These poems by Yannis Ritsos were written during his imprisonment on the island of Makronisos for the crime of being a communist; in 1948 he was arrested and was declared an enemy of Greece, despite the great efforts of resistance against the German occupation by the communists during World War II.

I do not know Greek, so like many people, I've read a lot of Ritsos' work in translation. Still, the question might be posited: how is it possible to obtain a deep understanding of a poet in translation, to the degree that we grasp not merely the denotative but also the connotative value of a poem, what John Berger refers to as “a return to the preverbal” (The Guardian December 12, 2014, U.S. edition, “Writing is an off-shoot of something deeper”). Berger acknowledges the value of the “conventional view” of translation, “so-called word-for-word translation” but says this is “second-rate” to the “thing” behind words themselves. A real translation tries to “penetrate through [words] to reach, to touch, the vision or experience that prompted them.”

I must confess to being torn between these two objectives, the word-for-word project on one hand, and what might be called capturing “the soul” of the poem itself. I have to say that I appreciate a close word-for-word approach, which essentially allows me to create my own secondary translation as I read. Approaching translation this way, I sometimes feel that I have a sharper tool for finding the author’s original intent. Of course, words in one language do not correlate on an equal basis to another, but I can feel that I am better able to decipher the gist, or the ghost within the poem myself. And I cannot help but distrust invention from a translator whose inclinations might bend the poem toward a particular reading. For example, Robert Bly’s translations of Rilke become Robert Bly and for me, anyway, pretty much destroy Rilke.

Obviously, we are in territory that is very subjective and a matter of preference, and I also wonder to myself if the word-for-word approach is really the information I seek. Of course it isn’t, finally. At some point I have to give myself over to the translator. I want the impact behind
the poem itself. I always seem to wrestle with this question. As do translators, certainly. Fortunately, I do feel these poems have captured the ghost or soul, the emotional content behind the words, which carries the poet’s voice, as much as I know of that voice from, admittedly, reading a good amount of his work in translation elsewhere. Without question I appreciate these poems as poems in English, which is a separate goal from trying to find verbal equivalents between the two languages. There do exist quite excellent translations with which to compare, and thereby obtain a sense of his voice.

Despite the issues of translation, Ritsos is an important poet to my own sense of the contemporary world beyond the borders of the U.S. Greece has suffered, as have many nations, from overt political oppression. In this sense, these poems speak to our universal history. With all due respect to Seferis, who objected to the brutal regime of the Colonels (1967-1974) as an “anomaly,” oppression applies to virtually any historical time and place. Its severity may fluctuate, but not its purpose and constancy, its usual scheme, which is power and wealth. For Ritsos, his communism becomes an important reference, like light is the constant of time in physics. This collection certainly adds to our understanding his resolve. Perhaps it might also add to understanding the need for our own.

How would reading Ritsos improve my understanding of the world’s political problems beyond what I can easily read in history? Here we approach the value of political poetry, which in Ritsos is often very direct and honed. While many poets suggest, if obliquely, our social discontents, sometimes even the damages from war if these can no longer be ignored, Ritsos provides more than the palliative of expressing how society and its conflicts hurt us. Nor does he retreat into himself, or into nature as often happens in the U.S. He provides a political and social response for change. In fact, I believe that Ritsos would find the concept of “poetry of witness” as promoted in the U.S. to be insufficient. Rather, he insists that poetry be engaged with collective physical struggle. In his long poem Epitaphios the grief of a mother for her son murdered in a labor dispute is transformed into militant action: “I am headed for your brothers as I add my rage to theirs. / I have taken up your rifle, dear. You go to sleep, my bird” (translated by Rick M. Newton). This is a sentiment not likely to be embraced in American poetry, where we still debate the legitimacy of politics in poetry.

Several motifs arise out of these poems, consistent with Ritsos’ broader work. Four major recurrent issues are resistance to oppression, endurance of oppression, camaraderie (which can be elevated to love),
And belief in overcoming oppression. Others might easily argue differently, but I see these categories both as investigations of the poems and motivations for their use.

Muriel Rukeyser remarks in *The Life of Poetry* that “Exchange is creation. In poetry, the exchange is one of energy. Human energy is transferred, and from the poem it reaches the reader. Human energy, which is consciousness, the capacity to produce change in existing conditions.” We can have none of the above responses to oppression without exchange.

Let me provide an example from the poem *Always*, which opens:

> We start a conversation– it gets cut off.
> We start building a wall– they won’t let us finish.
> And our songs– cut off halfway.
> Only the horizon can complete them.

(17)

If these pursuits were a tree, we would say it is truncated. Nevertheless, in the midst of this fragmentation imposed by the guards, freedom surrounds the prisoners, the openness of the horizon. The poem concludes:

> We’ve shared everything, comrades–
> bread, water, cigarettes, sadness, hope;
> now we can live or die
> simply and beautifully– yes, beautifully–
> like opening your front door at daybreak
> and saying good morning to the sun and the world.

(17)

By contrast, what happens when this “saying” ceases, this opportunity to share:

> And this August moon that hangs over us
> is like an important word that can’t be voiced,
> transformed into marble inside the throat of night.

(*Differences*, 49)

And again, from *Duty*, which redefines the word from its usual nationalist meaning:
We had no chance to give voice to our song.
As usual, the afternoon fills with dust,
dust from the traffic of mothers in black dresses
returning from Averoff Prison or Hadzikosta Hospital
or the Department of Transfers,
grieving mother in black dresses,
with their hearts wrapped in handkerchiefs
like crusts of dry bread, bread so hard Death can’t chew it.

These are the consequences of being denied voice for Ritsos.
And yet, we find hope in human invention and imagination, when the
“moon rises above the horizon without a word,” and “the shadow from
a gigantic crutch is etched onto the rocks of Makronisos.” (51):

“We could make this crutch into a ladder,”
Vangelis suggests, leaning toward Petros’ ear,
as if giving voice to the first line of our future song.
Comrades, it’s getting late. It’s very late.
We must give voice to our song.

These poems return again and again to the need for voice. Despite the
title, they continually tell us, sometimes by reporting hardship and injustice,
sometimes through speaking of comradeship, always in the collective “we,”
that endurance and hope require “human exchange of energy.”