

**SHEDDING LIGHT ON ODYSSEUS' COMPANIONS:
A COMPARATIVE READING OF SELECTED POEMS BY EZRA POUND
AND YANNIS RITSOS**

**LANÇANDO LUZ SOBRE OS COMPANHEIROS DE ULISSES:
LEITURA COMPARATIVA DE POEMAS DE EZRA POUND
E YANNIS RITSOS**

MATRONA PALEOU

mpalaou@culture.gr

Ministry of Culture and Sports

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0531-2154>

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Abstract

Seen in the framework of classical reception, this paper discusses the use of the ancient sources by modern poets, highlighting some main aspects of the dialogue between past and present. It focuses on the examination of four poems that present an interesting reworking and appropriation of themes drawn from the Homer's *Odyssey*: Ezra Pound's Canto XX (1928) and Yannis Ritsos' three selected short poems, included in the collection *Testimonies 2* (1966), where myth, history and politics are interwoven. Although they were written by poets engaged in different ideologies, these poems have a key element in common: the focus on Odysseus' companions instead of Odysseus himself, a choice which reveals both their aesthetic and ideological choices. The way myth is used here brings out the association between aesthetics and politics, thus illustrating the views of the two poets on the position and function of literature in society and their critical intervention in the current socio-political developments of their time. The consideration of the poems in the context of Pound's and Ritsos' work at this stage of their poetic careers

suggests an ideological reading of the myth linked to contemporary concerns and also confirms the importance and lasting impact of the Homeric epics, providing yet another example of the modernists' reception of the classical tradition.

Keywords: classical reception, mythical method, modernist poetry, E. Pound, Y. Ritsos

Resumo

Partindo de um estudo de receção, discute-se neste artigo o uso de fontes clássicas por parte de dois poetas modernistas, com destaque para pontos fundamentais de um diálogo firmado entre o passado e o presente. A nossa análise centra-se em quatro poemas que atestam o interessante trabalho de recriação e apropriação de temas apresentados na *Odisseia* de Homero, quer no Canto XX (1928) de Ezra Pound, quer em três pequenos poemas de Yannis Ritsos, extraídos da obra *Testimonies 2* (1966), onde mito, história e política se cruzam. Embora estes quatro textos tenham sido escritos por autores com ideologias distintas, todos eles têm um ponto em comum: colocam a tónica nos companheiros de Ulisses e não propriamente no herói, escolha reveladora de determinadas opções estéticas e ideológicas. A forma como o mito é usado permite associar a estética e a política, além de ilustrar os pontos de vista dos dois poetas, relativamente à função social da literatura e ao poder da sua intervenção crítica no desenvolvimento sócio-político do seu tempo. A consideração de tais poemas no contexto de criação de Pound e Ritsos, nesta fase das suas carreiras literárias, sugere uma leitura ideológica do mito ligada a preocupações contemporâneas que confirmam o impacto da épica homérica, fornecendo outro exemplo da receção modernista da tradição clássica.

Palavras-chave: receção de autores clássicos, leitura mítica, poesia modernista, Ezra Pound, Y. Ritsos.

“There is no ownership to my statements and I cannot interrupt every sentence or paragraph to attribute authorships to each pair of words, especially as there is seldom an a priori claim even to the phrase or half-phrase” argues Pound in *Guide to Kulchur*, pointing to the numerous references, fragments and languages that are found blended in his poems and also hinting at the openness of literary texts to multiple readings and creative reworking.¹ This makes a good starting point for the examination of four poems that creatively work on themes from the *Odyssey*: Ezra Pound’s Canto XX,² written in March 1925 and which first appeared in *A Draft of*

¹ Pound 1970a [1938, 1st ed.]: 60.

² Pound 1996: 89–95. Canto XX was translated into Greek by Aris Alexandrou (1984), poet, prose writer and professional translator, who moved from an unconditional

Cantos XVII–XXVII in 1928, and Yannis Ritsos' short poems "Eurylochus", "Forgiveness" and "Non-hero", included in the collection *Testimonies 2* (1964–1965) first published in 1966.³ Set in the framework of classical reception, a constantly developing research field, this approach discusses the adaptation and appropriation of the ancient sources by modern poets with the aim of highlighting some of the main aspects of this dialogue as presented in the aforementioned poems, thus inviting us to reflect on the complex relationship between past and present.⁴

The choice to read in parallel a poem written by Pound, the controversial American poet, who spent the major part of his life in Europe and was closely associated with Italian Fascism, and Ritsos, a Greek poet, who spent long periods of his life incarcerated in internment camps for political prisoners because of his communist ideas, is a challenging one.⁵ Strange as it may sound, the ensuing reading is based, firstly, on a common thematic aspect, that is their choice to focus on ordinary people, thus showing a preference for Odysseus' companions rather than for Odysseus himself, and, secondly, on the way the two poets drew on Homeric epics, which illustrates their interaction with classical tradition in the framework of modernist aesthetics. The relationship between Odysseus and his companions is inverted and revised by both poets who follow a different path from Seferis, who, after having quoted a short passage from the *Odyssey* at the very beginning of his poem "The Companions in Hades" where Odysseus' companions are described as "fools" (*nepioi*),⁶ clearly exposes their irresponsibility, which

commitment to a more sceptical view on communism, which led to a strengthened belief in international humanism.

³ Ritsos 1989a: 275, 276. The edition of *Testimonies 2* cited here incorporates twenty-one poems not included in the 1972 edition. See also Ritsos transl. by Keeley 1991: 31–33. Henceforth, translated titles of poems and collections will be used when available. In the Bibliography, Ritsos' works will be given in Greek and translated into English.

⁴ Hardwick 2003: 1–11. In the first chapter, Hardwick outlines key concepts of classical reception and highlights the two-way relationship between the ancient source and its modern reading, without overlooking the importance of the political, social and cultural context in which each developed.

⁵ This article owes much to Savvides' study (1990) [1980, 1st ed.] on the Elpenor character in modernist poetry, where he also briefly referred to the links between the aforementioned poems.

⁶ Lines quoted from the *Odyssey* (Book A, 8–9): "νήπιοι, οἱ κατὰ βοῦς Ὑπερίονος Ἡελίοιο/ ἦσθιον· αὐτὰρ ὁ τοῖσιν ἀφείλετο νόστιμον ἦμαρ" ("fools, who ate the cattle of Helios Hyperion;/ but he deprived them of the day of their return.")

was the only reason they were deprived of the day of return.⁷ In contrast, Pound and Ritsos' choice to bring to the fore the neglected companions and absolve them of moral responsibility provides yet another example of the interweaving of myth, history and politics, and, by extension, of the association between aesthetics and politics, thus illustrating their view on the position and function of literature in society and at the same time their critical intervention in the prevailing socio-political conditions of their time. It is worth noting here that the *Odyssey* itself, which is not limited to presenting the adventures of the aristocracy but embraces characters from across the social spectrum, opens the way for such readings and appropriations where class consciousness comes to the fore.⁸

In the *ABC of Reading*, Pound mentions that “The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension”,⁹ also alluding to his own journey through centuries, different literary traditions, cultures and languages as illustrated in his poetry. *The Cantos* captures his aspiration to create a synthesis – a kind of epic – that exposes the vastness of human knowledge and inspiration available to him. George Kearns considers it a didactic poem that “invites us to accompany its pilgrim/poet on a difficult, non-linear journey out of darkness towards light, in the course of which we meet innumerable examples of the blessed and the damned, as well as of every gradation between”.¹⁰

Canto XX, in which the main themes of the previous nineteen Cantos reappear, encompasses some of the features and some of the enduring sources of inspiration that made Pound's poetry distinct; the blending of languages, traditions and senses that here calls us to go back as far as Antiquity, pass through Middle Ages and Renaissance and reach up to the aftermath of the Great War. It belongs to the group of Cantos XVII–

⁷ See the final lines: “Πεινούσαμε στης γης την πλάτη, / σα φάγαμε καλά/ πέσαμε εδώ στα χαμηλά/ ανίδεοι και χορτάτοι.” (“On the earth's back we hungered, / but when we'd eaten well/ we fell to these lower regions/ mindless and satisfied.”). Translated by Keeley and Sherrard 1995: 236.

⁸ Hall 2008: 136–143.

⁹ Pound 1970b: 34.

¹⁰ Kearns 1989: 1.

XXIII, in which we are given aspects of heaven – even fleeting glances, after having passed through hell in Canto XIV and XV and purgatorio in Canto XVI. Pound is fully aware of the difficulty of approaching and understanding a text – possibly without excluding his own poetry – as is shown by his visit to Professor Levy, a specialist on Provençal, illustrated at the beginning of Canto XX. In a letter to his father, he refers to all the different historical and mythological figures and incidents found in this poem that form “a sort of bounding surface”, which brings out the main subject of the Canto: “the lotophagoi: lotus eaters, or respectable dope smokers; and general paradiso”.

Canto XX opens with a reference to the senses of sound and sight, coupling allusions to Homer (“*Ligur’ aoide*”) and the troubadour Arnaut Daniel in the lines “Si no’us vei, Domna don plus mi cal,/ Negus vezer mon belpensar no val” (“And if I see her not,/ no sight is worth the beauty of my thought”). More references to senses are to follow, including fine smells and splendid images of natural environment, but the comparison between the sense of sight and thought in Daniel’s lines and the predominance of the latter over physical experience alludes to the vital importance of artistic creation.

The sharp contrasts give us an insight into the multifaceted nature of reality. A typical one is between heavenly-like and nightmarish imagery occurring in the description of spring setting at the beginning of the poem and the subsequent evocation of Italy and Provence as paradise on earth, which are followed by the horrifying family history of Nicolo d’ Este, illustrating his turbulent thoughts after the execution of his young wife, Parisina Malatesta, and her lover Ugo, his own illegitimate son. Nicolo d’ Este occupies a central position here and, as his delirium unfolds, allowing key elements of the poem to surface, more antitheses are to be revealed. The allusion to Provençal themes of love (also seen in Cantos IV and VI) in the first lines of this Canto is rather far from the suffering characters appearing in Nicolo’s delirium, including Nicolo himself and members of his own family, Helen of Troy, as portrayed in Homer’s *Iliad* (Book 3) and Elvira de Toro in Lope de Vega’s *Las almenas de Toro*, all of them providing examples where love and beauty have adverse consequences. There is also a reference to the fatal opposition between Roland’s heroism and Ganelon’s treason inspired by *La Chanson de Roland*, the medieval *chanson de geste*, while Nicolo, addressing his son Borso, makes a plea to keep peace in Ferrara. The blissful images, however, are to come up again,

this time associated with the reference to lotus-eaters and love considered here as substitutes for paradise.¹¹

It is within this context that the reference to Homer's *Odyssey* must be seen. The reference to this epic becomes the vehicle for manifesting the juxtaposition between individualism and companionship. "Feared neither death nor pain for this beauty; If harm, harm to ourselves" reverberates through the land of the lotus-eaters, a declaration that prepares the ground for the rhythmic song of the nameless companions, who voice a harsh accusation against Odysseus:

"What gain with Odysseus,"
 "They that died in the whirlpool"
 "And after many vain labours,"
 "Living by stolen meat, chained to the rowingbench,"
 "That he should have a great fame"
 "And lie by night with the goddess?"
 "Their names are not written in bronze"
 "Nor their rowing sticks set with Elpenor's,"
 "Nor have they mound by sea-bord."
 "That saw never the olives under Spartha"
 "With the leaves green and then not green,"
 "The click of light in their branches,"
 "That saw not the bronze hall nor the ingle"
 "Nor lay there with the queen's waiting maids,"
 "Nor had they Circe to couch-mate, Circe Titania,"
 "Nor had they meats of Kalüpsö"
 "Or her silk skirts brushing their thighs." (Pound 1996: 93–94)

The reference to the *Odyssey* closes emphatically with what the companions were given instead:

"Give! What were they given?"
 "Ear-wax."
 "Poison and ear-wax,"
 "and a salt grave by the bull-field,"
 "neson amumona, their heads like sea crows in the foam,"

¹¹ For example: "[...] Nel fuoco/ D' amore mi mise, nel fuoco d' amore mi mise.../ Yellow, bright saffron, croceo;/ And as the olibanum bursts into flame, / The bodies so flamed in the air, took flame, / "... Mi mise, il mio sposo novello." [...]."

"Black splotches, sea-weed under lightning;"

"Canned beef of Apollo, ten cans for a boat load." (Pound 1996: 94)

This rhythmic, increasingly bitter song in Canto XX is ironically characterised at the end as "*Ligur' aoide*". Unlike the opening lines of Canto XX, in which the song was associated with love, this time song is reminiscent of the "poor devils dying of cold" in Cantos IX and X or the nameless victims lost in the trenches during World War I as described in Canto XVI. By turning against Odysseus and instead giving voice to the underprivileged companions, Pound undermines what is used to be considered heroic by criticising individualism and railing against the abuse of power, issues that have already been raised in the very first Canto. The focus on the less privileged can also be linked to fascist populism and therefore must also be considered within the very context of the poet's commitment to fascism. This commitment is generally a thorny issue for a critical approach to Pound's writing, as there is always the danger of either trying to brush it aside and focus on the aesthetics or rejecting his poetry as a whole.¹² In this respect, it would be useful to remember what Burton Hatlen noted while referring to the basic features of fascism that allowed its rise and appeal to wide audiences, also including intellectuals, writers and artists: "For in blending a 'socialist' egalitarianism with a 'conservative' authoritarianism, fascism became a new kind of political movement that was neither truly 'socialist' nor truly 'conservative', neither a 'left'- nor a 'right'-wing movement, but rather something unique, dazzling – and (in the end) frantically self-destructive", a comment that is quite illuminating for the approach of the *Cantos* in general, and specifically of Canto XX.¹³

Almost forty years later, Ritsos attempted to rehabilitate Odysseus' companions, especially Eurylochus and Elpenor who have been the typical victims of criticism. No much effort is needed to find the common features between Pound's aforementioned lines and the sharp criticism against Odysseus put forward in Ritsos' poems "Eurylochus" and "Non-hero" or the bitterly ironic tone against the much-praised king voiced in the poem "Forgiveness", all of them written between 1964–1965.

In the first poem, Eurylochus, the only one who escaped Circe's spells and then incited his companions to kill and eat Apollo's sacred cattle,

¹² See also Kagiales 1996: 117-155.

¹³ Hatlen 1985: 145-172 (150).

questions the accusation of being a “fool”, which is common for Odysseus’ companions, as shown above, and instead emphasises the injustice done to them, considering the suffering they have endured compared to the king of Ithaca:

“Had we too the good will of the gods, and had they”
 “given us”
 “that herb with the black root and the milky flowers”
 “that wards of the evil eye”
 “or a woman’s wand – who would not have drawn his”
 “sword, really, [...]”
 “[...] Who would not”
 “have gone”
 “into the baths, to be soaped by the maidservants, rubbed”
 “down with oil,”
 “guided to the silk sheets of their mistress”
 “and her silken breasts?” (Ritsos 1991: 31)

This poem ends with a harsh reaction against power: “Κι ύστερα σου λέει ο άλλος:/ δειλοί, απερίσκεφτοι, και πάνω απ’ όλα «τα γουρούνια»” (“And then the other one calls you:/ cowards, fools, and above all, ‘the pigs’”). Ritsos’ attitude towards the underprivileged companions, so different from that of Seferis, aims at defending an anti-hero like Eurylochus and therefore challenges the characterisation of Odysseus as *philetairos* (fond of his companions). Similarly, the poetic voice in “Forgiveness” is directed against Odysseus in an ironic way, as seen in the last line of the following passage:

“What were they supposed to do? They were only human.”
 “All that was saved”
 “From the ship’s hold – and that barely – was the wine and”
 “flour; they were patient quite a while,”
 “cought some fish with hooks – small fry – hardly enough”
 “to fill up on. In the end”
 “they put the knife to the broad-browed Oxen of the Sun.”
 “So what”
 “if the meat on the spits bellowed like real cattle and so”
 “what if”
 “the skinned hides walked? Eurylochus and the others”
 “had the joy of them hot.”

“The man of many stratagems was having his beauty sleep”
“on the grass. He didn’t get to them in time.”
“The warnings were no use at all. [...]”
“For once in their lives they went out with a fully belly – ”
“Who can blame them?” (Ritsos 1991: 32)

The poetic voice shows an understanding of the companions’ weakness and tries to explain their actions by emphasising the importance of material factors that shape their morality and determine their choices. However, there is also an irony addressed to them, as Savvidis also points out, which, combined here with the absence of the word “*syntrophoi*” (comrades, companions), which is a standard address among members of the Communist Party in Greece, shows an attempt to keep a distance from them too, a choice that is probably also related to the poet’s own concerns regarding political commitment as well as to his attitude towards his political comrades. Even so, the accusations against Odysseus cannot be ignored or underestimated. As in Canto XX, their *hybris* is toned down while at the same time their harsh living conditions are stressed.

Elpenor, one of Odysseus’ most criticised companions, is the central figure in the poem “Non-hero”.¹⁴ An ambivalent attitude is evident in this poem, as the appropriation of the myth that emphasises the underprivileged, in line with Ritsos’ Marxist ideas, is combined with a rather elitist view of the poet’s image and work, especially when compared with the image projected in the poem “Περίπου” (almost, sort of) of the same collection, in which a third person is needed to confirm poetic transcendence.¹⁵ A poet’s distinctive view of things probably also explains why Ritsos is quite generous with Elpenor here, uniquely combining praise with contempt:

[...] “So then, honor and glory”
“to the handsome, gallant young man. Light in the head,”
“they called him. Still,”
“didn’t he assist as best he could”
“in their great voyage? For that, indeed, the Poet”
“commemorates him separately, even if with a certain”
“contempt,”
“and maybe exactly for that reason with more love.” (Ritsos 1991: 33)

¹⁴ See also Savvides 1990: 25–29 and Ricks 1993: 49–65 (58–60).

¹⁵ Ritsos 1989a: 235.

In this case, the political connotations that are usually found in Ritsos' reading of the myths are counterbalanced by a kind of aestheticism. The emphasis given to the "Poet", a word here capitalised, and his special role in the creative process points to Homer and also to Ritsos himself.¹⁶ The poet's distinct position is highlighted in a poem that attempts to humanise and democratise mythology by restoring Elpenor's reputation. And it is important that his memory is restored by the poet not only because of his contribution to the long voyage of return alongside his companions but also because of his good looks that are specially mentioned here, while the negative characterisations usually attributed to him are toned down, inviting a parallel with the handsome albeit insignificant young men found in C. P. Cavafy's poetry. This poem is also indicative of a general tendency observed in *Testimonies* to bring together different or seemingly different aspects of reality. For example, in the poem "Trivial details" in *Testimonies 2*, the affirmation of the poet's excellence is coupled with a focus on ordinary people like Eumaeus, the swineherd, and on trivial things.¹⁷ Another such example is provided in the poem "Reverse side" in the same series of poems where "the sculptured profile of a youth" on the ancient coin is found "shaded by a horse's tail and a helmet", thus putting together youthful beauty and combative engagement in a cause vaguely reminiscent of the unfortunate Elpenor.¹⁸

In this respect, the poem "Non-hero" can be seen as an example of Ritsos' renewed attempt to express both his social and aesthetic preoccupations in the 1960s. There are critics who argue that a similar kind of tension afflicted Pound too, even if Pound himself considered the Cantos a "political tool".¹⁹ Hatlen, for example, commenting on Pound's commitment to fascism, refers to "[...] the tension between his 'elitist' celebration of the solitary 'genius' as the source of artistic and

¹⁶ See also the poem "The Disjunctive Conjunction 'Or'" (*Repetitions 3*, 1969) for the emphasis on the word "Poet". Ritsos 1998: 94, tr. by Keeley 1991: 113; Friar and Myrsiades 1989c: 228-229.

¹⁷ Ritsos 1989a: 280. Note the following lines: "[...] These things – the hide, his sandals, the belt tightening-/ their secret meaning (beyond gods and myths, / beyond symbols and ideas), only poets can sense" translated by Friar and Myrsiades 1989c: 178 and Keeley 1991: 39.

¹⁸ Ritsos 1989a: 260; Friar and Myrsiades 1989: 174.

¹⁹ Kagiales: 1996: 117–155 (130).

political change, and his 'populist' sense of 'the masses' as the ultimate agent of history".²⁰

The above reading of poems highlights the use of myth by Pound and Ritsos, at least at this stage of their poetic careers, allowing us to explore the way in which they perceive the place and function of poetry in society.

The exhortation *ut doceat, ut moveat, ut delectat* ("to teach, to move, to delight"), rooted in medieval rhetoric, has been used by Pound to illustrate the threefold direction of literary purpose.²¹ Moreover, his aspiration is to form "a guide TO not THROUGH human culture", as he emphasises in *Guide to Kulchur*, where he also refers to the past not as something static, being "convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table with dates pasted on here and there", but as something we know "by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time" and not following a chronological sequence.²² This may further illuminate why he has drawn on various literary and non-literary sources regardless of the time period or language that have left their imprint on his work, whether it is poetry or even a kind of guidance for the appreciation of poetry and literature in general, such as the *ABC of Reading*.²³ Pound sees tradition as a "beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us" and the return to origins as invigorating since it leads back to nature and reason, an indication of longed-for sensibility.²⁴

In this respect, Pound finds in the past a source of authenticity that he considered vital to the realisation of the underlying aim of his poetry, which is, among others, to contribute to the improvement of contemporary reality. And, as mentioned above, this aim not only highlights the social function of his poetry but also betrays its relation to fascist ideology. In the aftermath of the Great War, Canto XX graphically illustrates the anxiety of coping with current circumstances by approaching the present through returning

²⁰ Hatlen 1985: 145–172 (165). It is noteworthy that the aforementioned tension is the second out of six basic polarities in the *Cantos* and in Pound's political thinking that "deconstruct" fascism.

²¹ Kearns 1989: 2; Pound 1979a: 74–87 (78).

²² Pound 1970a: 343, 60.

²³ Pound 1970b.

²⁴ Pound 1979b: 91–93 (91). Noteworthy are the points of convergence between Pound's and T. S. Eliot's view on tradition (Eliot 1972: 71–77).

to and interacting with the past. A time continuum is thus presented that opens up opportunities for interpreting both the past and the present and that perhaps can counterbalance injustice: the reference to Nicolo d' Este's turbulent life is followed by the lotus-eaters' paradise – a place where Odysseus' companions can be heard, thus overturning their traditionally marginalised position and compensating for the accusations that piled up against them, while the Canto closes with a plea “to keep peace”.

Ritsos, on the other hand, draws on myth while he is at a turning point in his poetic career in an attempt to explore the passing of time both on a personal and on a broader historical level. Apart from the scattered mythical references in his early poetry, the incorporation of myth into his work was an option he had not previously explored extensively.²⁵ He actually turned to myth between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, taking into account, for example, some of the long poems of the collection *The Fourth Dimension* (1972)²⁶ or the shorter ones in the collections *Testimonies* (composed between 1957–1967) and *Repetitions* (1963–1965, 1968, 1969). Being openly engaged in the communist cause, this belatedness was primarily due to his ideological reservations about the modernist use of myth.²⁷ His political affiliation also gives reasons for his treatment of myth, which is far from both Cavafy's elaboration of mythological and historical sources and Seferis' employment of the mythical method, to mention two typical examples,²⁸ and also explains the belated incorporation into his poetry of aspects related to aestheticism,²⁹ another point that differentiates him from Pound, who followed the opposite course.

²⁵ Veloudis 1979: 17–41; Kokoris 2009: ιγ-μθ (ιζ-κζ), 297–302 and Kokoris 2003: 31–35, 37–42.

²⁶ Ritsos 1998b; tr. by Peter Green and Beverly Bardsley (2016).

²⁷ The lines: “έτσι να κάνω μια μικρή χειρονομία σου χτίζω έναν άνθρωπο/ [...] ή το μικρό σκαντζόχοιρο που τρύπωσε και σκάβει τρύπες στο ροδόνα του Έλιοτ” in Ritsos' autobiographical poem “The Monstrous Masterpiece”, written in 1977 (1998c: 391), are indicative of his scepticism.

²⁸ According to Beaton (1983: 23–44), Cavafy's treatment of the past is significantly differentiated from the mythical method as practised by the Anglo-Irish-American writers and by Seferis in Greece.

²⁹ For example, the erotic element stressed in *Twelve Poems For Cavafis* (1963) (tr. by Friar and Myrsiades 1989), and further elaborated in the years to come (e.g. in *Testimonies*, *Erotica* published in 1981) shows the increasing importance of these aspects in Ritsos' poetics from the 1960s onwards.

In the 1960s, Ritsos projected an ambivalent and sometimes sceptical outlook towards political commitment and socially engaged poetry. The poet was deeply affected and in some cases frustrated by political developments, but in both the *Testimonies* and the much darker *Repetitions* – which mark a turning point in his poetic career and signal the need to renew his poetics – the issue of engagement is not questioned in the way or to the extent that Aris Alexandrou exposed in his mature poems, for example.

In Ritsos' treatment of the past, the return to myths becomes an additional way of dealing with contemporary problems and dilemmas that still retain their importance over and above the mythical past.³⁰ Especially in *Testimonies* and *Repetitions*, Ritsos often uses myth to speak for the present, addressing contemporary social and political concerns through various anachronisms, thus creating distancing effects. Moreover, as also seen in the poems examined here, his inversion and appropriation of well-known myths shows an attempt to humanise and democratise mythology.³¹ In this respect, Ritsos seeks to demythologise mythology while remaining consistent to his Marxist ideology. His interest in minor mythological figures in the context of revising well-known myths is part of his own image as a politically conscious poet, and more specifically as a poet of the Left.³² It is useful to remember that in post-civil war Greece, left-wing engagement was largely considered a vehicle of subversive ideas and was therefore seen as a major threat to the dominant political discourse. By revisiting and appropriating myth, in other words by presenting this particular kind of *repetitions*, Ritsos appears to be “bolder” – to paraphrase his poem “Κάθοδος στο μαντείο του Τροφώνιου” (Descent into the Oracle of Trophonius) – in order to convey his aesthetic and social concerns at that stage of his poetic career.³³

³⁰ See Veloudis 1979: 17–41 (38–39) for Ritsos' historicisation of myth and Prokopaki 1981: 46–66.

³¹ See Keely 1996: 81–96 (91–94) and Tziouvas 2017: 350–378.

³² Worth noting here is the appearance of Hephaestus, “the lame god, the worker god”, in a positive light in the poem “The Prototypes” (*Repetitions* 3), which is indicative of Ritsos' political stance as a poet of the Left. See also Kokoris' focus on the rather unsuccessful poem “Heracles and Us” (*Repetitions* 2) to emphasise the political connotations of many of Ritsos' poems drawing on ancient sources. (2003: 31–35; 2009: 297–302) Ritsos 1998a: 96, 46; tr. by Keeley 1991: 116, 76.

³³ Ritsos 1998a: 33. (The translation of the title of this poem is mine.) Yantromanolakes' comments (1981: 195–229) on the poems “Chronicle” and “Winter Clearness” in *The Fourth Dimension* are quite useful here, as they highlight the renewing power that the return to the past, either the distant mythic-historical or the personal/individual, has.

Even so, Ritsos' view of mythology remains quite ambivalent, especially in *Repetitions 2* (1968). In the poem "Niobe", mythology is initially seen symbolically as a natural source of inspiration and is not rationalised.³⁴ But there is also a different perspective on it, far from any idealised view of the past. It is the one that, from the distance of the present, sees mythology as a mechanical device that it would be interesting to discover its function, even if it were destroyed. The beauty and enchantment offered by mythical symbols are here contrasted with the rationalisation regarding their construction and operation. As these two tendencies coexist, it seems that the use of myth offers no easy solutions to unlock poetic inspiration. The doubts raised here about the efficacy of mythology must also be considered in a political context, as myth cannot necessarily offer consolation to the writer in difficult times. Moreover, if one takes into account the overexploitation of tradition and its symbols that was commonplace during the dictatorship (1967–1974), it is reasonable to have doubts about its use and effectiveness.

In the poem "Not even Mythology",³⁵ Ritsos goes beyond the scepticism expressed in "Niobe". Being incarcerated in an internment camp in Leros in 1968, he voices his frustration at the deadlock and expresses, in the first person plural, an even more pessimistic view on the way mythology works under adverse circumstances, even though the word mythology is still capitalised. He casts doubt upon its adequacy to offer the poet a means to express his opposition and thus find relief:

[...] "And later, when the"
 "lamps were lit,"
 "we went inside and again returned to Mythology,"
 "searching"
 "for some deeper correlation, some distant, general"
 "allegory"
 "to soothe the narrowness of the personal void. We found"
 "nothing."
 "The pomegranate seeds and Persephone seemed cheap to"
 "us"
 "in view of the night approaching heavily and the total"
 "absence."

³⁴ Ritsos 1998a: 58; tr. by Keeley 1991: 84.

³⁵ Ritsos 1998a: 51; tr. by Keeley 1991: 46.

The focus of the two poets on Odysseus' companions instead of Odysseus himself suggests an ideological reading of the myth that aims to link poetry with social concerns. Although their political orientation and ideological references are completely different, Pound and Ritsos treated this mythical theme in a similar way. It has been pointed out that modern poets aim mainly at the appropriation of ancient sources with a view to the development of their own work and their own contemporary concerns, while the reception of the classics constitutes a two-way approach that leaves neither the contemporary text nor the ancient source unaffected.³⁶ This is quite useful here. The poems discussed above were written and published under very different circumstances: Canto XX was published in 1928, the year that the parliamentary government was abolished in Italy, while Ritsos' collection *Testimonies 2* was published in 1966, a year before the military coup in Greece. Despite their ideological divergence and the concerns expressed in literary criticism, especially over Pound's devotion to fascism, both poets employed myth here in an attempt to denounce the inequality of the less privileged in the hope that this might change. "Literature is news that STAYS news" notes Pound in the *ABC of Reading*, and in focusing on *Odyssey* he underlines: "The news in the Odyssey is still news. Odysseus is still 'very human', by no means a stuffed shirt, or a pretty figure taken down from a tapestry", thus pointing out the openness and enduring relevance of such seminal texts as the Homeric epics and giving good reasons for readers to revisit them.³⁷

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³⁶ Harrison 2009: 15–16.

³⁷ Pound 1970b: 29, 44.

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