

# The Cyprus Tragedy and the Greek Resurrection: When Poetry Speaks Politics & History

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**Abstract:** Yiannis Ritsos (1909-1990) is a national poet. He wrote about Greece and expressed his love for Hellenism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain how Ritsos expressed this love for his country, and how he responded to crucial historical events in his other poetic works. Having said that, his enormous (in terms of extent and value) work vividly shows the poet's connection with his country. In this paper, we are going to explore Ritsos' poetic reaction after the Cyprus tragedy of 1974, focusing on his collection *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο* (*Hymn and Lament for Cyprus*). Then, Greece's fortune suffered under the military regime, which deprived the Greek people of their natural rights and freedoms. Greece was a country where democracy had no place, and people were forced to oppress their voice. To a very great extent, it was the junta's misjudgements that led to the Turkish invasion and the *de facto* partition of Cyprus. However, in the five poems of the collection, the 'invaders' (we refer to in the article) are not meant to be connected with one or the other country. Ritsos' response to the events is not a reproach or an attack against ethnic groups. It is a voice of protest against the abolishment of democracy, peace and freedom. Thus, the 'invaders' are those who opposed these values, and through certain allusions to Orthodox tradition Ritsos intends to show human suffering.

**Keywords:** Modern Greek poetry, Ritsos, Cyprus, politics, history, Orthodox tradition

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE POEMS

15<sup>th</sup> of July 1974: The Greek military junta ousted the elected president of the Republic of Cyprus Archbishop Makarios III. However, this was half of the tragedy, as on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July and invoking the Treaty of

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Guarantee, Turkey invaded Cyprus with the pretext of protecting the Turkish Cypriot community living on the island. Furthermore, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August, Turkey proceeded to the second stage of the invasion that resulted in the partition of the island and the exchange of population. The Turkish troops advanced and ended up occupying 36.2% of the whole island. In substance, Turkish policy on Cyprus had already been designed before, and especially in the 1950s. The basic argument of the Turkish policy on Cyprus was that the Cypriot population consisted of two different communities with their own ethnic characteristics. This was the basis on which Ankara, in the following years, built their argument that partition was the only viable solution to the Cyprus problem.<sup>1</sup> As regards the junta, they saw Makarios' opposition to *enosis* (union of Cyprus with Greece)<sup>2</sup> as a threat to their plans in Cyprus and considered a change of power necessary. Today, Cyprus remains a divided island with the two greatest Cypriot communities (the Greek Cypriots—80% of the population and the Turkish Cypriots—18% of the population) living apart and Nicosia is the only divided European capital city.

The 1974 events left their stigma on the whole island. Cyprus was not the same exotic island as before. Beyond the geographical dimensions that the ceasefire line left, there was a new cruel reality. There were refugees and people who lost their families and their properties; still an ongoing humanitarian issue (see also Stylianou 2012). Nevertheless, the 1974 tragedy—in all its darkness—became a source of inspiration for simple civilians and national poets, who wrote about and lamented this tragedy. Ritsos' *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο* is a collection written by a prolific poet who 'was constantly writing' about Greece and its history (Rosenthal 2014, 11-13; Spanos 1973, 17), and whose avocation with Cyprus started before.<sup>3</sup> Ritsos

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<sup>1</sup> The reports by Niham Erim to the Prime Minister Adnan Menderes in 1956 were a key to this direction. See for example Robert Ellis, 'The Scandalous History of Cyprus' <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/mar/03/cyprus-turkey-eu-uk>. Also: <http://foreignpolicy.org.tr/remmiscenses-on-cyprus-nihat-erim/> and Ιακώβου, Χ., (Ed.), 2017. See also Anastasiou 2008, and Kizilyurek 2008, on the development of the Cyprus problem.

<sup>2</sup> *Enosis* was a position Makarios abandoned gradually, because of the risk of a Turkish invasion that could result in the partition of Cyprus.

<sup>3</sup> For example in 'Αποχαιρετισμός' (1957), Ritsos writes about Grigoris Afxentiou who was killed by the British in Machairas—during the battle against the colonial forces. Ritsos wrote the poem within twenty days from the day Afxentiou died for Cyprus' independence. See Κανελλίδου 2013.

knew about the events in the 1970s and of Turkey's and the Greek junta's expansive plans for Cyprus (Green 1996).

Certain Greek authors responded through their work to the junta's actions in the 1960s and the 1970s, and they used as source the mythical world and the Byzantine Orthodox tradition; of course, Ritsos was no exception (Pilitsis 1995-96). A poet who could be characterised as a political one, not only because of his political orientation—and as a communist a natural enemy of the military regime which adopted an anti-communist policy—, but also because of the sensitivity he showed to the fortunes of Greece and its people. Nevertheless, one should also bear in mind that Ritsos' poetry went beyond the limits of political ideologies, as even if during his life he was mainly known in socialistic countries, after his death his poetry gained a special place in the Western world too (Βιστωνίτης 2009).

In his poetry, Ritsos expressed a profound concern for freedom, love for humanity and justice (elements we are going to see in this paper). The reader of his poems can see the poet's concern with the man's struggle in a world of political, social and psychological turmoil. For Ritsos, tragedy as a result of war is a living reality and derives from personal experience. The poet experienced feelings of isolation and neglect, which were the outcome of Greece's political instability; these elements are prevalent in his poetry. His poems revolving around the dictatorship depict people's despair. It is a world characterised by terror, fear, death and lack of basic freedoms. People are even dispossessed of their homes, as is the case in the collection we are going to discuss (Pilitsis 2000-2001).

#### INTERESTS AND POLITICS AS ENEMIES OF DEMOCRACY

The collection consists of five rhyming poems written in the popular style of the demotic songs. Written and published within some months after the events and dedicated to Makarios, *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο* could be described as 'a brief testament to the Cypriots' (Myrsiades 1975, 826). Independently of political beliefs, orientation and perhaps the results of later criticism, Makarios was a church leader and political leader who enjoyed the support of the vast majority of the Greek Cypriots.<sup>4</sup> Makarios was the Ethnarch and led the battle of the

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<sup>4</sup> In 1959 Makarios was elected with 66.29%; in 1968 he was re-elected with 96.26%; and in 1973 he was re-elected unopposed. Beyond these results of the presidential elections, It is also important to see what Glafkos Clerides (another prominent Greek Cypriot politician) says about Makarios: he was the only that could

Greek Cypriots for independence from the British during the years 1955-59, and —up to the feasible— sought *enosis* with Greece. Democratically elected, Makarios was seen by the Greek Cypriots as the incarnation of freedom, and this is what Ritsos manifests by dedicating his collection to him.

Lyricism and strong emotions are evident in the first stanza of the first poem. The poet characterises Cyprus as a ‘bitter’, ‘sweet’ and ‘tyrannized’ island.<sup>5</sup> The contrast between ‘bitter’ and ‘sweet’ derives from the way Cyprus has been treated by its invaders, which makes the island a ‘tyrannized island’, and the poetic ego’s love and sympathy for Cyprus. Cyprus is a tyrannized island because it has been attacked by military forces that represent the role of the tyrant in the poem. It is also bitter, because there are ‘bitter’ memories from previous occupations. Cyprus gained its ‘experimental’ independence from the British in 1960,<sup>6</sup> and the bitter memories are the memories of a previous battle for a freedom that did not last for more than fourteen years (1960-1974). Now, a new invader comes to disrupt life in this ‘sweet’ and exotic island. In his attempt to ‘speak of’ the island’s soreness, the poet ‘kneels’ and ‘remains’ in the position of a pilgrim. The poet alludes to Cyprus’ religious identity and Orthodoxy; he sees Cyprus as part of the Greek Orthodox world.<sup>7</sup>

The next stanza starts with the poet praising Cyprus’ natural beauty through two strong metaphors. Initially he refers to the plops of the sea, which sounds like ‘rhythm’, and later he characterises Cyprus as a ‘twig full of blossoms’. Nevertheless, although such beauty was meant to be admired and praised by others too, this is not the case, as ‘double’ and ‘triple barbarians’ destroyed this natural beauty and all the blossoms.

After the parallel the poet draws with barbarians who could symbolise the enemies of democracy, in the next stanza he turns to the way Nature is compassionate with the tragedy taking place: the ‘fish are going around’ the island in grief, as they lament the new state. In that case, the fish could be the people of Cyprus who defend democracy and they are in a condition of despair about the catastrophe

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convince the Greek Cypriots for the acceptance of the London-Zurich Agreements in 1959-1960; as he did. See Kizilyurek 2008, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Our translation of the poems. For the original poems in Greek, see Ρίτσος 2002.

<sup>6</sup> It was described in similar terms by prominent politicians of both sides. See Constandinos 2009, 105.

<sup>7</sup> For the poet’s avocation with Christianity, see Κανελλίδου 2013, and Φίφης 2000.

in their homeland. But on the other hand, there are the ‘antichrists’ who not only show no sympathy, but they find the opportunity to negotiate for the island’s future: ‘they gamble with dice’. In this stanza there is another very strong contrast. While Cypriots lament the tragedy, the ‘antichrists’ —who could be seen as those who prioritise their personal or political interests above democracy— are trying to see what is best for them.

In the last stanza of the first poem, the poet urges Cyprus to have courage. Although Cyprus is described initially by the poet as a ‘young daughter’, in the same line it becomes ‘mother’ for the whole of Hellenism. Through its tragedy and sufferings, Cyprus becomes a source of inspiration for the whole of Hellenism and, in the poet’s words, ‘the church bell’ that will bring ‘resurrection’. Again, although the island went through different occupations, the poet stresses the fact that it retained its Greek Orthodox character.<sup>8</sup>

In the next poem, the poet returns to the praise of Cyprus. The island is characterised as a ‘golden string in the wind’, that ‘was singing smiles’. However, in the second stanza the poet disrupts the exotic atmosphere, as the invaders ‘enfold’ the island like a ‘blood-wet skein’. In the same stanza, the poet refers to the anger of democracy supporters: ‘our anger in our tear like a knife in its sheath’. The use of the possessive pronoun ‘our’ shows that the poet is one of them and the poem gains a more personal tone.

In the next stanza, the poet stresses the impiety of the invaders and how disrespectfully they treated the island: ‘and this immaculate shape that was singing holiness, was targeted by bullets’. The pure nature of the island, which is reflected through its immaculate voice or shape that sings Orthodox Hymns (as holiness suggests), is opposed by the intentions of the invaders and becomes the target of their bullets.

It is interesting to note here that Ritsos’ certain poems have a Marxist aesthetic and because of his political beliefs he was imprisoned, exiled and put under house arrest during the Greek Civil war (1946-49), and later during the dictatorship in the late 60s and the early 70s (Dobyns 1993, and Liapis 2014). Especially in the poems he wrote during the junta and his imprisonment, Ritsos denotes his personal experience of ‘terror, displacement, censorship and death’ and also ‘the signs of intimidation, dispossession and disfiguration’ during

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<sup>8</sup> As Pilitsis (2000-2001, 98) argues, we see the message of hope and resurrection in Ritsos’ poems ‘Message’ and ‘Our Land’.

a period of ‘a historical trauma’. What we see in some poems — including the poems under discussion— is the nightmare of a dictatorship. Ritsos connects the Colonels’ regime with sickness, mutilation and Greece’s maladies. It was a regime characterised by violence and vengeance (Theodoratou 2006). He even exploited the ‘cautious liberalization programme’ of censorship that the junta adopted in 1972, as *Helen*, a poem that was written two years earlier, was only published then (Chambers 1992). Nevertheless, in *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο*, although written after the Turkish invasion that signified the end of the military regime, Ritsos is barely overt, as he mainly uses the language of strong symbolism and allusions, that gives his poems an even more timeless character.<sup>9</sup>

In the third poem of the collection, the poet urges Cyprus to be strong and courageous and not to allow ‘the stream of rejection to obfuscate its heart’. In fact, following the coup and the Turkish invasion, Greece was in turmoil. The junta retreated and the Greek officers considered that it was time for a regime change. In the whole upheaval and instability, Cyprus remained helpless. Despite some isolated willingness for sending military help, the disagreements of the Greek officers led to the collapse of their dictatorship and its succession by the new Greek government (the emergency government) which had critical internal and external issues to deal with. The poet explains Greece’s inability to help as ‘rejection’. Nevertheless, the Greek Cypriots should not be discouraged, as the ‘heart’ of Cyprus remains Greek.

In the following stanza, the poet refers to ‘the murderers’ that signifies a very strong metaphor. The poet implies that ‘the murderers’ are those who murdered peace and democracy in Cyprus and led the island to the deadlock. The *de facto* partition of the island and the ceasefire line are interpreted by the poet as murders, as now Cyprus goes through a new harsh state. Now, it is a divided island where the presence of the troops functions, according to the poet, as ‘traces of the murderers’.

In the next stanza, the poet turns to the glorification of the people who died during the tragedy. They deserve to be sprinkled ‘with blossom leaves and rice’, and they are described as ‘beautiful dead’. In

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<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that as Jeffreys (1994) claims, with the collapse of the military regime in 1974 and the lift of the censorship, the persecution of Ritsos was replaced by adulation or praise.

that way the poet gives an almost heroic status to those people who died defending their country. They represent ‘the light’ which cannot be defeated by any weapon or by ‘sword’, as the poet says. Thus, their sacrifice will not stay unjustified for long, as in the next and last stanza of the poem the poetic ego invokes justice: ‘here, the fair and those who play underground games will be judged’. Again, the poet sees the defenders of democracy as the fair ones, while those who disrupt democratic ideas and order are the ones who play the ‘underground games’. Of course ‘light’ alludes to Orthodox tradition, where light applies to Jesus and his resurrection (see Baghos 2018; and Tănase 2018), and where ‘God is Light’ and the experience of His energies ‘takes the form of Light’ (Ware 2015, 66). In the same way that Jesus sacrificed himself for humanity, these people died to protect human values for the following generations.

The fourth poem is a clear lament, as in the first stanza ‘dead’, ‘sad’ and ‘naked’ people are walking all together. These poet’s words could be read as an indirect reference to the results of the 1974 events, as an uprooted population left their properties and everything they had. They have been forced to leave their homeland and they are ‘walking angry at night’. The negative and calamitous consequences of war appear very vividly in the first two lines. Focusing on another Ritsos’ poem (‘Our Land’), Pilitsis (2000-2001, 99) asserts that haunted by death and experiencing the terror of undefined forces, people walk in the streets of their place ‘that has been subjected to violent destruction’. Of course in *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο*, this reference could apply to the Cypriot refugees.

The imagery is very vivid, almost cinematographic, and becomes even more intense in the next stanza, where the poet asserts that the dead ‘do not fit in the soil and cry’. Not only because they are so many, as a superficial reading would suggest, but because they are national heroes who died for their country and democracy. According to the poet, they gave ‘soul and flesh as offering for the sacred struggle’. Thus, they deserve a special place in the world of the heroes; no lament or cry could reflect their glory.

The ‘sacred struggle’ in the poem is a reference to show why they deserve a special place, as with their own death they defeated death similarly to Christ. In the last two stanzas, the poet makes this clear as those people exceeded their strength and showed admirable bravery: ‘with their own fingers, they pulled out the bullets from their wounds’. Almost with supernatural powers, they do not behave like normal

people. They go beyond their earthly status and show unprecedented and preternatural physical power. Thus, the poet draws a parallel between Christ and those heroes who ‘stood again and bravely they defeated their death’ —alluding to Christ who ‘θανάτω θάνατον πατήσας’—, and then they led the sacred battle for freedom and democracy. It is also worth noting, that the poet uses the same verb (‘πατάν’) we see in the Paschal troparion — the hymn which celebrates the Christ’s resurrection in the Orthodox Church (although in a different form to the hymn). In that way, the poem insinuates that these heroes stepped on death and they will live eternally. These patrons of democratic values gained remarkable grandeur through their sacred battle. Paraphrasing the poet’s words, it could be said that the heroes in the poem will live for ever. Ritsos’ description above belongs almost to the world of the metaphysical, as he describes a metaphysical state that ‘exists outside of known experience’. (Dobyns 1993, 131-132, 137)

In the last poem of the collection, Ritsos characterises Cyprus as an ‘ancient’ and ‘new’ island at the same time: ‘ancient island and new island, island of martyrdoms,/your eternal light is bleeding in the monster’s teeth’. The poet refers to Cyprus’ ancient civilisation. This makes Cyprus an ‘ancient island’. But it is also a ‘new island’ suggesting that there is always a new perspective one can explore in the island’s ancient culture. And although Cyprus is the ‘island of martyrdoms’ and in its current condition it is bleeding in the ‘monster’s teeth’, its ancient civilisation will remain alive because it is like an ‘eternal light’, that always brings a new birth or resurrection.

Later in the poem, the poet encourages his ‘brothers’ ‘to give the oath’ in order for ‘justice’ to prevail over ‘injustice’. Then, the ‘Glory’ together with the ‘Freedom’ and the ‘Happiness’ will come and signify the real victory against those who threaten the island’s cultural wealth and try to abolish democracy. In the final stanza, the poet repeats the last two lines of the first poem. He urges Cyprus to have courage, and he stresses that through its martyrdoms the island has progressed from ‘young daughter’ to ‘mother’ for the whole of Hellenism. Cyprus is a ‘hymn’, a ‘lament’ and ‘church bell of resurrection’.

The repetition, at a superficial level, is a direct reference to the ‘Greekness’ of Cyprus and its Greek Orthodox character which does not change despite the foreign interventions. It could be also seen as a sign of hope for the future, as one can see in Ritsos in general (Pilitsis 2000-2001, 97, 98). However, at a clearly historical and political level,

the events that took place in the summer of 1974 brought about the change of Greece's political fortunes. With the Colonels associating their regime with the most traumatic experience of modern Hellenism—the coup, the Turkish invasion and the *de facto* partition of Cyprus—, they realised that a change was needed. The situation in Cyprus reached the edge of a catastrophic war for Greece. Although some officers in the leadership of the regime insisted in sending Greek troops in Cyprus in order to prevent the Turkish advance, some others did not want to go to war with a NATO ally and a country with a much stronger army. Besides US officials warned Greece about the consequences of such a conflict.<sup>10</sup> The disagreement between the Greek officers ended with the transfer of power from the army to the politicians. Thus, Cyprus became the 'mother' of Hellenism as it became the reason for the end of the dictatorship. Cyprus, although a divided country, showed the way to democracy and national resurrection. Wounded and suffering because of a civil conflict and an invasion, Cyprus became the reason why Greece passed to a new era of democracy where the politicians were back in power and people regained their voice.

For Ritsos, 'antithetical forces' are necessary for the 'positive creativity' and the final triumph of human spirit. Even the darkest experiences of a war could help humans see the real dimensions and the meanings of freedom, justice and love (Pilitsis 2000-2001, 104). Through its 'passions', Cyprus manifests this role as it brought 'resurrection' for Greece. In the five poems of the collection, Ritsos expresses his hope that one day 'resurrection' will come for the people of Cyprus too.

## CONCLUSION

What do we learn from Ritsos' *Ύμνος και Θρήνος για την Κύπρο*? In fact, Ritsos defends democracy and freedom as humans' basic values that everyone should enjoy. The invader does not have a name. In contrast, he has multiple identities, because wars break out when people's political or personal aspirations and countries' expansive plans undermine democracy and freedom. Even if one would say that some of the poet's references reach the limits of propaganda, Ritsos does not attack countries; he is a lover of peace. Exploiting the wealth of Orthodoxy, Ritsos gives a literary depiction where the reader sees

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<sup>10</sup> For the regime change and the last actions of the junta see Constandinos 2009.

the poet's despair for the repression of democracy. But also, the five poems of the collection put the reader in picture on how people experienced the tragic events in July and August of 1974, as they are historically based.

Today, there is peace in Cyprus. However, the ceasefire line still divides the island. Despite some attempts for a resolution and a settlement that would satisfy the two greatest communities on the island (the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots), Cyprus remains a divided island that reminds us of the malevolent and harmful aspirations Ritsos criticizes in his poems.

Makarios enjoyed the support of the Greek Cypriots who massively elected him.<sup>11</sup> The coup, like any coup, was an anti-democratic action against the elected leader and the voice of the people; and the same could be said for the invasion, which —like any military action— disrupted peace. By dedicating his poems to Makarios, at the same time Ritsos dedicates them to the whole of Cyprus and its people, stressing also the Orthodox character of the island. As for the message he wants to deliver, this would not be anything different from the protection of certain values like democracy, freedom and peace.

## APPENDIX: THE POEMS

Νησί πικρό, νησί γλυκό, νησί τυραγνισμένο,  
κάνω τον πόνο σου να πω και προσκυνώ και μένω.

Εσύ της θάλασσας ρυθμός, ολάνθιστο κλωνάρι,  
πως σου μαδήσαν τ' άνθια σου διπλοί, τριπλοί βαρβάροι.

Τι θλιβερά που σεργιανάν τριγύρω σου τα ψάρια, -  
κι αντίχριστοι να παίζουνε την τύχη σου στα ζάρια

Κουράγιο, μικροκόρη μας, που μας εγίνεις μάνα,  
ύμνος και θρήνος της ζωής κι ανάστασης καμπάνα.

### II

Χρυσή, λιανότρεμη χορδή, στον αέρα τεντωμένη,  
χαμόγελα κελάηδαγες μέσα στην οικουμένη.

Και τώρα πως σε τύλιξαν ματόβρεχτο κουβάρι -  
η οργή μας μες στο δάκρυ μας μαχαίρι στο θηκάρι

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<sup>11</sup> See the results of the presidential elections mentioned earlier.

Κι εκείνη η άμωμη μορφή, που εψαλμωδούσε τ' άγια,  
χιλιάδες βόλια δέχτηκεν αντίς δάφνες και βάγια.

Κι από μακριά το πατρικό, το μέγα χέρι υψώνει  
και το κατάμαυρο ψωμί της προσφυγιάς σταυρώνει.

### III

Το δάκρυ κράτησε το ορθό, κράτησε ορθό και το αίμα  
μη σου θολώσει την καρδιά της αρνησιάς το ρέμα.

Τούτο το φως δεν κρύβεται, φεγγοβολάει και δείχνει  
μέσα στην πιο βαθιά νυχτιά των δολοφόνων τα ίχνη.

Τούτο το φως δεν σώνεται, σπαθί δεν το θερίζει·  
ραντίστε τους ωραίους νεκρούς με ανθόφυλλα και ρύζι.

Κι απέ στεριώστε τη γροθιά στου κόσμου το τραπέζι·  
δω πέρα ο δίκαιος θα κριθεί κι αυτός που κρυφοπαίζει.

### IV

Πόσοι νεκροί, πόσοι γυμνοί, θλιμμένοι, αποδιωγμένοι,  
αντάμα αντάμα πορπατάν τις νύχτες αγριεμένοι.

Αχ, οι νεκροί μας δε χωράν στο χώμα και στο κλάμα·  
ψυχή και σώμα βάλανε στον άγιο αγώνα τάμα.

Και κοντοστέκουν μια στιγμή, κι έτσι σκυμμένοι - δεξ τους -  
βγάζουν με τα δαχτύλια τους τα βόλια απ' τις πληγές τους,

Κι ορθοί ξανά και δυνατοί πατάν το θάνατό τους  
και στον αγώνα ρίχνονται πιο πρώτοι κι απ' τους πρώτους

### V

Αρχαίο νησί και νέο νησί, νησί των μαρτυριών,  
το αιώνιο φως σου μάτωσε στα δόντια των θηρίων.

Δώστε τον όρκο, αδέρφια μου, καταμεσής στην πλάση  
τ' άδικο πια να δικαστεί, το δίκιο να γιορτάσει.

Κι η Δόξα, στην ολόμαυρη που περπατούσε ράχη,  
τη Λευτεριά και τη Χαρά για συντροφιά της νά 'χει.

Κουράγιο, μικροκόρη μας, που μας εγίνεις μάνα,  
ύμνος και θρήνος της ζωής κι ανάστασης καμπάνα.

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