

YANNIS RITSOS



Monovasia
and
The Women of Monemvasia

TRANSLATED FROM THE MODERN GREEK
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

Kimon Friar and Kostas Myrsiades

Monovasia, as it is called by the demoticists, and Monemvasia by the purists, is a town and island promontory on the Argolic Bay some four hundred meters from land on the southeastern Peloponnesus, in the prefecture of Laconia. Here Yannis Ritsos was born on 1 May 1909. In the shape of a pear, with the periphery of about a mile and reaching nine hundred feet in height, all precipitous rock without water, it was separated from the mainland by an earthquake in 375 A.D. United only by a narrow strip of land, it has often been called the Gibraltar of Greece. It was probably uninhabited in ancient times (no traces of ancient ruins remain) because it lacked water. Later in the Byzantine period it was turned into an island by building a removable bridge over which the causeway led to the lower town. This was the “only entrance.” From which the town derived its name; it was called Malmsey by Old English writers, Napoli de Malvasia by the Venetians, and Malvoisie by the French. The promontory was called Akra Minoa in ancient times, which indicates that it may have been a Minoan port of call.

In the hard, lean, short and staccato sentences of *Monovasia*, Ritsos embraces all that the Rock had to teach him in austerity of craft and artifice; and in the long, undulating, supple and nuanced sentences of *Women of Monemvasia* he embraces all that the sea has whispered in his ears whenever he sat on a ledge between rock and sea and contemplated the eternal dualities.

Women of Monemvasia was written during 23-25 August 1975. In it the poet celebrates the women of his birthplace, young and old, housekeepers and warriors who keep sleepless sentry before their homes, their hearths, their lamps, their kitchen utensils and their gods, and embrace life with courage. It celebrates their gallantry, their suffering, their patience, their work, their creativity; women who with their milk and blood nourished the traditions of their town, of Greece, of humanity.

The youngest of four children, Yannis Ritsos was born on 1 May 1909 in Monovasia, the son of a ruined landowner. Having begun painting, playing the piano, and writing poetry at the age of eight, he is today one of Greece’s most popular and prolific poets. Since first publishing in 1934, he has written over one hundred fifty poetic works published in ninety-two books of poetry, two dramatic works, nine works of prose, a collection of essays, and eleven books of translations. His output by the end of 1984 registered a total of one hundred fifteen published works. Ritsos is also one of the most distinguished poets of modern Europe who has been celebrated throughout the world.

Kimón Friar is a distinguished and prolific translator of modern Greek poetry. His translations include Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel* and *The Saviors of God: Spiritual Exercises*, and the selected poetry of

Odysseus Elytis, *The Sovereign Sun*, instrumental in Elytis being awarded the Nobel Prize.

Kostas Myrsiades, translator and critic of modern and classical Greek poetry, has published translations of Ritsos, Papatsonis, Yannis Kondos, and many other contemporary Greek poets, as well as translations of Karagiozis, Greek shadow puppet theater. He is presently professor of English and comparative literature and chair of the Department of English at West Chester University.