it is always perceptible. Ritsos' use of anachronism sets even the iconic mythical monologues partially in the current age, and the dramatic plot always occurs throughout the speech. ‘Much like George Seferis and other Greek authors before him, he saw in the ancient myths tragicality a parallel to the tragicality of contemporary Greek Experience’ (Decavalles, 1993). This is executed perfectly for the modern audience especially for fellow Greeks because mythology is a large part of the Greek social landscape, and he uses the myths to convey the painful real-life experiences that not only he but also Greece have experienced such as the military dictatorship that lasted from 1967-1974. His literary voice blended smoothly with the characters he created, erasing the distinction between the poet's self and the speaker's voice. Character revelation is more challenging since Ritsos speakers convey more than simply a character. Often the legendary figures he chooses in his mythical poems were people who had no voice in their original myth or who had limited opportunities to express themselves. Ritsos uses these monologues to ‘ humanize the ancient heroes and demythologize the aura they live in to make them more accessible, and in his terms more appropriate, to our times’ (Keeley 1996: 93). This is an interesting choice as it seems to resonate with Ritsos himself as there have been many times in his personal life that he has been silenced and both his political and creative voice have been suppressed. Not only this, but if they are not mythical figures that does not mean they are flat characters. Even in the more modern-day poems such "Romiosini," which is more than a concept than a physical character he still manages to encapsulate the essence of Greek identity and resilience through the descriptive and emotive language which conceptualises the enduring of the Greek soul.." “he may weep with the assurance of the trees and the stars and his brothers” (Ritsos and Sharon, 1996, pg.13). This expression depicts the Greek people's fight to maintain and revitalise their cultural legacy in the face of hardship. His ability to encapsulate feelings into a poem is driven by the fact that “he concluded that he was essentially a lyrical poet; what he desired supremely was the presence of what he called “the poetic vapour” in all he wrote” (Decavalles, 1993).

The interplay between dramatic action and the action that happens in the present is an important component in a dramatic monologue. I don’t believe that there is a better example of this in Ritsos’s poetry other than his use of Mythic stories. He is skilfully able to warp time according to the modern-day event that he is trying to allude to. For example, the ten yearlong campaigns of the ancient Greeks against Troy narrated in epic poems such as the Iliad, is understood in the poet’s monologues to be the decade of war (1912-1922) in which the Greeks fought the Turkish army in the same battlefields. The decade in the Iliad also transforms through his imagery and double meanings can mean the Greek struggle against the Nazi troops and later in the 1950s the civil war. This is a creative technique for a man such as Ritsos to have mastered due to the many conflicts that his political and personal beliefs have caused him. His poems were banned for many years in Greece for being too openly political however many of his poems have his own opinions veiled behind a metaphoric smoke screen of symbolism and imagery. As I have said previously, this kind of added depth to his poetry across such long lengths like the monologues is one of the main reasons I believe that readers resonate and are touched by his work, it is also the reason why his works are continually studied and taught and will continue to be so. Not only is he able to do it with the actual time frame of the event but he also is able to portray many forms of a character through one poem. For example, the events and objects that are mentioned in correlation with the different myths may not be directly related to the character as it is known in the original. Moreover, the landscape and setting in which the figures operate are often made to fit into a contemporary setting. For example, Agamemnon having a “marble staircase covered with purple carpets” (Ritsos, 1993). This is change in setting is significant as it means they now represent common people with all of the issues and worries that face modern society. As a result, the anguish and regret that characters like Agamemnon, Ajax, Electra, and Orestes try to express serve as a metaphor for both the tragedy of the poet's own life and the anguish that all Greeks have gone through over the turbulent years throughout their lengthy history.

The dramatic monologue’s deep effect is further enhanced by the poet’s use of form. Ritsos defies traditional forms by using different stanzaic patterns and rhythms to reflect the emotional swings in his characters. His monologues have levels of depth added by this dynamic use of form, which highlights the narrative emotional intensity. This is evident in “Moonlight Sonata” maybe Ritsos’s most well-known piece from the Fourth Dimensions collection. This is a confessional monologue that uses symbolism and dramatic language to encapsulate the despair of the ‘black lady’. The feelings of despair and agony are visceral to the reader. This is brought about by the growing tension that develops between the speaker and her listeners as her cries get more intense and her companion starts to pull away. This underpins the feeling of deep loss that the reader feels. Despite the poem being 18 pages in length, Ritsos holds and continues the feeling all the way through, and he uses powerful imagery “And it makes no difference that my hair has turned white, (that is not my sorrow – my sorrow is that my heart too does not turn white). Let me come with you." (Ritsos, 1975). This is just an example of the powerful imagery that he uses to make the reader experience the deep anguish that this lonely woman is feeling. Ritsos also can be seen to be infusing his own personal messages. Yannis was a known Marxist and parts of this poem could be a comment on the Bourgeoisie class and how their decline is necessary. Shown through the dilapidation and withering of the grand house and mirrors in which the women describe, could be imagery to show that the bourgeoisie should be left in the past like this unfortunate woman is being. The lady’s soul can also said to be decaying and withering along with her house every time she cries out to get no reply. I believe that this poem in particular is masterfully written. It’s like a theatrical play in which you can truly get a sense of both characters despite it being a monologue.

The thing that makes Ritsos stand out above other poets such as Browning and Cavafy is his remarkable ability to harness the power of language to evoke visceral emotions through the use of just one speaker. His manipulation of imagery immerses readers into his characters in such a way that it exceeds the boundaries of traditional poetic expression. Surreal imagery is also a technique that he uses in order to blur the lines between reality and imagination which promotes introspection from the readers. The best example of this can be found in “The Dead House” in which the narrator is a hybrid of two characters: an old Electra recalling the horrific events of her father’s return to Mycenae, and an old recluse from the present day recalling the piano and cutlery in her once-elegant home, along with the return of twentieth-century war soldiers and their lice-infested undergarments. Although the poem contains several mythical allusions that allude to the Mycenaean past, Agamemnon’s family and the fabled House of Atreus, some of the features she describes are not unique to any one historical era. Under closer inspection, these particulars could indicate that the elderly Electra who discusses her house and her close relatives may be Ritsos himself reflected in the storyteller. Ritsos’s own life experiences are not all that unlike the anguish and misery that Electra is attempting to describe in her monologue. Ritsos is from an aristocratic family, much like Electra. Similarly, to the house of Atreus, his home was also plagued with tragedy when the poet was a small child, He was affected by the deaths of his mother and sibling at a very young age. As well as the unfortunate events surrounding both his sister and his father passing away in an insane asylum. Perhaps Ritsos saw Electra’s house of death in the original narrative and thought it to be a fitting stage for his own life story therefore his very own ‘house of death’. However, due to the lyrical and symbolic nature of his work, these kinds of deeper meanings will always be ambiguous. In my opinion, this gives the poems a further level of depth and as I have said previously it promotes introspection for the reader to think about what it made them feel. As David Harsent states “In dramatic monologues like The Dead House, direct speech does the job for him. The awareness of which you speak comes, surely from ownership: the poems are his, as are the people, the events, he’s co-opted them or they come directly from his imagination, or something of both” ( 2012). This is a tough boundary to follow because his mythic figures are technically always a part of the public’s imagination regardless of whether or not he places a true story behind the scenes. However, to capture the minds and feelings of the audience, especially the Greeks who are surrounded by the remnants of the past In their general life. The imagery and concept have to be creative and gripping without being completely farfetched as he is already revisiting stories that many poets, writers, artists and dancers have had their own take on for decades. Frequently, the experience invoked is not that of Agamemnon or Ritsos, but rather the experience of Greece. In ‘Beneath the shadow of the Mountain’ in which Electra who is aged seventy years old, pieces of Greek history are superimposed on to the audience “Since then, how many kings have changed, what number of revolutions occurred… one instance of unadulterated democracy” Ritsos, 1993). This is yet another example of what makes this poet’s monologues specialised and why people consider him to have perfected it. His ability to evoke such emotions whilst simultaneously running two storylines alongside each other both of which have significant history and lore behind them.

In conclusion, Yannis Ritsos is a skilful poet who I have a newfound respect for. His dramatic monologue especially in his later work is the formula to create poems with gripping and complex characters and depth that delves into wider social/political contexts without being openly controversial. Although he is Greek, his avid use of mythology in his works appears to be for more than just the large relevance they hold in Greek culture. He uses them to present allegories to the audience that relate to many aspects of social life both in his own past and in the lives of the Greek public. I admire much of Ritsos’s lyric poetry, but these poetic monologues reveal a side of his creativity that I have never truly witnessed before even with other great poets. I believe that he is a truly talented man whose works will be transient through time as they will always act as marks in the timeline of Greek history and also show the development of literary style.

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