A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TRAGIC AND THE EXISTENTIAL HERO:

AGAMEMNON IN AESCHYLS AND RITSESS

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To my family
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NOTES</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDIX</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF REFERENCES</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

The problem of continuity in history and culture appeared in Europe after World War II. The atrocities and the undermining of human values which the war had brought about, caused the intellectuals to question Western tradition; there were two categories of writers who responded and attempted to address this problem: those, like the Surrealists, who admitted to a breach in the historical sense of tradition in Western Europe;¹ and those, like the majority of the French Existentialists who still discussed the past and resolved to defend this tradition, however loosely they understood it. They undertook the social mission of restoring shaken human values in their endeavor to breathe new life into the historical and cultural sense of tradition.

To the appeal which the latter group of intellectuals made around postwar Europe, a modern Greek author responded: the poetannis Ritsos (born in 1909) with the publication of his long poem Romiosini [Greekness] (1945–1947). In this literary work he takes up the task of consolidating the sense of the fragmented Greek historical and cultural tradition, the origins of which reach back to great poets such as Homer and Aeschylus. He struggled to recover this illustrious past by means of images from a rich stock of historical memory and to convince his audience that in its poetry 1
Greece could establish continuity with the past. Later on he used the same mythological material his historical and literary ancestors had used before him.

Ritseos has dealt with the story of Agamemnon's return, which is part of the legend of the house of Atreus, in his poem *Agamemnon*. The treatment of this age-old story points out the poet's close attachment to the legend of the Atreidæ in his *Tetartí Diastasi*, a cycle of eleven mythologically motivated poems written in the mode of the dramatic monologue. The same legend supplies Ritseos with subject matter for another six poems in this collection. Since *Agamemnon* illustrates Ritseos' literary attempt to articulate his own "mythology" through a legendary figure, I have chosen it as an example to demonstrate Ritseos' use of ancient Greek mythology.

Ancient stories have been used by modern writers of this century extensively: as narratives with heroic figures of the modern rebel (Anouilh's *Antigone*, 1942); as expressions of modern social and political themes (Giraudoux's *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*, 1936); as a pretext for the study of the human subconscious (O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 1931); and as manifestations of philosophical ideas (Sartre's *The Flies*, 1943). Likewise, poets such as Eliot, Yeats, and Pound reused ancient myths in their works as a response to the crucial questions of the now industrial society; the fragmentation of the subject, its alienation from nature, the loss of the divine, the destruction of unity in the world, the surpassing of nationalism, and a thorough questioning of man's existence are some of modern man's concerns. T.S. Eliot, among the founding
fathers of modernism in poetry, with his "mythical method", proposed an effective way for modernists to adopt an artistic attitude toward modern "reality". This method was imported into modern Greek poetry by George Seferis (1900-1971), the intellectual leader of Greek modernism; other Greek modernist poets have used mythology differently: C.P. Cavafy (1863-1933) applied a similar poetic technique in order to suggest a view which de-idealized the vast Greek history, by exposing the illusion of the Greek classical Golden Age; Andreas Embiricos (1901-1975), inspired by new intellectual fermentations in Europe, used a mythology which introduced completely new psychoanalytical theories into modern Greek literature through his surrealist poetry.

Ritsos' use of ancient Greek mythology bears little relation to the approaches these poets took to myths. Ritsos uses the old "narrative method", since he follows a clear narrative arrangement of the poetical material, in which the reader can easily trace the storyline. He does not use excerpts from his sources but he leaves the references to mythology as the only guide for the reader. He makes only some concessions to modern poetry, such as loose syntax, occasional omission of the verb, parentheses, and the combination of a semicolon and a dash. The last two elements delay the act of reading and cause breaks in its flow; the reader pauses and changes the tone of his/her voice for the lines included in parentheses or between two dashes. It is both a rhetorical device and a dramatic one, distracting momentarily the reader from the mainstream of action. His insistence on a single poetic genre throughout Tetarti
Dinastasi and the introduction of existentialist ideas in his poetry, compel one to focus on the reasons for this combination. His choice of legendary figures, such as Agamemnon and his "candid" references, mostly to ancient Greek tragedy, might also lead one to wonder about the relationship of his mythological poetry to ancient Greek drama.

I think that by taking as a departing point both the extraliterary fact that Ritsos did not oppose later stage presentations of his monologues and some considerations about modern poetic drama, could help one find an answer to these questions.

The attempts of modern European poets of this century to write poetic drama were hindered by extreme difficulties, as T.S. Eliot, who engaged also in this field, explained. The private, introspective character of modern poetry made its entrance into a modern public theater ineffective. Poetry was no longer a powerful public medium, as it used to be in the nineteenth century: the novel had absorbed much of its strength. On the other hand, what Eric Bentley has called the "crisis of modern drama" brings about the separation between literature and the stage. As a result, the responsibilities of the modern poet increase even more: it is an advantage for him to refer to an already known story or name drawn from the treasure house of ancient mythology, because he can easily captivate the attention of his audience. In order for him, however, to achieve a successful effect on the stage, as he could do with the written word, he had to work at coordinating the style, which the use of a certain myth implies, with the sociocultural reality of his
time. This requirement takes not only personal talent and imagination, but also the creation of a public code of conventions and expectations, which are common to the poet and his audience. In this way, the background of ancient mythology is accompanied by a fresh modern language, which allows the communication between poetic drama, as both linguistic experimentation and stagecraft, and its audience.

My argument is that Ritsos could not write a tragedy. The secularization of the society within which he writes is totally hostile to the theological background of Tragedy as the ancient Greeks conceived it; and, equally important, both the difficulty and brevity of form of the new —the modern— poetry do not permit him to use it for a public role on the stage. Therefore, in compliance with the historical and cultural changes, he opted for another path which could bring him close to tragedy: the use of a poetic genre with dramatic affinities, the dramatic monologue, and the obvious references to ancient Greek tragedy, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, for that matter. Since there are two different works with the same title, it would be interesting to ask what their relationship is; not only what their differences are in treating the same myth, but also what the modern text does to the ancient one. For this last reason, I believe that reading the modern poem in the light of its ancient predecessor will help one first, to discover what interpretation of the Aeschylean hero the modern text gives and secondly, to formulate an evaluation of the enterprise of the modern text against its ancient "source".
Therefore, it is my intention to show, through a comparative reading of Ritsos' *Agamemnon*, that the modern poem’s interest in the Aeschylean figure of *Agamemnon* is but another effort to convey a sense of unity in the Greek history and culture, even though it offers a groundbreaking existentialist interpretation of the Aeschylean hero.
CHAPTER I

Although it can be disputed that Agamemnon is the central figure or the protagonist in the Aeschylean tragedy, it is clear that the action of the tragedy is distributed among three main characters — Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Cassandra — and supported by other minor ones — the Watchman, the Herald, Agiathus or even the Chorus. In fact, in terms of the size of the part, Clytemnestra must be considered the protagonist; but in terms of the thematic focus, Agamemnon can claim the role. Agamemnon’s return and his conversation with Clytemnestra in front of the palace come late in the Aeschylean play (lines 810–974). This scene has been prepared by the Watchman, Clytemnestra, the Chorus, and the Herald, who disclose the news about Agamemnon’s imminent arrival.

In Ritsos’ poem, the exclusive focus and center of the work is Agamemnon. The poem picks up the Aeschylean text at the point where the hero returns from the war at Troy and continues until he meets his death. The scene of the Watchman and that of Clytemnestra’s dream, as well as her beacon speech, are omitted; there is also no Herald to bring the news of Agamemnon’s expected arrival. And, most importantly, there is no Chorus; all these changes are required by the generic limitations within which Ritsos works. Ritsos, therefore, is interested only in the return scene in the Aeschylean
text. The death of Agamemnon is downplayed in the modern poet's confrontation with the ancient text, although death is the central theme of his existentialist interpretation. The hero's return—although he is triumphantly received—will end up with an inglorious death. His return presupposes a ten-year absence in the Trojan war, where many deaths occurred. Therefore, the question about Hiton's understanding of and preference for "death" in this poem is fundamental. The idea of death in existentialist terms preoccupied a series of writers around World War II in France.10 They responded to the concept of death, by turning not to its transformation into experimental art, but to its expression in ideological terms; they needed, apparently, an ideal as a guide for their life rather than a solution to formulate this new element in terms of art. Consequently, they differentiated themselves from Joyce's and Proust's experiment with literary form. Literature to them was a means towards an end. Hiton advocates similar ideas about art and literature in his prose writings.11 It is my intention here to integrate Hiton's work into a broader context of discussion rather than a strictly national one. I shall, therefore, only point to further existentialist concepts in Hiton's poem throughout my discussion, without focusing on similarities with or differences from analogous French works.12 My objective will be to show why he merged existentialist ideas into his version of the myth of Agamemnon.

In Aeschylus' Agamemnon, the hero is anxious about his royal status among the Argives: he is immediately eager to stress his
difference from the oppressive Oriental despots like Priam (827-828) and to hold again the assembly of the citizens, which is a proof of his constitutionality (844-846). In the same vein, in his second speech to Clytemnestra, he rejects barbarous manners (918-920) and condemns Priam's baseful vanity of his walking on "tapestries" in order to celebrate a victory (936). At the beginning, he tries to avoid Clytemnestra's exhortations to do so for fear that he might incur divine retribution for his arrogance (922-924 and 925). Yet, in the following stichomythia with Clytemnestra (931-943), Agamemnon succumbs to his royal pride and vanity rather than to Clytemnestra's persuasiveness. He is presented in Aeschylus as determined to commit another sin, after he was responsible for the destruction of the temples at Troy and for sending many Trojans and Argives to death (799-804). This double sin prefigures the tragic element involved in the play (i.e. Agamemnon becomes twice arrogant /hypbristic, and, as a result, he will be punished) and sets the tone for the reading of the play until his murder. Moreover, the inevitability of ὑβρις rings the bell of fate (218: ...ἀδερφός Ἡσυχοθήκη...), which will ultimately destroy Agamemnon. His irreverence at the end will cause the hatred of gods—a something Agamemnon attempted to escape—who will also make him commit the sin (922-925). According to the pattern of High Tragedy, which Aeschylus follows in Agamemnon, there is a conflict between gods and man, or between two different kinds of justice:14 Agamemnon's condemnation is vindicated, after all, as a just retribution for the crime his father Atreus had committed. Agamemnon's actions are
predetermined and he has no freedom of choice in a world of divine machinations.

In Ritsos' modern version of the hero, it is Agamemnon who highlights and gives life to the other characters who are represented by and are integrated in his consciousness. What one reads is his soliloquy, which is an internalized narrative in spoken language. According to the conventions of the dramatic monologue, which prescribe the attendance of the main character's speech by another silent character, Agamemnon occasionally addresses an imaginary listener, who is referred to as "his wife" (opening stage directions), and "the woman" (closing stage directions). Since the significance of the listener is not central for the action of the poem, the task of this mute character, who supposedly is Clytemnestra, is to serve as a signpost for the reader to the myth. The same applies to the clues given in the text about Cassandra: 

"...the loud prophetic utterances of a frenzyed woman...inexplicable utterances in a foreign tongue", "Outside...the cries of the foreign woman continue" (opening stage directions) and "suddenly, the voice of the foreign woman is heard outside...in clear Greek...", "The voice of the frenzyed woman..." (closing stage directions); or Agisthus, referred to as "A handsome, bareheaded man with a suit of armor, with a big, bloodied sword in his hand, [who] enters the empty room..." (closing stage directions).

It is relevant to this discussion to examine the conventions of the dramatic monologue as well as their appropriation by the modern Greek text, before I proceed any further with the comparison of the
two texts. The basic features of this genre, as they appeared for the first time in the Victorian age in poets like Browning and Tennyson, are the following: a first-person speaker, a silent listener, a specified time and place, the colloquial language, and the awareness in the speaker of himself and his feelings. About the history of the dramatic monologue there are theories which are not unrelated to each other because they associate the emergence of the genre to Romanticism. Robert Langbaum\textsuperscript{15} discusses the genre, stressing the difference between the Victorian age and Romanticism: the shattering of the unqualified acceptance of general and absolute ideas, which characterized the Romantics, brings a new tendency to search for truth in its different versions. Another way to look at this genre, though, more productive in our case, is to take into account that it is a mixed genre; it makes use of conventions from both lyric poetry and drama transcending them. By its lyric qualities it arouses the reader's sympathy, while simultaneously, with effects like anachronism, it makes the reader uneasy and perplexed. Again, by its dramatic qualities it offers an illusion of plot. Therefore, it can be perceived as a miniature drama, with its internal action and with its lyricism instead of choral parts.

The modern Greek text adheres to all these conventions. The anachronism in Ritsos' poem has a surrealist origin\textsuperscript{16} and its effect is to confuse details from different historical periods. Furthermore, his innovation appears in the use of stage directions, which usually accompany modern dramas aimed at actual stage presentation. They appear in parentheses immediately before and
after the text of the monologue and they specify the time, place, actors as well as details about their movements on an actual stage. There is a third-person narrative, which suggests an omniscient narrator, besides the speaker, and a cold spectator, in a complete contrast to the first-person narrative of the main text, where the style becomes intimate, almost confessional. In modern Greek literature, this innovation occurs only in Ritsos' dramatic monologues.

It is, consequently, in accordance with the principles of the dramatic monologue that the modern Greek text focuses on Agamemnon and his consciousness. Unlike Aeschylus’ hero, this latter-day Agamemnon is devoid of any tragic dimension, since he does not display any arrogance nor is his power challenged by a Clytemnestra "who has a man's mind" (ll: γυναικὸς ἄνδροβουλον...κατ' and 351: ...κατ' ἄνδρα σέφρον’...). He is not involved in any kind of conflict between a human and a divine law. Tragedy, which is inconceivable without gods, becomes in Ritsos the drama of modern man. Ritsos’ Agamemnon does not even exchange any arguments with Clytemnestra over the way he is welcomed as well as over the confirmation of his absolute power. He feels so exhausted and tired from the war that he succumbs without resistance to female superiority. He even admits to his dynastic rule of the people and feels guilty for his fellow-citizens who fell at Troy; that is why he appears self-conscious before his people and why he calls himself an "executioner" when he entreats Clytemnestra to make the people keep silent:
Δόν μην προσταγῇ σου, σε λειτουργώ να σωμάτων. Τι φωδικών ἄδειμης;
Τιδ θεοὺς στραγκροτᾶτι; Τι ἰερομορφόν; Τοὺς θεμίους τοὺς τέκνα; τοὺς νεκροὺς τοὺς;

Give them your command to keep quiet, I implore you.
Why are they still shouting? Whom are they applauding? Whom are they cheering?
Their executioners perhaps, or their dead?
Ritsos, Ag. 1-2

In Ritsos' poem, therefore, the hero becomes an intellectual who is bold enough to criticize himself as if he did not care about his kingly status. He repents his past belligerent conduct even though it raised him to a hero, because it caused death to many innocent soldiers. He rejects oppression but seems too tired and self-preoccupied to champion the cause of human liberation.17

Agamemnon, as presented in the modern Greek text, is not concerned with the consequences of his walking on the "red tapestries",18 and, therefore, he does not face any dilemma whatsoever: he does not seem to be hindered either by the gods who influence the Aeschylean hero's behavior or by a Christian god,19 like some of Eliot's characters; he does not even worry about the measure of the people. The only thing he cares about is fate and his life. The Aeschylean image of the "sea-purple clothes" (944: ἀλουρῆ) is transformed into "purple carpets" (πορφυρῶν γαὶας, opening stage directions and πορφυρὰ χαλία, 93). In the ancient text this imagery refers to human life and implies the blood that was shed in the Trojan war by both Trojans and Argives, subjects of Agamemnon. In the modern text, a sense of blood and death is also
conveyed to the reader, since Agamemnon's words prefigure an imminent death which comes, though, out of weariness:

... Μία στη μαυρή ου τίμεν ένα βασιλικόν σώμαν κ' είτε η δε μεγάλη ζωή νά πάνε στά σοματικά χαλαρό μονέ λόγιον τα γόνατα. Κ' είτε στράφη κ' είτε τα σκονισμένα χνίδια απ' τα σαντάλια μου πάνω στά μένα κάκινον σιν τούς φαρδικούς ψελλούς κέκκυνους που επιμέλειαν έπαινω απ' τ' το κρυβόνα, μεθυσιάδος διέλευ. Κ' είτε μερός μου τ' έκτεις νά εξειδικεύουν κι έτει κάκινα χαλάρωμα με νέορχημα τούς κάκινους τροχαίος τής μολότου. "Ενα ρήγος μεθύσα το θριάμβουκαδί. Την αυτό σοι δίημα νά μοι έποιμαί σιν ένα τέσσερο λούτρο. Ελέες το ρήγος —γυάλινο, γυάλινο, γυάλινο,— έξεις, κανείς έξεις, οικιάς έξεις, νά πεθάνει, δοκοι και κοροσμένους.

...Within your voice there was a deep river, and it was as if I were drifting in it. When I trod upon the purple carpets my knees bent. I turned back and I saw the dusty footprints from my sandals on the ground red color like those fishermen's buoys which float over the hidden, sunken pet., And I saw in front of me the woman slaves unfolding more red carpets, as if they were rolling the red wheels of fate. A tingling sensation went through my spine. That is why I asked you to prepare a hot bath for me. That shudder—glass, glass—you know, nobody wants to die, however tired he may be.

Hesiod, Ag. 91-101

In Hesiod the "fate" which is common both for human beings and animals does not come out of a conflict or a necessity fundamental to ancient Greek tragedy but from the philosophy of Existentialism and it has to do with the conception of human life as something likened to a burden.
Another important feature in the divergence from the royal and heroic Aeschylean character of Agamemnon that Ritsos attempts, is his own hero's renunciation of all material possessions and even power. Cassandra, Priam's daughter, whom Agamemnon had brought to Argos as his mistress, and the spoils from the Trojan war, which are meant to be the material confirmation of the victory over the Trojans, are relinquished by the solitary hero.

In Aeschylus (550-955), Agamemnon not only orders the slaves to escort Cassandra to his palace but also asserts that she is a gift from the war for himself alone.

On the other hand, Ritsos has his hero disclaim power in an explicit way:

Τ' ἔλα τώρα κατά το ἄλογο, ἄγαμον πολικεύτω ὁ σέβητρος
προδότων κόρην — ἐκ µοῦ χρησιάσεις — ἀκρατο..."Keep all the rest; and as for the heavy, diamond-
—especially this— I do not need it; —it is im-
possible to lift.
Ritsos, Ag. 53-54

By the word σέβητρο (scepter) —the same in both ancient and modern Greek— Ritsos recalls the royal status Agamemnon was invested with, and he also refers to the Aeschylean text (43: σέβητροεως/"two-sceptered"). The Aeschylean adjective refers to the wealth of the Atreidæ, a common motif in Agamemnon.²¹

Ritsos' hero repudiates his love of Clytemnestra (42-48) because he fears that her beautiful figure cannot resist the test of time. He prefers to keep Clytemnestra in his memory as a statue (Σκυλεύς),
an image used in the Aeschylean text about Iphigenia in line 208 in an abstract sense though: δόμων δύναμις (delight of the house). The only thing Ritsos' Agamemnon wishes to keep is his "ash-tray" (στοιχείων), a very elaborate one, with a tripod, "where [he] used to leave his cigarette" (49-52). This is a startling but entirely effective example of anachronism by means of which Ritsos tries to persuade the reader of the modernity of his hero. Through a not so far-fetched stretch of interpretive imagination it functions in an oblique way to refer his reader to the destruction of Troy.

In the Aeschylean text, one notices the importance of ash imagery when Agamemnon himself talks about the decision of the gods to destroy Ilium:

κατάδικος δ' ἄλογα νῦν ἔχει εὐδημος πόλις;
ἐπὶς θύελλαι Σώλ, διαθνάρεις αἰὲ
στοιχεῖα προσάμει πίθων πυρὸς πονδος.

The city is now captured and is still marked by smoke; the stormwinds of destruction live on, and Troy's die-hard embers send forth their wealth in thick smoke.

Aesch., Ag. 818-820

At this point ash and smoke clearly stand for the destruction of the city of Troy. Earlier on, however, the same image occurs when the Chorus talks about the dead Achaeans:

οὐδὲν γάρ <τις> Ἑπεμνέν
οίδειν, ἄντι δὲ φέρουν
τεῦχε καὶ στρατὸς ἐλς ἱκανοῦ καὶ
ἐκ τῶν ἐνδοτῶν ἀφικνεῖται.

Those who were sent to Troy they knew; now, instead of the men urns and ashes arrive at every house.

Aesch., Ag. 433-436
These lines, repeating the relationship of the exchange of ash for men (434-435: ...,ωτί πολυ...) and 441-442: δυνάμεις παροδού) have an especially tragic ring in the Aeschylean text. They also help us to better understand the part which the Chorus play in the Aeschylean tragedy; perceived as a character, they represent the polis of Argos and notably a select portion of it: the elders of the city. They voice a judgment about public matters as, for example, the fairness of the Trojan expedition, but they support their king who champions the rights of his people according to the laws. Although they appear critical of Agamemnon's actions (799-804), they are loyal to him and undertake to talk on his behalf. They protect Agamemnon's heroic image and attempt to touch upon what he passes over or deliberately ignores. In the Parodos they function as the collective memory of both the polis and the king and bring out what pertains to the Trojan past which is not accounted for by Agamemnon, who would be responsible for this duty. Agamemnon, complying with the heroic pattern of the time, must conceal any weakness and be
strong, almost equal to the gods, leaving the deaths of both Argives and Trojans unmentioned, as well as the sacrilege of temples and the other atrocities at Troy. The Chorus takes up the heavy task of recapitulating what preceded Agamemnon's return: the sailing to Troy, the battles fought there, the adventures before the departure and the prophecies of Calchas, the appearance of the omens, and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Their manifold narrative culminates in raising the question of the dead Argives by bringing to the fore the existence of the cenotaph urns and by using a markedly emotional language with the ash and smoke imagery, appealing to the relatives of the dead. It is a crucial point of the Anacolouthic play because it is the last hint at the Trojan past the Chorus makes before the Herald appears with his news which confirms what they predicted. It is an important passage also because the memory of the Chorus converges with that of the soldiers' relatives, who again prefigure the consequences this past disaster will have on Agamemnon later on in the play.

It is important for the comparison of the two texts to notice here that Aeschylus raises his Agamemnon to a superhuman level. Even though he is presented as a one-dimensional character without a memory and will of his own, but dependent on the polis, as on the gods—the Chorus being itself the polis, is humanized, as is the case with the Watchman, who is a common man, and, most significantly, possesses memory and consciousness. They also explain the reasons why they did not join the Trojan expedition:
because of their old age and their weariness (72-75). This last element is ascribed by Ritsos to Agamemnon and is transformed into an existentialist motive.

It seems, therefore, quite logical for Ritsos to use the above-mentioned lines (433-436, 438-444 and 818-820) as a key point in his focusing on the Aeschylean hero and the legend for his own existentialist plan. Instead of providing his hero with a concern for the matters of the polis and a wish to thank the gods, he has his veer to his past at Troy, from which he recollects in his memory/consciousness his deeds as well as those of his fellow-warriors and tries to reconsider them. It is the part played by the Chorus, then, that is of interest to Ritsos in the Aeschylean text, beyond the return scene. In his effort to portray a convincing modern existential hero: the Chorus provides Ritsos with the mnemonic function that he needs for his own hero. He switches thus to Homer with a clear reference to the Iliad attempting an existentialist interpretation of the epic's basic motif, Achilles' wrath.
CHAPTER II

Ritso's Agamemnon turns back to the world of the heroic, authoritative epic past. This is a veering towards the major document of epic heroism, the Iliad, as well as an exploration of history which extends even beyond his memory of the Trojan war. Ritso's Agamemnon reinterprets the Homeric hero Achilles with a retrospective approach. The modern Agamemnon is not devoted to any kind of heroism; therefore, his dispute with Achilles occurs out of weariness and loneliness, not out of spite for the sake of a woman:

Σήμερα νυστάτησεν
τὸ θυμό τοῦ Ἀχιλλῆς—καθέναν ἄντιδεικνύει μενῑ τί τοι
καὶ κούρασαι εἴτεν,
μιὰ κόρωρῃ προδρομικῇ ποιὸ ἱσομέτρει τὴ νύκτα μὲ τὴν ἴδιαν,
τὴν ζωὴ μὲ τὸ ἀνάγκην. Μονόχως τοῦ κατω ἐκὸς ἀφερενίατο,
μὲ συντροφία τὸ μέτρο τεῦχον ποι ἑκοσταλληθῆκε καὶ ἄθων
ἀνεξήγητα
μὲ νύχτα πάσινομορίνη μὲ μεγάλο μεγάθρη (Πτολ. Λέγαν).

...Today I can understand Achilles' anger; —no, it was not out of a dispute with me—it was weariness, a precursor's weariness which equated victory with defeat, life with death. He was alone down on the seashore, in the company of the black dog which inexplicably befriended him at his side all autumnal night with a full moon (so they said).

Ritso, Ag. 54-59

The homeric Achilles now receives some of Agamemnon's characteristics: he is tired, lonely, and shuns human companionship and love. He is content with keeping only an animal's company, a
mute presence/ which does not ask questions, which does not deny, but believes and approves always/ with a wag of its tail, with a blinking of its eyelids...". (Ritsos, Ag. 60-62). The image of the dog is very familiar to the reader of both Agamemnon and the Iliad. 23 Ritsos, however, adds a new aspect to it by making it a "black dog" devoted to its master, hinting in this way at the hero's emotional distress which assumed the appearance of an animal. It is significant, after all, that even after Achilles' death the "dog" remains loyal to its master:

Μια μέρα, κάποιος του σέταξε ένα κόκκαλο· δεν τάρανεν το τόμαν ενάντια του καὶ χέρικα. Σα λιγά το βράκαν στόν τάμο του Ἀχιλλής, —καὶ τό κόκκαλο ἀφημένο καὶ
πέντε
οὶ μικρὰ ἑλικιακὰ...

One day somebody threw it a bone — it did not eat it; it took it in its teeth and disappeared. Soon after, the dog was found on Achilles' tomb — the bone was placed there as a small libation;...

Ritsos, Ag. 80-83

Ritsos not only ascribes human features and behavior to the animals he uses in his poem, 24 but also presents the relationship between man and animal as harmonious. 25 The friendship animals offer to man appears stronger than that between men themselves. According to some basic existentialist principles, man lives in solitude because his language has been ossified and has limited communication with his fellow men. 26 Patroclus is presented by Ritsos as being jealous of his best friend Achilles because of the dog's friendship (69-71) but also as not being able to communicate with Achilles; therefore, he resorts to the horses.
The wreck-age scene, which in Aeschylus is in the Herald's account of the Achaean's return from Troy (859), adds the existentialist motive of freedom:

στὸ γυρισμό, στὰ Ἀγαῖα εἴλαγος, μεν νῦχτα μὲ μεγάλη 
θύμοι τῷ τιμῶν. Τότε ἡθελάνθη μὲ τρομάγημα 
μὲσα σ' αὐτῷ τὸ ἄκυμφρητο ἄκιμβος....

On our way home, in the Aegean Sea, a night with heavy storm, the hale broke. Then I felt a terrified freedom right in this state of disorder....

H. Stocchower notes that "the differentiating character of the existentialist approach is that it is concerned exclusively with the second act of the mythic drama, that is, with the revolt of the individual. Its primary motive is to affirm the individual's unconditioned freedom from 'systems', 'essences', and any type of organized control...". So is the case with Ritsos' Agamemnon: he resembles Orestes, the Satrían hero, in that he shuns any agent —gods, ship— that restrains his freedom and individuality.

The recurring image of a "hot bath"28 in Ritsos is Agamemnon's last hope to cleanse himself of his weariness and begin a new life. The bath, however, will be the scene of his doom. The murderer in Ritsos' poem is Agamemnes, as it is in the Odyssey, not Clytemnestra, as in Aeschylus, but this is of little importance since it is given in the form of stage directions at the end. The same is true of Cassandra who appears in the closing stage directions, although in Aeschylus she plays an important part since she is the character who predicts her own as well as Agamemnon's
imminent death. In Ritasos she becomes only a "foreign woman", as she was in the opening stage directions.

Helen’s figure recurs, mainly in the first and second Stasimon, as an ominous echo in the background of the Aeschylean play in order to remind the reader of the disaster at Troy. She occupies a long passage in Ritasos’ poem, in which her presence is symbolic not only of the Trojan destruction but also of its memory. In Aeschylus her importance is stressed by means of a word play in which Helen is described as both “destroyer of ships and cities” (Ἄλαγος, Ἀλαγος) and “destroyer of men” (Θαυμάσιος), in the first strophe of the second Stasimon (681-761). In Ritasos she seems, interestingly enough, to be aware of her memory as well as of her death. For Ritasos, beyond the suggestion that Helen was the cause of the Trojan destruction, Helen carries also a mnemonic function which supports Ritasos’ project to present past history as memory.

Before he pronounces a judgment on the heroes, Aegaeus renews through his memory the pessimistic attitude towards the past of an existential hero:

...I think that everything did not happen for its own sake, but in order for me to recall it one day or rather, perhaps in order that I may discover its immortal futility.

Ritasos, Ag. 164-166

His excursion into and exploration of a heroic past with diverse mythical figures, such as Philemon or Ion, aims at historical memory.
Although it uses the guise of myth. The names are recalled not for their own sake but in order to prove that they cannot lead their heroic lives anymore under the burden of the modern problems; that is why almost all the heroes, Agamemnon himself included, die at the end. They prove in their way the insubility of modern man to cope with his problems and carry his weight. They also prove that history as mere memory of heroic deeds of the past, as presented, for example, in Homer is useless and does not lead to a vital solution in an age which does not believe in heroes. Therefore, his life matters more to him than a glorious and heroic death:

Ol ἄλλοι πέσαν —σωτὰ παλλακάρια, (ἴφως, ποιὸς ἔφες, μὴ ἔση πίκρα, κόσο φῶβο κι αὐτῷ). Δίν τοὺς τάς εἴδες τοῦ ἀδικῆνε τοὺς. Τῶν ἐγκαίων τῶν ἁρματών τοὺς, ἐτένε γιὰ νὰ κραφή τή μυστική μου σῶμασοσύνη πώς ἤγει ἐκήμω σώζει — διόλου ἡμῶς

The others fell —truly brave men, (yet who known with how great a grief, how great a fear they, too. I did not envy them their death.

If I praised their heroicism, it was only to hide my secret gratitude that I was still alive —not at all a hero.

Ritsos, Ag. 174-177

Agamemnon through his memory tries to revitalize things and figures that have some impact on the predicament of modern man but the diversity of names and places weakens his argument: the reader’s attention is deflected to different times that coexist at once. The events of the monologue take place in a time that is difficult to pinpoint and they can be contemporary as much as past. The setting of the monologue’s action is somewhat mixed and triggers associations to contemporaneity as well as antiquity. At this point
it would be worth mentioning that a striking characteristic of Ritsos' figures in his monologues is that although they cannot survive --as modern man is unable to do so--, nevertheless they have an incredible capacity for memory.

Ritsos succeeds in *Agamemnon* in transforming the ancient Greek heroism of the Aeschylean tragedy and the epic into an anti-heroic existentialist ideology. Time for Ritsos' *Agamemnon* assumes three dimensions: it is Agamemnon's own past; it is the past of his fellow-warriors as well as his relation to their past; and it is his present and that of Clytemnestra and Cassandra. The "fourth dimension", however, is also the effort to produce a coexistence of past and present in a dazzling mosaic; yet, nothing succeeds in surviving from the past for the sake of the present, and the reader remains in a state of ambiguous anticipation. The final impression is that the wrestling with time, the "fourth dimension," fails and no sense of coexistence of Greek history and culture is achieved, however much it may be desired.
CONCLUSION

Yannis Ritsos responded to the call of Existentialists to preserve humanism and renew faith in the Western tradition by means of his mythological poems, one of which is Agamemnon. For many of his poems he used titles from ancient Greek tragedies and wrote these poems in a genre which approximated ancient Greek tragedy, because he realized that it was not possible anymore to write a tragedy. He included in his poems references and allusions to ancient Greek works and various heroic mythological figures. He imbued his poetry with existentialist ideas, which revealed his interest in modern man and his problems.

Regarding the use of ancient Greek myths, he opened an interpretive field: he offered a new, modern, anti-heroic aspect of the ancient heroes. Although he displayed a concern for modern man in general, he "hellenized" the existentialist experiment by frequent references to ancient Greek works. He attempted both to make mythological figures appear lively and contemporary by removing their heroic halo and to activate his personal talent by transforming the thematic influences of the ancient Greek texts into excellent poetry. Although he succeeded in both tasks, he was not able either to appropriate the meaning of the Aeschylean text according to the modernist poets' principles or to convince the
reader that a simultaneous existence of past and present can be beneficial for the present.
NOTES

1René Char, the French poet, summarised the ideas of a generation of European writers in his aphorism: "Our inheritance was left to us by no will." By this statement he meant that without a tradition—a mechanism of historical succession which creates a certain hierarchy in which values and codes are handed down—, without a testament, there can be no continuity in time. See René Char, *Hyperion: Poems and Prose* (New York: Random House, 1956), pp. 108-109, also quoted in Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Present: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 3. Arendt's book, although it belongs to the area of political thought, discusses among other issues the idea of "the modern break in tradition." See Chapter I: "Tradition and the Modern Age," pp. 17-40.

2At the end of the poem, the supposed date the poem was written appears: Athens, Sicyon, Heraion, Samos: December 1966 - October 1970. For this study I am using the 1976 Redros edition of *Iliad* (in English) where *Agamemnon* is included. I have provided an English translation of the poem in the Appendix.

Τὸ νεκρὸν εἴρημα (The Dead House), 1959

Κατά τοῦ Τούκτο τοῦ Σουνίου (Beneath the Shadow of the Mountain), 1960

Οξυφόρος (Orestes), 1962-1966

Χρυσοθήματος (Chrysothemis), 1967-1970

Η Επιστροφή τῆς Ιφιγένειας (The Homecoming of Iphigenia), 1971-1972

T.S. Eliot explains this program in his essay on James Joyce's Ulysses: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. ...It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history." After this remark he proceeds to the suggestion of the new method: "Instead of [the] narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art." (My emphasis.)


6 Eliot, op.cit., p.123.

7 See E. Makrinikola, "Εη Φίλνη ντά Πίτσος στή σκηνή" [Yannis Ritsas' Texts on the Stage], Theatrika Tetradia 2 (January
1980), pp.13-16. In this issue, which is dedicated to Ritsos' dramatic poems, there is a listing of Ritsos' poems that have been staged.

T.S. Eliot again formulates the opinion of many other poets writing in defense of verse drama: "...the ideal towards which poetic drama should strive...is an unattainable ideal: and that is why it interests me, for it provides an incentive towards further experiment and exploration,...I have before my eyes a kind of mirage of the perfection of verse drama, which would be a design of human action and of words, such as to present at once the two aspects of dramatic and of musical order...To go as far in this direction as it is possible to go, without losing that contact with the ordinary everyday world with which drama must come to terms, seems to me the proper aim of dramatic poetry." (My emphasis.) By "mirage" Eliot warns about the future dangers dramatic poetry would face. He himself experienced them in his The Family Reunion (1939), in which, as he admitted later, he failed to get across his meaning to a theater audience.


George Steiner, in his The Death of Tragedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), defines tragedy as "the dramatic representation or, more precisely, the dramatic testing of a view of reality in which man is taken to be an unwelcome guest in the world," an appropriate definition for my purpose here. (p. xi.)
Then, on p. xii, he mentions: "...the dramatists of the absurd will not amend the conclusion that tragedy is dead, that "high tragic drama" is no longer a naturally available genre. (My emphasis.)

One notices clearly this preoccupation at the beginning of novels such as Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942) and André Malraux's *The Human Fate* (1933).

In the first essay from the collection of his prose writings he argues: "The ideological, social, and ethical background of art, if this is not the first reason of its value, it is, nevertheless, the last." (My translation.) See Yannis Ritsos, *Maiatrūgto* [Studies] (Athens: Kedros, 1974), Chapter I: "Μπλ Μαϊατρογτόν," [On Mayakovski], p. 25. In this small book Ritsos outlines his literary credo. It is worth mentioning that its largest part consists in impressionistic assessments of four poets, Mayakovski, Hikmet, Ehrenburg, and Šluard and Ritsos' acknowledgment of his indebtedness to them.

Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), an essay of philosophical character, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies* (1943), a play, seem to have attracted the attention of many writers because they offer two exemplary modern existential heroes, Sisyphus and Orestes. Ritsos follows their ideological assumptions but does not deviate from poetry: he tries to combine those existentialist ideas which seem interesting to him with his choice of genre as well as some surrealist beliefs about poetry. The result of this blending is questionable with regard to its consistency.
It is important for our understanding of Ritsos' dramatic monologue in its relation with the Aeschylean tragedy, to point out here that there is a wide variety of words in the latter to describe the objects which are spread out for Agamemnon; these objects are, finally, "garments." In Ritsos the imagery is simplified and reduced to "carpets". Later on, I explain the character of this transformation. Denniston and Page give a list of the terms about "garments" and reject the idea that the things spread out were tapestries on the grounds that these items were not used in Greece until the time of Alexander the Great.


Denniston-Page, op. cit., p. xii. The introduction of Denniston and Page to the Aeschylean text is very helpful to understand how the concept of justice works in Aeschylus. The authors give the necessary background of Aeschylus' time and make frequent references to the text.

"Much could be learned from the isolation of a poetry of experience. It would reveal...a distinctively romantic form in poetry—a form of which the potentials are realized in the so-called reactions against romantic poetry, in the dramatic monologues of the Victorians and the symbolist poems of the moderns."

assumption that the poetry of nineteenth and twentieth centuries was poetry of experience.

15Ritsos mentions his indebtedness to Surrealism and the elements he chose from it to incorporate into his poetry in the essay on Éluard. See Ritsos, ΜΕΛΑΝΗΣΟΣ, p. 78.

17Albert Camus undertook a similar task in his The Myth of Sisyphus, written out of compassion for those who suffer in the absurd world.

18Ritsos transforms the Aeschylean "garments" into "carpets", (opening stage directions and lines 90, 93, 97) a visual rather than functional adoption of this element, since the "tapestries" to him do not implicate an impending sin. This move of the modern text indicates the way Ritsos works with the Aeschylean text: he is interested mainly in the imagery of the text. He takes the character of Agamemnon from the Aeschylean text and uses an elaborate imagery in order to write an existentialist dream rather than establish a close relationship with the text using a modernist's method.

19In Ritsos' Agamemnon the hero mentions gods at two points (lines 69, 294) with neutral detachment. He seems rather more concerned with "fate". (lines 98, 267, 275 and closing stage directions.)

20The same Greek word ΑΔΥΤΟΣ is used in both the Aeschylean text by the Chorus (578) and in that of Ritsos (32); this instance can explain Ritsos' poetic technique to insist on using words common to ancient and modern Greek and create images out of them.
The Herald applies the word ἀδέσποτος (loot) to the wealth the Achaeans acquired from the plundering of Troy; also in line 949 Agamemnon, with reference to the "purple carpeted" reveals the wealth of the Atreids. In line 377 the Chorus talks about the wealth hidden in the palace of Agamemnon.

All translations of the ancient Greek passages appearing in this study are my own and are meant to convey with clarity the meaning of the text.

The word "dog" refers to the Watchman as a humorous simile in line 3, to Clytemnestra in 1. 607, and to Agamemnon in 1. 896 in Aeschylus' Agamemnon. In the Iliad the word occurs in 3. 26, 8. 299, and 13. 623 among other points.

Such as συνή (soul) and σέξος (tears).

One notices the relationship which develops between Patroclus and the horses of Achilles, (Ritsos, Ag. 138-141.) Ritsos "borrows" the image rather than the idea from the Iliad 23, 283-284:

τὸν τῷ γὰρ ἱππότατος πανάστατον, ὑμέτεροι δὲ σπινθώρες ἔπεσον, τὸ δ′ ἱππατον δεψάμων κήρ
Both horses were standing by and were mourning him; their manes leaned on the ground and they were standing grieving in their hearts as it appears in the lines 141-142:

...Ἀόρη τὸν παραστατόν,
...τὸν Ἰχμονίτη παραστατόν κέντρον αὐτόν καθότως ἀκαθάρτως...

...I think I have seen this representation on a relief of a pediment;


28Ritsos again uses the same word ἀπορμάα as in the ancient text (I. 1109).
APPENDIX

Yannis Ritsos, Agamemnon

(Once more, from the top of the marble staircase, which is fully covered with purple carpets, the warlord bails the cheering crowds with a gesture of near impatience. In the crystal-clear winter sunshine, drums are heard at the square below, tramplings from the hooves of the horses as well as fluttering of the banners and the voices of the slaves who unload the spoils from the wagons. Only the guards stand immobile at the propylaea as if they belonged to another world. An acrid smell from the numerous trodden laurels fills the air. Amidst the applause and the public turmoil, once in a while one can distinguish loud prophetic utterances of a frenzied woman who is lying down at the base of the staircase - inexplicable utterances in a foreign tongue. The warlord and his wife retire. They cross the long corridor. They enter the hall where the table with the breakfast is set. He takes off his suit of armor. He lays his large helmet with the horse-tail on the console-table, in front of the mirror. The mirror reflects the helmet, as if two empty, distorted, metal skulls were put together. He leans on a couch. He shuts his eyes. Outside, the applause of the crowd and the cries of the foreign woman continue. He covers his ears with his hands. His wife, beautiful, grave, imposing, leans with a modesty, unfitting to her countenance, to untie his sandals. He rests his left hand on her hair, carefully, for fear that he might undo her hair. She pulls away. She stands up, a little to the side. He smiles remotely, tiredly. He speaks to her. You cannot tell if she hears him.)

Give them your command to keep quiet, I implore you. Why are they still shouting?

Whom are they applauding? Whom are they cheering? Their executioners perhaps, or their dead?

36
Or, maybe, in order to confirm that they have hands and are able to clap, that they have a voice and are able to shout, as well as to hear their voice?

Make them keep quiet. Look, an ant is crawling down the wall—how confidently! and simply it walks this vertical line, without any arrogance at all, as if it were carrying out a labor—perhaps because it is alone, perhaps because it is insignificant, weightless, almost non-existent; I am envious.

Let it be; do not chase it away; it is climbing up the table; it has taken a crumb; its burden is larger than its very self;—look at it,—always it is the same as the load we all carry, larger than our stature.

They do not want to keep quiet. And, besides this, the fires on the altars—this thick smoke, and the smell of the roasted meat;—nausea—no, not at all because of the tempest—something bitter in the mouth, a fear in the fingers, on the skin;—just like the time,
that summer night, I sprang up from my sleep - a slippery,
creeping feeling all over my body;
I couldn't find matches; I stumbled; I turned on the
search-light:
inside the tent, on the ground, in the bed-sheets, on the
shield, on the helmet,
thousands of snails; I was stepping on them barefooted; I
went out - there was a crescent,
naked soldiers were fighting, laughing, joking
with those hideous reptiles - themselves hideous, too; their
phalluses
were moving like snails. I dived into the sea; the water
would not rinse me;
on my left cheek the moon was creeping, itself slippery too,
yellow, yellow, viscous. And this applause now -

Prepare for me a hot bath, very hot; - did you prepare it
already?
with leaves of skino and myrtle? I recall their scent,
acid, refreshing - a resignation; just as if you smelled
again
childhood with trees, with rivers, with cicadas. Our
daughters
seemed to me lost; - did you notice that? - one of them
was holding my cheek from the beard like a blind woman. You
when you ordered them to their rooms, - I could not see them.

Keep all the spoils for yourselves or share them - I want nothing.

Even this woman who howls on the stairs, take her for your slave or as our son's nurse (-where, indeed, is he? - I did not see him) - no, not on my bed, now I need a bed, completely empty, in order to sink down, to lose myself, to be, in order to have at least my sleep unguarded, in order not to be concerned about whether my face is duly grave or whether the muscles of my belly and of my arms have loosened. Now only the recollection of love works erotically, outlining that large unfit disproportion between the decay of the body and the obstinacy of desire.

And, certainly, I grant our bed to you. I would not at all wish to become a witness of the changes of time on your beautiful figure, on your thighs and on your breasts. I will not nurture any hatred
against such an image. On the contrary, I would wish
to preserve untouched (for my own sake — not yours)
your erotic stature beyond time, like some exquisite statue
which somehow maintains even the dazzle and glory of my own
youth

I would like to keep only this ashtray with the hewn tripod
(if it is still preserved)
on which on certain nights I would occasionally leave my
cigarette to smoke alone
like a distant chimney in a very little Ithaca or like
a star of mine, when you were sleeping by my side.

Keep all the rest; and as for the heavy, diamond-adorne's
scepter —
especially this — I do not need it; — it is impossible to
lift. Today I can understand
Achilles' anger; — no, it was not out of a dispute with me —
it was weariness,
a precursor's weariness which equated victory with defeat,
life with death. He was alone down on the seashore,
in the company of the black dog which inexplicably
befriended him at his side
an autumnal night with a full moon (so they said).
It may also be that he needed this mute presence which does not ask questions, which does not deny, but which believes and approves always with a wag of its tail, with a blinking of its eyelids or sometime by resting its snout with gratitude on its lord's sandals, waiting with equal happiness the pat or clout; and sometime again gasping, not from running, but from its devotion, hanging out its red tongue as if it were holding in its teeth a bloodied piece from its soul which it was willing to give away. Such endless devotion, I think, can save a man or even a god. Patroclus was zealous;

It is perhaps for this reason that he induced him to reenter the battle and it is perhaps for this reason that he was killed. How much blood was shed - I did not learn why - I do not know; - from time to time I did not dare touch the bread - the bread was red. And when Achilles was killed that dog would wander alone along the seashore, it would gaze at the ships, at the clouds, it would smell
the stones,
which its master's feet had trodden, and inside the tent it
would smell his clothes,
hungry, famished - who would care for it? - it would become
a nuisance,
it would get in our way; many would kick it away; it would
sit down
and stare at the soldiers while they ate; but it would not
whine.

One day somebody threw it a bone - it did not eat it;
it took it in its teeth and disappeared. Soon after, the
dog was
found on Achilles' tomb - the bone was placed there
as a small libation; and it shed large tears as it cried
perhaps for the loss of its master, perhaps also because
it was ashamed of its hunger.
Then it took the bone again, it hid behind the stones
and began gnawing it. Along with its gnawing was also heard
its sobbing, - perhaps it was the groaning of eternal hunger.

How strange your eyes are! Like your voice, when you said:
"Slave women, why do you stand before me so? Have you
forgotten my command?
I told you to spread the carpets from the wagon up to the
house to redde the road
so that my master could make his entrance." Within your
voice
there was a deep river, and it was as if I were drifting in
it. When I trod
on the purple carpets my knees bent. I turned back
and I saw the dusty footprints from my sandals on the grand
red color
like those fishermen's buoys which float
over the hidden, sunken net. And I saw in front of me the
wonen slaves
unfolding more red carpets, as if they were rolling
the red wheels of fate. A tingling sensation
went through my spine. That is why I asked you to prepare a
hot bath
for me. That shudder - glass, glass - you know,
obody wants to die, however tired he may be.

This weariness of mine is my place now, it is me; it is as
if I ascend
effortlessly, almost without my feet touching the ground,
the bluest mountain
wherefrom I will gaze (and I am already gazing) down
hills, plains, cities - a little smoke glints like gold in
the sun - harbors
and the ships of our bitter return in the semicircle
of the deserted seashore, - white ships, distant,

diminutive

like the cut nails of children - like those of our other
daughter - do you remember? -

that you cut them for her at the door of the bath-house; -
she did not want them cut; she cried; - so many years ago.

How we allowed our hours to be wiled away, foolishly trying
to win the good opinion of others. Not even one of our
seconds, in so many such long summers, did we take to see
the shadow of a bird on the crops - a small trireme
on an all-golden sea; - in this trireme we could sail
toward silent trophies and conquests more glorious. But we
did not sail.

At times, it seems to me that I am a motionless corpse who
looks at

my very self existing; with his empty eyes he follows
my movement, my gestures; - like then, on a winter night,
down there, outside the walls, with an indescribable, cold
moonlight;

and everything looked like petrified, made out of lime and

moon.
I was observing all around with the unfeelingness of an immortal who neither fears death any longer nor cares about his immortality. Yes, like a handsome dead man who strolls in the white of the night, looking at the plaster ornaments of the houses, the railings of the gardens, the shadows of the masts on the seashore. And then, an arrow whistled past my ear and was thrust in the walls quivering like a single string in an unknown instrument, like a nerve in the body of the void, sounding with inconceivable delight.

Likewise, occasionally, something would stop us over there — you did not know what was happening — a reflection on your sword from the daylight, the miniatuized mirroring of a peaceful cloud on a helmet or that habit of Patroclus to touch with his both fingers the end of his ear, while keeping silent, deep in his personal and amorous daydreaming. One day, Achilles held his hand, looked at his fingers as a seer, then looked at his ear. "Autumn is
"we shall have to muster our forces." And there was a strange relation between this "muster" and Patroclus' refined movement.

And then Patroclus came out of his tent, approached the horse of his friend, Ajax and Xanthus, stood between them, passed both his arms around their thin necks, and in that way all three of them, face to face, did not stir as they stared at the sunset. I think I have seen this representation on a relief of a pediment; and, suddenly, I realized how it is possible to sacrifice a human being for a little favorable wind.

Little by little, everything was laid bare, calmed down, became of glass, walls, doors, your hair, your hands - an exquisite glass transparency - not even the breath of death can blur it; you make out an indivisible nothingness behind the glass - something at last integral -
that first integrity, invulnerable, like non-existence.

Before I place my hand on the doorknob, before I open up, before I enter the hall, I have already seen the couch, the chairs, and the mirror reflecting the opposite wall with its picture of a very ancient naval battle. Before I enter the bathroom I see the myrtle leaves floating on the water and the swollen face of steam rising up to the ceiling, jostling each other in the skylight. I can almost perceive my death time even.

Forgive me this vision, especially the confession - it is a way for you to see me; so that we may become equals - as we are after all - that is, all of us unarmed. But, still, this very moment, I ask myself what will I benefit, what will I avoid, what will I hide by this confession of mine; - which, perhaps, new mask of unbreakable glass on my glass, brittle face - a large hollow mask, a continuation of my figure, of my expression, hung high, in front of the palace, on the gate’s metope, my only personal coat of arms, not of the dynasty.
Sometimes I think that everything did not happen for its own sake, but in order for me to recall it one day or rather, perhaps in order that I may discover its immortal futility.

A benevolent time - and I enjoy it. I look at my hand - neither for sword nor for caress; - by itself, given, - given where? - to some invisible chords, like the rhapsode's hand on a great lyre; - if you hold his hand for a moment, the music will stop perplexed; and the half-complete sound does not forgive either of the two; like a silver ring, hanging in the air with a string, it inexplicably strikes your shoulder.

The others fell - truly brave men, (yet who knows with how great a grief, how great a fear they too). I did not envy them their death. If I praised their heroism, it was only to hide my secret gratitude that I was still alive - not at all a hero.

Here I am, then, I who did not bring you even this joy - the multinominal glory, as people say...
which could possibly, alas, redeem
with thundering and counterfeit coins our ten silent,
genuine years,
thousands of murders, secret and brazen, thousands of
mistakes and graves.

Away from me with such heroisms; - someone else now
silent and invisible is beckoning me. Once at dusk,
I saw a last golden leaf on an all-black tree
and it was the naked shoulder of a calm, handsome athlete,
who, inclined,
lifted the burden of all of us, in order that he might lay
it gently on the ground. Then
a new hunger, another appetite filled my mouth with saliva
and I felt the milk of gratitude, sweet and soothing,
rolling down
from the ends of my lips. Unwittingly
I raised my hand up there in order to wipe it
lest I betray myself, lest they see my new childishness,
my new suckling from the first nipple of creation.

In this way they would realize how mighty, how important
I am -
both challenging. One afternoon I was strolling alone on
the seashore;
a golden quietness; a rose-colored sea; an oar was blazing.

On the rock

people had spread a large red sail. From the camp above
a desolate, sad song reached me,

warm and palid, like a garment which a beautiful body had
just taken off —

a warm song, which I held in my palms as I strolled
in the evening dew, beside the ships. All around
one could smell something like roasted corn and seaweed.

A little water, bubbling, must have fallen on a burning
stump. Outside the tents
great fires were lit for the evening common meal.

Death seemed so easy. I remembered silent Philemon. One

night,

when, all drunk in the tent were prattling endlessly
about feats, women, horses, Antilochus challenged with

scoffings

his calmness and temperance. And, Philemon said: "I am

getting ready;" nothing else;

and he remained so, inclined, not drinking, his elbows

leaning on the table,

his face in his hands. Behind his fingers

shone a strange smile. "I am getting ready." At daybreak

Antilochus came out of the tent, turned to the east and
with an actor's grace and youthful irreverence his prayer to the sun.

I don't know how I retained his last words. "Sun," - he said, "you who, with your finger, open a golden hole on the black wall and two birds come out from therein, one red, the other blue - the red one sits on my knee, the blue one on my shoulder." And truly, at that very moment, two big birds flew toward him; they were two ravens. Neither he nor Thilemon came back. On a white lekythos we engraved two beautiful birds - the red one and the blue one.

Ah, of course, our cohabitation will be hard. Right tomorrow I will retire to my fields. Don't be anxious about it. I know: people may forgive us everything one day, but that they should know that you see them and you see yourself, this nobody - neither your enemy nor even your friend - will forgive. And nor
can you ever hide: Right in the middle of your face is
that third eye
which, however secret and however closed, takes aim at you
with the brightness
of loneliness and uniqueness - ultimate arrogance and
modesty.

Tears go by. We ourselves leave. We ourselves grow old; -
not you. Helen, you know,
when the city was taken, was sitting for hours and hours
in front of the big mirror
which she had people carry for her into the ship - a
strange mirror:
two golden, very cunning Erotes, hewn on the side of the
frame,
naked, without quiver, without bow, look with mistrust at
the one who looks at herself in the crystal. Anyway, Helen
makes up her face now after the model of her memory - and
perhaps more beautiful
with recollection, knowledge, and will (and even with
tenacity)
with secret paints - a whole alchemy - with ochre, rose,
purple, silver color,
with strong black around the azure of her eyes,
with dark cherry on the soft, fleshy lips.

She is now painting her mouth big, as if she were to utter an inexplicable "no" from the balcony or to kiss a God. Anyway, what's the point her face is no longer the one it used to be, for which we sailed, for which we fought sowing with broken oars, with wheels and skulls, the seas and plains.

It is another face now - the one which may be more hers - another, nevertheless. Underneath the exquisite colors of her feminine artistry it is as if she were veiling or grievously putting to sleep her death. And she knows it.

One day, at table, down at the seashore, in order to celebrate the victory, after we had buried the dead, and the whole city was still smoking in the quiet autumnal dusk, Helen, holding the glass in front of her lips, screamed:

"listen how my bracelets sound; I am dead" - and from her teeth such a pure white gleam flowed out, that suddenly
everything was petrified and stood still. Hands and voices were fastened in the air.

Everything white, purely white - both the masts and the sea; a seagull, as if it were hit by some invisible arrow, fell soundlessly on the middle of the table, beside the amphorae. Helen took it in her hands, looked at it silently, wet her small finger in its blood and wrote on the tablecloth a flawless circle - maybe a zero, maybe a full circle.

Afterwards, plucking, with a gesture of incredible grace, a tuft of feathers off the bird's belly, she scattered them laughingly on our hair. We forgot it all. Only a dab of white and that inexplicable circle remained.

On our way home, in the Aegean Sea, a night with heavy storm, the helm broke. Then I felt a terrified freedom right in this state of disorder. I was watching with an incredible vision in the dark. I discerned a lifebuoy being flung on the waves. I managed, indeed, in the weak light of the torches, to discern on it the
And this lifebuoy, this name, and the fact that I saw them, gave me a strange strength and calmness; and I said to myself:

"Even if only this lifebuoy were to be saved, nothing is lost."

On the next day the Aegean calmed down; I saw the lifebuoy floating among the shipwrecked men and the scraps of wood. I picked it up. I keep it still in my luggage, as a secret life-jacket.

If you like, you can hang it up as a momento in any room or even throw it away - I don't need it anymore - it reads "Lachesis."

Everything is inconceivable, deceptive; - that Trojan Horse in front of the wall, inexorable; with its huge eyes of glass reflecting the sea - a wooden horse, with blue eyes, very lively ones. You would think that the sea itself looked at its very self with the eyes of the horse, it looked simultaneously at the entrails of the horse,
pitch dark, hollow,
with its enclosed, stark armed warriors. I kept,

nevertheless,
that blue vision of the sea, endless,
compassionate, exhausted. I feel no resentment at my fate;
there is only the sense of a foreign, unrelenting law,

which abolished
the mistakes and the sins of every one of us separately
and the responsibility of all of us together.
Sometimes even weariness leaves a presentiment of
indestructibility,- isn't that so?

At a banquet, down there, on a three-day armistice,
when everyone drunk (not so much with wine as with death),
broke their glasses on the rocks, it seemed to me that I
saw the broken glasses
intact and uncracked, still shining in an excellent row up
to the end of the horizon,
sparkling in the flames of the torches; at the very end
the half-moon shone - a silver cup, serenely steaming
full of tepid milk. And then Ion, the twenty year old man,
threw off his tunic and stark naked as a god, leapt onto
the table,
kicked dishes and amphorae, poured a jar full of wine on
his curled hair,
he became wet all over, he was dripping, shining. "There
is the unbreakable,"
"there is the unbreakable," he exclaimed. He threw his
glass - it didn't break;
they gave it to him again; he aimed at an anchor; he threw
it again;
for fourth, fifth, tenth time,- it didn't break; (it might
have been made
from another material - artificial,- who knows?- perhaps
still
our very drunkenness might have imposed on us the
persuasiveness of the impossible.) On the next day,
Ion was killed in battle. I asked for his glass inside his
tent, in his knapsack;
I searched every place. I didn't find it. Still, I remember
those words of his.

I think you're not listening to me; - as if you were in a
hurry. Yes, indeed, all of us are in a hurry
to stop the other, to speak ourselves. And each one of us
listens only to his own words. What do words matter? Only
action
is counted and counts, - as you always emphasized.
Do you think that the water you prepared for me has got
cold? You need not come with me.
I will manage on my own - I feel at home down there; and perhaps it is better so. And, let me tell you, I am also somewhat ashamed before you.

So many years have gone by - we ceased to remember; we forgot. As if our body (not only the soul) has lost its old certainty: flexible and upright in its very enjoyment to exist and be looked at.

Now it can only see (distrustful and aged itself) with a different vision the trustful and youthful beauty of the world, which does not belong to it any longer.

This vision, nobody excuses it. And truly, so independent, so deep and self-sufficient and endless, I think that it hinders even us and the others - unprofitable. This shudder - not of glass now, here in my spine, - a different one. A little while ago, everything was made of glass - faces, bodies, objects, landscapes, you, I, our children - made of glass, unveiled, bright - out of hard, transparent glass. I observed through them interestingly, almost with exultation - like in an aquarium the movement
or even big, ugly, sullen and bloodthirsty fish - strange always.

And, all of a sudden, it is as if the glass has grown soft - it doesn't take any shape, it doesn't have any transparence, as if it never had any shape and transparence; - it collapsed along with all that it contained - a blurred mass, as a dirty sack in which they gathered dirty underwear hastily, in order to wash them one day, but they don't do it; - they have grown bored; they forgot them there (they want to forget them), thrown away on the floor, near the door; - they run into the sack, they kick it as they go out, and especially as they enter the house. And truly, they forget the underwear, but why should they remember them? - they are already rotten, drenched by their own smell from very old sweat, urine, and blood. To the bathroom. To the bathroom.

The water will become cold, it will have become cold. I go. You stay; - you are not necessary. Are you insisting? - Come.
The man stood up. He goes forward - clearly making for the bathroom. The woman follows him silently. They have left. The room, empty now, seems larger. The breakfast on the table is untouched. The glasses have somewhat blurred. The helmet stands always there, in front of the mirror. A grave silence prevails both inside and outside the house. An ant strolls again on the white tablecloth. Following the ant, you can notice at the center of the table a circular embroidery - a wreath of red flowers. Suddenly, the voice of the foreign woman is heard outside, from the marble staircase, in clear Greek: "Citizens of Argos, citizens of Argos, the big goldfish is caught in the black net, and the sword is raised. Citizens of Argos, the sword is raised, two-bladed, citizens of Argos, citizens." Loud drums, bugles, noise, suppress their voices. A handsome, bareheaded man with a suit of armor, with a big, bloodied sword in his hand, enters the empty room. With his left hand he takes the helmet from the console table. He puts it on backwards. The horse-tail on his face. Like a mask. He goes out. The voice of the frenzied woman: "Citizens of Argos, it is now late, late, citizens of Argos." She stops. The drums become louder. The first woman enters the room. Pale, tall, very beautiful. She climbs up onto a chair. She hangs a lifebuoy by the nail on the wall. It reads "Lachesis." She then goes up to the mirror to fix her hair.

ATHENS, SIKYON, HERAION, SAMOS, December 1966 - October 1970
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