

*Monochords*, Yannis Ritsos with Chiara Ambrosio, tr. Paul Merchant (prototype)

Yannis Ritsos was a prolific poet, who spent many years in prison or under house arrest because of his communist beliefs and opposition to Greece's right-wing regimes. *Monochords* is a strange book amongst his work: 336 one-line poems written in a single month in 1979. I have a copy of the text already, but when several poem are presented on the page it's difficult to allow them the mental space and room for understanding.

This beautiful new edition corrects that: each page consists of a single poem accompanied by a small linocut from artist Chiara Ambrosio. She already knew the poems, indeed they had been a companion to her 'for over a decade', but when the pandemic and lockdown shut down, she set herself the task ('I felt compelled,' she says) to make an image for each monochord, one a day, reading and responding to the text, seeking 'out resonances and emergences'.

They are more, much more, than illustrations though. They have become part of the poems, opening up what Ambrosio calls 'text and image entwined in mysterious ways, creating often incendiary pairings, unlocking new, contemporary resonances within the text'. The artist describes her daily process as 'akin to the tending of a garden', but also 'a dialogue with Ritsos', her own 'personal diary, and 'a book of days'. It is this complex relationship, the entwining of poetic and visual lines which makes this volume so exciting. The past and present are mixed on the page: 1970s Greece, English translations from the Greek originals, lockdown London, the reader's now, the timelessness of poetry and the imagination, and the way text can facilitate a kind of time travel:

How gently time collapses into poetry.  
(286)

Sometimes Ritsos' writing can be surreal, indeed the first book of his I came across – in a seaside shop in Greece, 1980 – seemed to present him as a juxtaposer of unconnected images and actions. In hindsight, having found other collections, most of this was due to the translations, not the original text, but there is no escaping the strangeness of some of Ritsos' minimal poems:

A naked man with an umbrella. Summer noon.  
(72)

At night, the sea with its ships enters my room.  
(244)

Elsewhere, there are more straightforward moments: a ship departing the harbour whilst the poet remains on land, memories of 'lost years' triggered by 'distant voices of children', a red pebble hidden under a white one, rubbish on the stairs, all considered and given recognition or attention in retrospect:

Much later you see what you saw.  
(164)

Ritsos can be philosophical, too, about both the world and words themselves:

I saw you and remembered poems.  
(16)

A word made fresh by repetition.  
(17)

He also suggests poetry as a kind of ritual cleansing, a personal shedding and dismissal of, and moving on from, the past:

I create lines to exorcise the evil that oppressed my country.  
(203)

In addition to the images and texts of the poems themselves, the book contains several useful and informative texts. David Harsent, himself a translator and author of 'versions' of Ritsos introduces the writer himself, discusses the Greek derivation of 'monochorda', and then contextualises and discusses both Ritsos' poems and Ambrosio's images. The artist herself then describes the project, her working methods and relationship with the poems, which then follow. Gareth Evans' 'afterword' is a wide-ranging essay which discusses re/presentation, materiality, the abuse of authority (and resistance to it), and contextualises the work in relation to film makers Sergei Parajanov and Andrei Tarkovsky, the author John Berger and several other writers, as well as myth and history.

The musician and author Thurston Moore, in his blurb, suggests that these monochords are 'the essence of a thought, a sign, a glimmer', the product of 'singular moments and observations', which Chiara Ambrosia has responded to in 'a dance of suggestion'. This beautifully conceived, designed and produced book is the best form of collaboration, one where something new is produced whilst also retaining both the essence and specificity of the original. It is text and metatext, reinforcement, recognition and reconsideration of ideas, poetic gloss and development, commentary and continuation. As monochord 121 says:

The distance between things keeps growing till they meet.

Rupert Loydell

(717 words)