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YANNIS RITSOS AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA: ANTHOLOGY OF CZECH AND SLOVAK POETS

The aim of my contribution is to introduce the work of a Greek leftist poet Yannis Ritsos Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets (Ανθολογία Τσέχων και Σλοβάκων Ποιητών). The impulse and inspiration for his work were his two visits to Czechoslovakia in the 1960's. The book was published in 1966 in Greece, but almost all copies were destroyed at the behest of the contemporary ruling military junta. The anthology is unique not just in its creation, in which even Czechoslovak Writer's Union took part, but more importantly it is unique for its content, because it introduces a wide, well-researched overview of Czech and Slovak poetry of the first half of the 20th century.

Key words: modern greek literature, czech literature, slovak literature, translation, Ritsos, Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets, Cold War cultural politics, Czechoslovak Writers' Union

Yannis Ritsos, a Greek leftist poet, worked on the *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets*¹ during his two stays in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s. This monumental piece of work fell victim to the right-wing dictatorship in Greece and only a few copies survived. My modest goal is to introduce this unknown work of Ritsos. An in-depth analysis will be a part of my dissertation on Yannis Ritsos and his relationship to Czechoslovakia. Firstly, I will briefly mention Ritsos' foray into translation, then I will move on to the main topic – the circumstances of creating this work, the content of the work, its contribution, and I will finish my lecture by outlining the basic incongruities and questions that arise when this work is studied closely.

Yannis Ritsos, one of the most important and most productive Greek poets of the last century, dedicated his time, apart from creating his own original work, to literary theory and translations of foreign poets. In both cases,

¹ RITSOS (1966).

the authors were usually his personal favourites that he admired and that influenced him. His work resulted in *Studies*,² a collection of essays focusing on the poetry of Vladimir Majakovsky, Nazim Hikmet, Ilja Erenburg, and Paul Eluard, as well as their translations into Greek, in addition to works of other authors he translated.³ In the 1950s and 1960s, he frequented Eastern European countries, where his work on translations took on an entirely new course – compiling anthologies.⁴

In the 1950s, Yannis Ritsos started travelling abroad, mainly to countries of the Eastern Bloc. His first visit was to the Soviet Union in 1956 where he went as a journalist and as a part of a delegation of Greek intelligentsia. The impressions he gathered during this visit were published as articles, 36 of them were published by a leftist newspaper *Avgi*.

For Yannis Ritsos, the Soviet Union represented the first socialist country where a new man is being born.⁵

In 1958, he was officially invited to Romania, among other notable writers such as Stratis Myrivilis, Angelos Terzakis, Menelaos Lountemis, and Maria Ralli. At that time, he was already a famous poet in Romania thanks to the collection *Vigil (Αγρύπνια)* which was published by Political and Literary Publications (Πολιτικές και Λογοτεχνικές Εκδόσεις)⁶ in 1955 and the performance of his play *Beyond the Shadows of the Cypress Trees (Πέρα απ' τον ίσκιο των κυπαρισσιών)*.⁷ During this visit, which lasted from May to the 8th of July, he familiarizes himself with the Romanian poetry through French translations and starts preparations for compiling the *Anthology of Romanian Poetry*.⁸ These

2 RITSOS (1974).

3 A. Blok, A. Jozsef, N. Guillén, etc. For more see MAKRYNIKOLA (1993).

4 In this period Ritsos was not the only Greek leftist poet focusing on compiling anthologies. In 1960 an anthology of Modern Greek short stories was published in Germany under the title *Antigone lebt*, which was compiled and translated to German by Melpo Axioti and Dimitris Chatzis, ones of the most important Greek leftist writers living in exile. The proposal to publish this anthology was approved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Greece (Κομμουνιστικό Κόμμα Ελλάδας – ΚΚΕ) in 1959. MATHAIOU – POLEMI (1999: 207).

5 KOTTI (2009: 135).

6 A content of work of this publishing house placed in Bucharest, which continued in activities of a publishing house New Greece (Νέα Ελλάδα), was supporting ΚΚΕ's intentions via publication and propagation of an appropriate literature (studies of Marxism – Leninism classics, propagandistic and educational literature as well as works of writers that were in harmony with requirements of the Propaganda Department of the ΚΚΕ about a work of engaged literature. For more see MATHAIOU – POLEMI (2003).

7 KOTTI (2009: 127, 137).

8 RITSOS (1961).

preparations culminate during his second stay in Romania, at the invitation of Romanian Academy of Sciences and the Executive Board of Unesco, which lasted from October 1959 to February 1960. During this stay, he also visits Czechoslovakia for the first time,⁹ from December 1959 to January 1960.¹⁰

We can piece together the course of Ritsos' first visit to Czechoslovakia from the poems he wrote here, which are provided with dates and place-names of origin. Thanks to the collection of *Chromatic Details*¹¹ which contains these poems and was published in Czechoslovakia in 1963 translated by Mariana Stříbrná, we can trace the steps of this visit. This work also includes a vast poem *The First and the Last Man from Lidice*.¹² From this collection, we know that Ritsos resided for the first eleven days of 1960 in Prague, that he later visited Jablonec nad Nisou, Železný Brod and Hradec Králové, then returned to Prague, where he remained until the 26th of January. Then he moved to Slovakia and visited the Tatra Mountains, Martin, and finally Bratislava. Mariana Stříbrná also mentions his visits to South Bohemia, Lidice, and Brno and adds that these Ritsos' trips were organized by the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, at whose invitation Ritsos came to Czechoslovakia. During his stay in Prague, he watched a performance in the National Theatre, visited several concerts and art exhibitions. He also got acquainted with many writers from the Czechoslovak Writers' Union and with the editors of magazines such as *Flame*, *Literary newspaper*, *Culture*, *World of Literature* and *A Guest in the House*, where many of Ritsos' poems were published.¹³ Even though the last poem of the *Chromatic Details* collection bears the date of the 28th of January, we know that he left Czechoslovakia as late as March of the same year, as evidenced by the note accompanying the poem *The First and the Last Man from Lidice*.¹⁴

Preparations for compiling the *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets* already began during this first visit, as documented by the proposal of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union concerning the foreign relations of its members and that was approved by the secretariat of the Central Committee of

⁹ In Czechoslovakia there was a large group of Greek emigrants who came here as well as to other countries of Eastern Bloc (for example USSR, Poland, Hungary, etc.) after the end of the Greek Civil War (1944–1949). For more see TSIVOS (2011); BOTU – KONEČNÝ (2005).

¹⁰ ΚΟΤΤΙ (2009: 137–138).

¹¹ RITSOS (1963); RITSOS, Y. Χρωματικές λεπτομέρειες. In: IDEM (1989: 79–98).

¹² RITSOS, J. První a poslední z Lidic. In: IDEM (1963: 37–63); RITSOS, Y. Ο τελευταίος κι ο πρώτος του Λίντιτσε. In: IDEM (1964: 275–294).

¹³ This information comes from a letter sent to me by Mrs. Stříbrná.

¹⁴ RITSOS (1963: 63).

the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Under this proposal, an educational and working trip to Greece was arranged with the following attendees: Czech poet František Branislav, Slovak prose writer Vladimír Mináč, Mariana Stříbrná in the role of the interpreter and, as a substitute, Slovak poet Vojtech Mihálik.¹⁵

The reasoning behind the approval was following:

*... Dispatching a delegation was recommended by our representative of-fice in Athens, which in cooperation with our union created favourable conditions for this excursion, such as mutual translations. It was also recommended by a progressive Greek poet Yannis Ritsos who recently stayed in Czechoslovakia. The delegation will hand Yannis Ritsos a proposal for an extensive anthology of Czech and Slovak poetry, that Yannis Ritsos will translate, and will also provide the basic necessary information for Ritsos' work.*¹⁶

Another goal of the delegation was to establish closer relations with Greek writers and to exchange information about their work, culture and literature. The tour was planned to last 10 days, with the departure scheduled for the end of September. The expenses were supposed to be covered by the Czechoslovak Writers' Union. The trip did indeed take place, as evidenced by the 1961 report of The Foreign Department of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union.¹⁷

In 1962, Yannis Ritsos again travels to Eastern European countries. On the 28th of May he travels to Romania with other Greek writers as a guest to a theatre festival bearing the name of Romanian dramatist Ion Luca Caragiale. From there he goes to Czechoslovakia, where he arrives on the 23rd

¹⁵ A three-member delegation was supposed to be dispatched in 1958, but the members weren't granted visas and the visit was canceled. The Museum of Czech Literature in Prague, Archive of Czechoslovak Writer's Union, *The proposal of The Foreign Department of the Czechoslovak Writer's Union in the third quarter of 1960*. Unpublished.

¹⁶ ... *Vyslání delegace doporučil náš zastupitelský úřad v Athénách, který ve spolupráci s naším svazem vytvořil předpoklady pro tuto cestu (vzájemné překládání, atd.). Cestu doporučil také řecký pokrokový básník Jannis Ritsos, který dlel nedávno v Československu. Jemu odevzdá delegace návrh rozsáhlé antologie české a slovenské poesie, kterou J. Ritsos bude překládat, a poskytne mu k tomu základní informace.* (*The proposal of The Foreign Department of the Czechoslovak Writer's Union in the third quarter of 1960*. The Museum Of Czech Literature in Prague, Archive of Czechoslovak Writer's Union, Unpublished).

¹⁷ *Ibid. The report on the activity of The Foreign Department (file date 29. June 1961)*. Unpublished.

of June. This second stay in Czechoslovakia is again under the patronage of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, which arranged for Ritsos to stay in the *House of Writers* at the Castle Dobříš, where he spends his time working on the anthology. He simultaneously works on the collection of poems *Poems of Loneliness*,¹⁸ from which we can trace the steps of his stay as well. From the collection we know that he stays in Dobříš until the 16th of July at the latest and leaves for Prague.¹⁹ Later during his second visit, he also takes part in a festival of Czech citizens of Greek origin²⁰, but his plans are put on hold due to a tuberculosis seizure and he is hospitalized in Ostrava's Fifejdy hospital²¹ where he is forced to stay until the beginning of August. The poetic reflection on this ordeal is a large poem *Ostrava*.²² He spends the first two weeks of August in the capital of Slovakia, Bratislava, which was his inspiration in writing *Bratislava is Love*,²³ undoubtedly the most poetic of Ritsos' poems written during his visits to Czechoslovakia. At the end of August, Ritsos explores Hungary, followed by Eastern Germany and on the 24th of September he returns to Czechoslovakia for the last time. After a month in Czechoslovakia, he travels to Romania and on the 11th of November 1962, he returns to Greece.²⁴

When considering compilation of the *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets*, Ritsos had already had an experience with a similar work – the work on *Anthology of Romanian Poetry*. From the preface to its Greek edition we can draw information about his anthology work and his work as a translator in general, which certainly applies to his work on *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets*. Just like in the *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets*, Yannis Ritsos put the authors and their works in a chronological order. Ritsos admitted that his choice of poetry did not always rely solely on qualitative evaluation; he took care to choose poems that would reflect the frame of mind of a given era, and that would show the tendencies developing in poetry, regardless of quality.²⁵ In this preface, he also adds that many poets in the anthology are not represented by as many poems as would be appro-

18 RITSOS, Y. Μοναχικά σχέδια. In: IDEM (1989: 101–111).

19 KOTTI (2009: 140).

20 RAFAJ (1962: 269–271).

21 It was the Festival of Greek Emigrants Living in Czechoslovakia, which took place on 21.–23. July 1962. 5000 Greek emigrants living in European communist countries visited this festival. BOTU – KONEČNÝ (2005: 342).

22 KOTTI (2009: 140).

23 RITSOS, Y. Η Μπρατισλάβα είναι ο έρωτας. In: IDEM (1989: 143–166).

24 KOTTI (2009: 140).

25 RITSOS, Y. Εισαγωγικό σημείωμα. In: IDEM (1961: 12).

priate to their stature and that the pages devoted to a poet are not a result of the regard Ritsos holds him in, but rather a result of a certain randomness – many poems were not available for translation, with some poets he got along better than with others and could translate their works to Greek more easily and from some poets he managed to gather more poems and had more time for translation.²⁶

According to Ritsos, this work process is further influenced by the fact that translation is subject to artistic principles and apart from knowledge, determination, hard work and precision, it also requires a certain kind of inspiration and the ability to identify oneself with a given moment or a given frame of mind. He admits that it is not always possible to achieve this harmony or to sustain it permanently. Ritsos dealt with the exhaustion that goes hand in hand with being a translator by working on his own poetry concurrently. That is one of the reasons he gives for omitting some poets from his anthology – a lack of time prevented him from including them. Ritsos also expresses the hope that this work is merely the first step to a more systematic research and more profound understanding of Romanian poetry.²⁷ At the end of the preface, he thanks his co-workers and the Romanian Writers' Union, which probably had a similar role to the Czechoslovak Writers' Union. One of those mentioned is a Romanian poet, prose writer and translator, Veronica Porumbacu, who helped Ritsos with his translations to Greek.²⁸

Czech and Slovak poetry was not completely unknown to Ritsos, he acquainted himself with it roughly 4 years before his first visit to Czechoslovakia, thanks to French translations of Petr Bezruč and Vítězslav Nezval, and thanks to French literary periodicals, particularly *Europe*, whose one entire issue was dedicated to Czechoslovak literature. Articles of a French writer Louis Aragon about Czech and Slovak poetry, which were published in a leftist literary revue *Les Lettres Françaises*, were essential as well, mostly providing information about Nezval who was very highly regarded by Aragon. In an interview with the magazine *Red Blossom* in June 1962, Ritsos admits that even though there is a noticeable French influence, Czech and Slovak poetry still keeps its own character and he values it among the most important of the time.²⁹

In the same interview, he also mentions how he chose the poets for his anthology. At first, he planned to include only 16 poets in the Czech section – a selection ranging from Bezruč to Miroslav Florian. Later, he decided

²⁶ Ibid. (13).

²⁷ Ibid. (14).

²⁸ Ibid. (15).

²⁹ RAFAJ (1962: 270).

to add further 5 or 6 younger poets. In the end, the number of Czech poets included in the anthology rose to 28. Even before adding the Slovakian section, he reckoned the anthology would have 350 pages altogether.³⁰

We can gather more information about the inception of *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets* from his notes to the Greek edition. There he concedes that Czech and Slovak languages, with their *frequent consonants and peculiar musicality*,³¹ were too difficult for him. Ritsos mastered neither of the languages and therefore could not draw from originals of the poems. He also stresses that he did not use the existing French translations of the poems for fear of inaccuracy. Thus, the process of the very translation was quite curious. The Czechoslovak Writers' Union played its part in it by making a group of translators available to Ritsos – Greeks and Frenchmen with knowledge of Czech and Czechs with knowledge of French. This group produced the translations of the selected poems into Greek and French as accurate as possible. They also included detailed notes and comments on rhythm, metrical feet, and rhymes, and also on the existence of anomalies and ambiguities in each particular poem. Initially, Ritsos based his work on these translations, comparing Greek and French versions of each poem, trying to clarify the varying approaches, interpretations or different impressions that often arose when dealing with two versions of the same verse. His clarification of meanings relied on his poetic intuition and experience with constructing a literary work.³²

According to Ritsos, much of the credit for the translations to Greek belongs to Mariana Stříbrná, who had previously translated Ritsos' collection of poems during his first stay in Czechoslovakia. During the 3 months spent at the Dobříš Castle in 1962, Ritsos worked with Stříbrná almost daily for 8–9 hours. Together they went through the translations prepared by Ritsos word by word and discussed the incongruities and doubts that Ritsos marked by question marks. With certain self-satisfaction, he also notes that his intuition, though different from the approach of the provisional Greek and French translations, was usually correct. After long hours of consultation with Stříbrná, the poet carried on late into the night, re-reading and editing, getting everything ready for a final check in the morning.

Ritsos further states that the ambiguities of meaning were sometimes so significant, that he often consulted the interpretations with the Czech poets themselves. It concerned some poems by Vladimír Holan and František Hrubín

³⁰ Ibid. (270–271).

³¹ ...με τα πυκνά σύμφωνα και την ιδιαίτερη μουσικότητα,... RITSOS, Y. Μια σημείωση του μεταφραστή. In: IDEM (1966: 375).

³² Ibid. (375).

in particular.³³ He also adds that while working on Bezruč's poem *Maryčka Magdónova*, he drew from Karel Čížek's Greek translation, with whom he had already worked on Jiří Wolker's *Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes* (*Balada o očích topičových*) even before considering the compilation of the entire anthology.³⁴ The Slovak part of the anthology was based on French translations by Mrs. Bálová, wife of the manager of a publishing house in Bratislava.³⁵

The *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets* is a substantial piece of work, with almost 400 pages and it is divided into two sections – the first is dedicated to Czech poets and is roughly 280 pages long, the rest contains a selection of Slovak poetry. We have almost no information about how the choice of Czech and Slovak poets and poems was made. Our only option is to assess and evaluate this process from the contents of the work. The anthology is primarily focused on the poetry of the first half of the 20th century. Judging from the chronological order, it is safe to assume that Ritsos puts emphasis mainly on the historical development of Czech and Slovak poetry, rather than on a single era, a setting or themes.

The Czech part of the anthology, which includes 28 Czech poets, begins with 8 poems of Petr Bezruč from his *Silesian Songs*. The very first poem in Ritsos' anthology is also the very first poem from *Silesian Songs – Red Blossom*. Ritsos claimed that Bezruč is exceptional in poetry and had a major significance in socializing poetry:

*I see him as a genuine pioneer in socially relevant poetry. Not merely in theoretical terms but in terms of engaged struggle. He is not a visionary. His poetry is a prototype that does not rely on established poetic standards, but rather on personal experience expressed by passionate involvement in social realities and their struggles.*³⁶

Other authors follow, such as Stanislav Kostka Neumann, Josef Hora, Konstantin Biebl, Jiří Wolker, Vítězslav Nezval, František Halas, Jaroslav Seifert, Vladimír Holan, Vilém Závada, and others. The Czech part is closed

³³ Ibid. (375–376).

³⁴ Čížek's Greek translations of Wolker's and Bezruč's poems were published in Greece in special edition of Thessaloniki's periodical *Diagonios*. DOSTÁLOVÁ (2005: 39). A complete list of these works: Τσίζεκ, Κάρολος. [online]. Available from URL <http://www.biblionet.gr/author/50076/Κάρολος_Τσίζεκ> [cit. 2013-03-31].

³⁵ RITSOS (1966: 376).

³⁶ ... *Vidím v něm rzyiho průkopníka poezie společensky platné. Ale ne jako teoretika, ale jako skutečně bezprostředního bojovníka. Není visionář. Je prototypem oné poezie, která má tu zvláštnost, že se neopírá o známé básnické představy, ale osobní zkušenost vyjadřuje vášnivou účastí na skutečnosti. V zápase o ni.* RAFAJ (1962: 270).

up by Josef Hanzlík's work. The section with Slovak poetry containing 19 poets starts with Ivan Krasko's work represented here by 7 poems.

Considering Ritsos' leftist convictions and his trip to socialist Czechoslovakia, it could be argued whether the choice of authors and poems was substantially influenced by Ritsos' political beliefs. I deem that this consideration did not play a major role in Ritsos' choice. When studying the books contents closely, it becomes clear that the primary goal of the work is to introduce the development and tendencies in Czech and Slovak poetry in the first half of the 20th century. It is evidenced not only by the arranged order of authors, which respects the dates of births and the period the authors entered the literary scene, but also by the poems chosen to fittingly represent the poet's development. In his anthology, Ritsos also included the youngest generation of Czech and Slovak poets, for example Karel Šiktanc, Milan Kundera, Miroslav Florian, Milan Ferko or Ján Stacho.

In his translation notes, Ritsos states that he had been working on the anthology for 5 years, while simultaneously working on other projects. The anthology was published in Greece in 1966 by a publishing house of Themelio in Athens. In April 1967, there was a coup in Greece and a right-wing extremist military junta came to power. Ritsos, together with other members of Greek intelligentsia, is arrested and taken to a prison camp. Furthermore, his works appear on the list of forbidden literature and the *Anthology of Czech and Slovak Poets* itself suffered even worse fate.³⁷ At the behest of military junta, vast majority of its copies is burned.³⁸

There are several incongruities, some of them mentioned in my contribution. Mainly the criteria for choosing authors and selected poems as well as the quality of the final translations raise questions. It is clear that compiling the anthology corresponds with the interests and efforts of the Czechoslovak Writers' Union to establish closer relations with Greek authors and to introduce Czechoslovak literature abroad. That fact points out to the question: to what extent did Ritsos perform the very choice of poets and poems and to what extent was it done by the Czechoslovak Writers' Union, or rather the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, which approved this project? What or who initiated the compilation of the anthology remains unclear, too. For now unanswered is also another question: what impact did the censorship of the official branches of Greek government have on the final form of Ritsos' anthology? The translations themselves require a detailed analysis in order to determine whether Ritsos' goal was achieved:

³⁷ KOTTI (2009: 145–147).

³⁸ DOSTÁLOVÁ (2005: 40, n. 2).

*I have no intention of making the Czech and Slovak poetry better or worse. I am convinced that I remained faithful to the original. ... I aim to understand every nuance, as far as ideas, meanings, and emotions are concerned.*³⁹

The uniqueness of the anthology does not lie solely in the very existence of such a work and its scope, but also in the possibilities it offers to Greek public in getting to know Czech and Slovak poetry. That is why it deserves closer attention, and a deeper understanding of this work should lead to answering the aforementioned questions.

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³⁹ ... Českou a slovenskou poezii nemám ovšem v úmyslu dělat ani horší ani lepší. Jsem si jist, že v tomto směru – abych byl věrný dílu, které překládám – mám úspěch.... Chci pochopit každou podrobnost, pokud jde o ideu, význam a cit. RAFAJ (1962: 271).