

# YANNIS RITSOS' NAUSEATED AGAMEMNON AND JEAN-PAUL SARTRE\*

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The paper embarks upon an analysis of Ritsos' "Agamemnon" in the *Fourth Dimension* from the viewpoint of existentialism – more particularly Sartrian existentialism. Even though Ritsos must have read and been influenced by other existentialist philosophers (e.g. Camus), the present study is limited to Sartre chiefly because of the prominent role that the Sartrian notion of "nausea" seems to play in the "Agamemnon".

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The myths surrounding the doomed House of Atreus fascinated Yannis Ritsos (Veloudis 1984: 55), and it is not coincidental that in six of the seventeen monologues included in his *Fourth Dimension* (*FD*) the speaker is understood to be a member of that family: Electra ("Under the Shadow of the Mountain", "The Dead House"), Iphigenia ("The Return of Iphigenia"), Orestes ("Orestes"), Chrysothemis ("Chrysothemis"), and Agamemnon ("Agamemnon").<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on "Agamemnon", a monologue which Ritsos chooses to place first – as a kind of preface (Sangiglio 1978: 61–62) – in the cluster of poems that revolve around the Atreid myth, even though it was written after "The Dead House" (1959), "Under the Shadow of the Mountain" (1960), and "Orestes" (1962–66).<sup>2</sup>

"Agamemnon" is dated December 1966–October 1970 and was written in Athens, Sicyon, and Samos. On 21 April 1967 Ritsos, a lifelong communist, was arrested by the right-wing Greek military junta and was displaced to island concentration camps, first on Gyaros and then on Leros. Due to a

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1. On the *FD* see, among others Sangiglio (1978: 30–72); Bien (1980); Kassos (1988); Jeffreys (1994); Colakis (1984); Champers (1992); Prokopakē (1981); Meraklēs (1981); Green (1996); Chasapē-Christodoulou (2002: 898–936); Alexiou (2008); Markopoulos (2009); Marōnitēs (2013).

2. On the arrangement of the poems of the *FD* see Jeffreys (1994) and Kasos (1988: 61–62).

chronic tubercular condition he was transferred to the island of Samos, where he was kept under house arrest in his wife's house until 1970 (Köttē 2009:145–168). From a letter sent by Phalitsa, his wife, informing him during his exile on Leros about the "good health" of their canary Agamemnon – evidently a veiled reference to the monologue of the same title – it can be deduced that Ritsos did not have access to the draft of his "Agamemnon" during his incarceration on the prison islands (Köttē 2009: 148). The monologue was completed during Ritsos' detention in Samos, even though he seems to have introduced further modifications at a later stage as well.<sup>3</sup>

### RITSOS, AESCHYLUS, AND EXISTENTIALISM

A cursory glance at Ritsos' "Agamemnon" suffices to reveal its debts to, and intertextual links with, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, although the hero's imaginative reconstructions of life in the camp outside Troy are transparent reflections of Homer. The story-line remains more or less the same; after a ten-year absence Agamemnon returns to Argos victorious, bringing with him the prophetess Cassandra, daughter of Priam. He enters the palace in glory, treading on a red carpet, only to be slain by Clytemnestra, his wife, and Aegisthus, her lover. Yet, whereas Agamemnon's return in Aeschylus is prepared by the Watchman's speech, Clytemnestra's dream and beacon speech, as well as by the Herald's report,<sup>4</sup> Ritsos omits these preliminary events and picks up the Aeschylean text at the crucial and emotionally charged moment when the hero vanishes from public view and enters the palace halls with his wife (Skiadas 1981: 617).

Even though our evidence regarding Ritsos' method of work and the means he had at his disposal during the detention period is scarce, the monologue's thematic and, especially, verbal affinities with the Aeschylean *Agamemnon* clearly suggest that Ritsos was a very close and knowledgeable reader of the ancient Greek text.<sup>5</sup> In spite of its obvious mythical influences, though, Ritsos' "Agamemnon" is also loaded with existential overtones, a feature that characterises many of the mythological poems of the *FD*. Ritsos' mythic characters typically adopt a profoundly existential stance, insofar as they question, reflect, and muse upon existence – life and death – and are led to what could be seen as an "existential

3. See below p. 47.

4. On Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* see, among others, Fraenkel (1950); Garvie (2010).

5. On Ritsos' relationship with ancient Greek literature and language see Zervou (2010: 18–26).

crisis". Whereas their finale is always the one prescribed by the ancient myth – Ajax and Phaedra commit suicide, Orestes commits matricide, Philoctetes follows Neoptolemus to Troy – the rationale underpinning this finale is entirely transformed.<sup>6</sup> Ritsos' heroes are never mere playthings at the mercy of gods, fate, and contingency. Rather, they take full responsibility both for their past actions and for the decisions they make for the future in full awareness of their consequences. Even when they decide to put an end to their lives, they do so as a result of conscious deliberation, not because they feel trapped by contingency or by extraneous factors.

While a number of researchers have acknowledged the existential orientation of the *FD*, they usually associate this feature with the dark years of dictatorship (1967–74) and the pessimism and bitterness that overwhelmed Ritsos during this period. To quote Prokopakē:

In the long poems which were written or completed during the dictatorship [...] action is of less importance, the heroes live or speak after action, in old age and retirement, usually at the moment of their impending death. Even if in their external architecture these poems resemble their predecessors, even so it would be possible to place them at another stage, from the point of view of their internal dynamics and world-view. A review of life and activity, a self-obsession, a confrontation with death. They are poems of memory.... but with an obvious repositioning of the centre of gravity to an existential level.<sup>7</sup>

Although I do not wish to deny that the *FD* monologues ingeniously integrate Ritsos' personal experiences, memories, and sufferings into contemporary history and the mercurial character of modern Greek politics in general,<sup>8</sup> I would also suggest that the unmistakable existential tenor of the pieces could be examined from another perspective as well – as Ritsos' conscious intellectual dialogue with the European movement of existentialism.

This issue has been recently extensively dealt with by Liapēs in an article on Ritsos' "Orestes".<sup>9</sup> Liapēs attempts to read "Orestes" in relation to

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6. See Prokopakē (1989: 28–29).

7. Prokopakē (1981: 323) translated by Jeffreys (1994: 86, n. 50). See also Prevelakis (1981: 428).

8. Most researchers argue that the *FD* is first and foremost biographical, and that Ritsos uses the mask of myth in order to voice and express his very own experiences and plights; see, e.g., Myrsiades (1978); Prokopakē (1981); Geōrgousopoulos (2009).

9. Liapēs (2014). The issue has been fleetingly touched upon by Sokoljuk (1976: 15-16) and Calotychos (1994) 190; see also Pavlou (2013) on Ritsos' "Ajax". It should be noted that Ritsos' relationship with existentialism has been the subject-matter of a series of MA theses

Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies* (1943),<sup>10</sup> a play which dramatises the responsibility of individuals to avoid "bad faith" (a key Sartrian tenet)<sup>11</sup> and create values through their free and authentic commitment to a life project. The thematic and verbal convergences that he traces between the two plays, especially with regards to the notions of duty and freedom, demonstrate Ritsos' indebtedness to Sartre's play. Liapēs' observations are noteworthy and significant not only for Ritsos' "Orestes" *per se*, but for the *FD* as a whole, in so far as they pave the way for a more systematic approach to the poems of the collection through the prism of existentialism – more particularly French existentialism.

To be sure, Ritsos makes no explicit references to existentialist philosophers in his *œuvre*. Yet, it would be legitimate to assume that he was familiar with their work, not only because he was fluent in French and could have had access to their output before its belated translation into Modern Greek,<sup>12</sup> but also because many plays, especially by Sartre, were staged in Athens during the 1950s and 60s.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, reviews of these performances, as well as a plethora of other relevant articles, were published in the newspapers and literary journals of the time (Petraou 2006). Interestingly, in most cases existentialists were repudiated because of the allegedly repellent, wrong-headed, and offensive subject-matter of their work, even though, as Petraou points out, this negative, defensive and sometimes scathing stance on the part of Greek critics often seems to derive from their misunderstanding and misconception of various existentialist tenets.<sup>14</sup> Even if we suppose that Ritsos was not familiar with Sartre's purely philosophical work, such as his *Being and Nothingness* (*L'être et le*

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submitted to the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of Patras; see, e.g. Christopoulou (2010) and Biliari (2010). See also the MA theses by Demelis (1986) and Chatzidēmētriu (2011).

10. Liapēs also traces affinities with the work of other existential philosophers, such as Camus and Kierkegaard.

11. On the term see below p. 30.

12. See on this Petraou (2004: 224 esp. n. 6) and ead. (2006); Liapēs (2014)

13. Petraou (2006) provides a comprehensive catalogue with the performances of Sartre's plays in Greece.

14. The prosecution of the translator and editors of Sartre's collection of short stories entitled *The Wall*, on account of its "inappropriate" content, provides a salient example. In the end, translator and editors were acquitted of the charges; see newsp. *To Brhma*, 5 February 1963.

*néant*),<sup>15</sup> we should not forget that the main concepts and premises of Sartre's philosophy are dramatised in, and integrated into, his plays and fictional work: the tyranny of the Other's look in *No exit (Huis clos)*, the notion of responsibility and freedom in *The Flies (Les mouches)* and *The Condemned of Altona (Les séquestrés d'Altona)*, the nothingness of existence in *Nausea (La nausée)*, etc.<sup>16</sup> Finally, it should be noted that Ritsos would have felt a certain affinity with Sartre, not least because of the latter's political convictions and activism.<sup>17</sup>

In what follows I will embark upon an analysis of Ritsos' "Agamemnon" from the viewpoint of existentialism – more particularly Sartrian existentialism. Even though Ritsos must have read and been influenced by other existentialist philosophers (e.g. Camus), the present study will be limited to Sartre chiefly because of the prominent role that the Sartrian notion of "nausea" seems to play in the "Agamemnon".

### THE OTHER'S LOOK – BAD FAITH

From the opening stage directions that precede the main body of the poem – a hallmark of all *FD* monologues – we are informed that the setting of Agamemnon's monologue is inside the palace, in the dining room.<sup>18</sup> Agamemnon removes his military uniform and helmet – a symbolic act which foreshadows his subsequent portrayal as a "human being" rather than as a high-ranking military officer – "covers his ears with his hands" in an attempt to block the cheering of the crowd outside the palace, and speaks to his wife, a "beautiful, austere, imposing" woman, with a "dis-

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15. Ritsos must have been familiar, however, with Sartre's philosophical lecture, existentialism *is a Humanism (L'existentialisme est un humanisme, 1946)*, perhaps the most accessible of all his philosophical writings.

16. On Sartre's theatrical work see Leavitt (1948: 102–105); Goldman and MacDonald (1970: 102–119).

17. Sartre belonged to a war-bred generation, just like Ritsos. He participated in the French Resistance against the Nazi Occupation and was transferred to a prison-camp, from which he was later released because of ill health. Moreover, Sartre was among the French intellectuals who in 1957 sent a telegram to the Greek Government protesting against the prosecution of Ritsos and other Greek intellectuals because of their contribution to the special issue published by the journal *Επιθεώρηση Τέχνης* for the 40 years from the Russian Revolution; see Kaklamanakē (1999: 55).

18. Contrast Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where the dialogue between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra takes place outside the palace.

tant, tired smile", even though it is uncertain whether she pays attention to what he says.<sup>19</sup>

*You order them to be quiet, I beg you. Why are they still shouting?  
For whom are they applauding? What are they cheering for? Their  
executioners, maybe? their corpses?  
or perhaps to reassure themselves that they have hands and can clap  
them,  
that they have voices and can shout and can hear themselves shouting?*

*Make them be quiet. Look, there's an ant going down the wall –  
how surely and simply it walks on that vertical plane,  
no arrogant sense that it may be accomplishing a great feat – perhaps  
because it's alone,  
perhaps because it's insignificant, weightless, almost non-existent – I  
envy it.*

*Let it be, don't brush it away – it's climbing the table, it's picked up a  
crumb;  
its burden is bigger than it is – just look – that's how things always are,  
the burdens we all bear are always bigger than we are. (Ritsos 1993: 49–50).*

In his opening gambit Ritsos chooses to signal his divergence from his tragic model and allow a glimpse into the unheroic tone that permeates the poem as a whole (Skiadas 1981: 619). In contrast to Aeschylus' Agamemnon, who arrogantly boasts of his military victory (810–828) and even dares to claim the gods of Argos as his associates in the sack of Troy (μεταίτιους 811),<sup>20</sup> in Ritsos' rendition Agamemnon falls short of his tragic and epic image and is rather portrayed as an exhausted and battle-weary man. He censures his people's hurrah for a victory that is in essence Pyrrhic, and even calls himself "an executioner" – in sharp contrast to the crowd's reception of him as a triumphant hero – thus equating the Trojan War to a hideous massacre, an association that recurs several times in the monologue.<sup>21</sup> This utterly unheroic stance is poignantly expressed in Ag-

19. Ritsos (1993: 49). All translations are from Green and Bardsley's 1993 translation. References to the translation are made by page.

20. See also Homer, where Agamemnon is presented returning home with rejoicing (χαίρων, *Od.* 4. 521–523).

21. The hollowness of the victory and its devastating cost come to the fore more forcefully later on, where Agamemnon reflects in distaste upon his recent triumph and debunks the glorious nature of war: "So now here I am, who brought you none of that joy – the renown as they say, the glory / that, alas, might even perhaps redeem, / with clanging and

amemnon's wish to be "insignificant, weightless, almost non-existent", like the tiny ant that he observes going down the wall. This prosaic ant vignette, which Ritsos purposely places at the opening of the monologue, and which constitutes an ironic twist of Agamemnon's references to fierce animals in Aeschylus,<sup>22</sup> ingeniously introduces one of the major existentialist themes that permeate "Agamemnon"; the Other's look and the burden that it may impose upon one's shoulders – a burden that is "always bigger" than one can bear.<sup>23</sup>

Sartre expounds on the ramifications of the Other's look in his philosophical work *Being and Nothingness*, even though many of his plays also grapple with this issue.<sup>24</sup> In his view, the Other is essential to my existence because it is only through the Other's look that I acquire awareness of myself. When I am unreflectively performing an act, I am pure action. I do not exist as an "I", but rather as a consciousness that simply "is". The thought that I may be observed by someone else has a twofold impact upon me: on the one hand, it reveals to me the subjectivity of Others – namely that Others are not just "things" to be looked upon, but also subjects that can look at me; on the other hand, it objectifies me by turning me from a being "for-itself" (*pour-soi*) into a being "in-itself" (*en-soi*),<sup>25</sup> that is to something that can be looked upon.<sup>26</sup> This objectification is a fundamentally alienating experience in the sense that it forces me to adopt a third-person perspective towards myself and, accordingly, to experience

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counterfeit coin, our silence for ten real years, / thousands of murders, covert and overt, thousands of errors and graves. / Such heroics are far from me" (55); cf. Ritsos (1993: 93). In Aeschylus, the absurdity of war is stressed by the Chorus, see, e.g., *Ag.* 429–455.

22. In his speech Agamemnon compares his soldiers to an "Argive beast" (Ἀργεῖον δάκος, 824) and to a ravening lion (ὠμηστῆς λέων, 827).

23. A similar remark is made by Ajax; see Ritsos (1993: 217–218).

24. The Other's Look constitutes the major theme of Sartre's play *No Exit*, from which also comes the much-cited phrase "Hell is other people".

25. According to Sartre (1978: 56), humanity is characterised by two aspects: "facticity" and "transcendence"; see also Reynolds (2006: 87). "Facticity" stands for the givens of our situation, such as our race, nationality, our talents and limitations; Sartre (1978: 82–83, 629). "Transcendence" is our freedom to negate our "facticity"; Sartre (1978: 34); see also Reynolds (2006: 3).

26. Sartre distinguishes three ontological categories: the *être-en-soi* (being-in-itself), the *être-pour-soi* (being-for-itself) and the *être-pour-autrui* (being-for-others). The *en-soi* is non-conscious being; it is solid, self-identical and, according to Sartre (1978: lxxv), "is what it is". The *pour-soi* has consciousness; it is fluid, dynamic and a being which "is not what it is and which is what it is not" (Sartre 1978: 79). It is also the "nihilation" of the *en soi*, since the consciousness negates or "nihilates" the being-in-itself in its attempt to create meaning and value; see Webber (2009: 108–109). For the definitions see also Sartre (1978: 629).

myself as having a nature and a character, what Sartre calls “facticity” (Sartre 2007a: 41). To the alienating effect of my objectification I can respond in two different ways: a) I can transcend my “facticity” and become again *pour-soi*; in other words, I can renounce what others think about me and remain free to envision new possibilities to become what I want; b) I can define myself through what others believe about me. By identifying myself with the Other’s look and by viewing myself as fixed and settled, however, I avoid experiencing my subjectivity. As a result, I feel obliged to perform the roles foisted upon me by others, and to uphold values I do not cherish, thus operating in what Sartre defines as “bad faith”.<sup>27</sup>

Upon his arrival at Argos Agamemnon becomes the centre of everyone’s attention. His people, his wife, his children all turn their gaze – whether literal or not – towards him.<sup>28</sup> The objectification that Agamemnon experiences leads to introspection and serves as a catalyst for his own gaze, in so far as it utterly and drastically impacts on the way in which he perceives himself and the world around him. This new gaze, however, is also painfully revealing because it makes Agamemnon realise that in order to “build a place in the consciousness of others”, he has abolished his own consciousness and happiness:

How we’ve let our hours slip by and vanish, struggling foolishly to assure ourselves a place in the consciousness of others. Not one second of our own, in all those long summers, to watch a bird’s shadow above the wheat – a tiny trireme on a golden sea – we could have been sailing in it for silent trophies, for more glorious conquests. We did not sail. (Ritsos (1993: 53)<sup>29</sup>

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27. “Bad faith” is a kind of self-deception (“a lie”) and refers to our denial or failure to coordinate our freedom with our “facticity”. Humans who live in “bad faith” do not lead an “authentic” life; see Sartre (1978: 47–70) and (2007: 47–48).

28. Even though Agamemnon notes that one of his daughters was touching him, as if she were blind, the objectification he feels is the same as, according to Sartre (1978: 277), “it is never eyes which look at us. It is the Other-as-subject”; see also Grene (1971-72: 34). On the prominence of the Other’s look in Ritsos’ “Agamemnon” see also Liapēs (2008: 368–374).

29. Agamemnon’s confession is imbued with bitterness, as well as irony, especially his assertion “we did not sail”, in so far as his happiness was damned exactly because he sailed for an absurd war, having sacrificed his very own daughter. Interestingly, a few lines later Iphigenia’s “cut nails” are compared to “white ships, distant, diminished” (53). This comparison serves as a double entendre: on the one hand, it brings to mind the Greek fleet that sailed to Troy; on the other, it alludes to the ships by which Agamemnon could have sailed for more worthwhile and “glorious trophies”.

### ALIENATION – TRANSCENDENCE

Agamemnon spent all his life striving to play the roles imposed upon him by others and to perform his prescribed duties in order to preserve and nurture his public image – especially that of the devoted king and powerful general. Now, however, he chooses to alter his public persona and negate his “facticity” in an attempt to reassume his freedom, a phenomenon which Sartre calls “transcendence”.<sup>30</sup> So, unlike his Aeschylean counterpart who seeks to hold the assembly again, by way of confirming his authority as king of Argos (844–846), Ritsos’ Agamemnon greets the cheering crowd “with a gesture almost of nervous impatience” (Ritsos 1993: 49) and repeatedly beseeches Clytemnestra to make them keep silent. He even renounces his sceptre, which he considers “unbearable”. What is more, Agamemnon disclaims his role as a husband and decides to abstain from sexual intercourse with his wife, stressing that he prefers to remember her body “vibrant” and young (Ritsos 1993: 51). He adopts a similar – if not even more detached – stance towards his daughters, Electra and Chrysothemis:

Our daughters  
seemed confused to me – did you notice? – one of them  
touched my chin through my beard like a blind girl. You did well  
to send them to their rooms – I couldn’t look at them. (Ritsos 1993:50)

Of particular interest is Agamemnon’s stance towards the “woman howling on the stairs” (Ritsos 1993:50) – an implicit reference to Cassandra, whose voice we hear fleetingly in the closing stage directions. Whereas in Aeschylus Agamemnon hails Cassandra as the “choice flower” of the booty they brought from Troy and orders Clytemnestra to welcome her with kindness (951–952), here he rejects her outright as his mistress and asks his wife to accommodate her, along with the rest of the booty, as she wishes:

Keep all the booty, or share it – there’s nothing I want.  
And that woman howling on the stairs, take her as your slave  
or as a nurse for our son (where is he, in fact? – I didn’t  
see him) – not for my bed, no,  
a totally empty bed is what I need now, in which to sink, to be lost, just  
to be,  
to have my sleep, at least, unobserved, not to care  
if my face is as severe as it should be or if the muscles

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<sup>30</sup> See n. 25 above.

in my belly and my arms have gone slack. (Ritsos 1993:50)<sup>31</sup>

The only thing that Agamemnon wishes for, immersed as he is in his stifling loneliness, is an empty bed where he can just be alone and unobserved by others.<sup>32</sup> This wish is expressed even more forcefully a few lines later, when he notifies Clytemnestra of his decision to move to the country property and be a recluse (Ritsos 1993: 56). What should be stressed at this point is that Agamemnon feels alienated not only from the world around him, but also from himself. His self-estrangement is eloquently expressed in the following passage, where the exhausted general experiences a kind of disembodiment and is imagined as observing his very own body from a distance:

At times it seems to me I am a calm corpse that watches  
my own self existing; it follows with its vacant eyes  
my movements, my gestures... (Ritsos 1993: 53)

### ANGUISH

The shift in Agamemnon's *Weltanschauung* and his decision to transcend his "facticity" do not emerge spontaneously or *in vacuo*; on the contrary, they have been carefully prepared. The fierce storm that befalls Agamemnon's ship during the homeward journey seems to constitute such a crucial turning point:

On the voyage home, in the Aegean, one night in a great storm  
the helm broke. Then I felt a terrified sense of freedom  
right at the heart of this lack of direction. I peered  
with unbelievably clear vision through the darkness; saw  
a life ring tossing on the waves. I was able, indeed,  
in the dim torchlight, to make out on it the word "Lachesis".

And this life ring, that name, and the fact that I saw them,  
gave me a curious strength and calm; and I told myself:  
"Only let this life ring be saved, and nothing is lost." (Ritsos 1993:58)

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31. Ritsos' Agamemnon specifically asks about Orestes, albeit fleetingly. Even though his question remains unanswered, this very omission points to the explanation provided by Clytemnestra in Aesch. *Ag.* 877–882, where she informs Agamemnon that Orestes was sent to Strophius, king of Phoecea, for protection.

32. Agamemnon's musings are reminiscent of Roquentin's confessions in *Nausea*: "I have no troubles, I have money like a capitalist, no boss, no wife, no children; I exist, that's all" (Sartre, 2007b: 87). On Roquentin see the discussion below.

This detailed and emotionally charged vignette clearly alludes – both thematically and verbally – to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (653–656) where the Herald recounts to the Chorus a similar plight that afflicted the Greek fleet. Notwithstanding the similarities shared by the two descriptions,, Ritsos diverges from his tragic model on a few points, thus utterly transforming its meaning and significance. In Aeschylus *Agamemnon*'s ship miraculously remains unscathed from the storm, in contrast to the other ships of the fleet, which are wrecked. The Herald ascribes this to the intercession of a divinity, declaring that their ship must have been steered by a god, whom he identifies with Fortune (Τύχη).<sup>33</sup> In Ritsos' rendition the helm of *Agamemnon*'s ship breaks and the ship is left out of control. This engenders in *Agamemnon* a "terrified sense of freedom", endowing him at the same time with an "unbelievably clear vision" that enables him to see clearly through darkness.

How are we supposed to comprehend *Agamemnon*'s "terrified freedom", and in what ways is this paradoxical feeling related to the sharpening of his vision? The context within which the oxymoron occurs encourages us to associate it with the Sartrean notion of "anguish". According to Sartre, this is the feeling that one experiences when entangled in a limit-situation and forced to make a decision.<sup>34</sup> The sheer fact that we are "condemned" to be free, Sartre (2007a: 29) argues, evokes in us a feeling of anguish, which emanates from the awareness that we have to make a choice without receiving any support or guidance from a transcendental agent. This freedom is inherently frightening, and it is easier – and undoubtedly more tempting – to run from it into the safety of pre-established roles and values, instead of facing it with determination and perseverance. Although *Agamemnon* finds himself in the midst of a situation that is, necessarily, constraining, he is free to choose among a number of alternatives: to give up, fight to survive, or commit suicide. It is this phenomenological apprehension of absolute freedom that terrifies *Agamem-*

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33. "We ourselves, on the other hand, and our ship, its hull unscathed, were either smuggled out or begged off by some god, no man, who took hold of the helm; Fortune in good will took her seat on our ship to save us, so that we didn't have to choose between being swamped by the waves at anchor and being wrecked on the rock-bound shore". (Aesch. *Ag.* 661–666). All quotations from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* are taken from Sommerstein's 2008 Loeb edition.

34. Sartre (1978: 32): "Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of not-being". See also Sartre (1978: 17–35); Reynolds (2006: 70).

non and sharpens his “vision” which, in this instance, should rather be taken metaphorically to indicate the “vision” of consciousness.

But whereas the breaking of the helm reveals to Agamemnon his complete freedom to act, his decisive transformation is yet to occur; eventually, the hero refrains from making an active decision and rather prefers to flee from his “anguish” by ascribing his salvation to his fate, here symbolised by the lifebelt bearing the name “Lachesis” that he sees floating on the sea. Ritsos’ choice of name for the lifebelt is deliberate: in Greek mythology “Lachesis” was one of the three Fates, responsible for one’s destiny.<sup>35</sup> Even though the next day, when the hurricane ceases, Agamemnon fishes the life buoy out and keeps it securely in his bag, in hindsight he deems it worthless and treats it with disdain, prompting Clytemnestra either to use it as an ornament or simply to get rid of it:

The next day, the Aegean grew calm; I saw the life ring floating amid the wrecked ships and splintered wood. I fished it out.  
I have it still in my duffle like a secret life preserver. If you want to, you can hang it as a memento in one of the rooms or throw it away – I no longer have need of it. “Lachesis”, it says. (Ritsos 1993: 58).

Agamemnon’s indifference towards the lifebelt signals a shift in his world-view. The “terrified freedom” that he experiences during the storm makes him realise – albeit in retrospect – that his life is not fettered by a prescribed destiny that needs to be fulfilled; that *he* is his destiny. This is, in fact, one of the core tenets of Sartrean existentialism – that existence precedes essence and that humans are entirely responsible for their own lives; we are what we make ourselves to be through our existence and choices, and not what we are destined to be (Sartre 2007a: 37). The non-existence of such a thing as “destiny” is masterfully put into relief in the closing stage directions where, after Agamemnon’s murder, Clytemnestra appears on stage and hangs her husband’s lifebelt on the wall as a souvenir (Ritsos 1993: 61).

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35. See Hes. *Theog.* 905. See also the relevant entry in Jean Richepin’s *Nouvelle mythologie illustrée*, on which Ritsos seems to have drawn extensively. Through a close examination of three poems from Ritsos’ poetry collection *Confessions* (Athens 1966) Tsitsiridis (2006: 20–33) has convincingly shown that Ritsos must have been consulting the Greek version of Richepin’s work published in Athens in 1954 (*Ελληνική Μυθολογία*, transl. N. Tetenes, Athens 1954).

### NOTHINGNESS – DEATH

The second radical turnaround in Agamemnon's outlook seems to occur after his return to Argos, upon his entrance to the palace halls:

How strange your eyes look; and your voice was strange, when you said:  
 "Slave-women, why are you standing around like that? Have you forgotten my order?  
 I told you to lay the carpets from carriage to house so the pathway would be all crimson for my lord's passage." Inside your voice was a deep river, and it was as if I were floating upon it. When I walked on those purple carpets my knees grew weak. I looked behind me and saw the dusty prints of my sandals on the bright crimson like those fishermen's corks that float above hidden, submerged nets. Before me I saw the slave-girls unrolling still more crimson carpets, as if they were pushing the crimson wheels of fate. A shiver ran up my spine. (Ritsos 1993: 52).

The scene, one of the most imposing and elaborate in the monologue, clearly echoes the famous "carpet scene"<sup>36</sup> in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, while Clytemnestra's order to her slave-women is a verbatim allusion to lines 908–911 of that play.<sup>37</sup> Yet, whereas in Aeschylus Agamemnon's treading on the red and fine fabrics is associated with *hubris* because it manifests potlatch behaviour and immeasurable arrogance, in Ritsos no such connotations are in evidence. Moreover, in contrast to the tragic hero, who explicitly asks to have his shoes removed before stepping on the red garments, Ritsos' Agamemnon walks on it wearing his sandals.<sup>38</sup>

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36. See Aesch. *Ag.* 783–974; cf. Crane (1993); McNeil (2005). Ritsos uses the noun "χαλιά" (=carpets) in order to indicate the material on which Agamemnon treads, thus continuing a widely-spread misconception of the reception of the ancient Greek text. Aeschylus' Agamemnon steps on expensive and fine fabrics, which are not supposed to be walked on, and not on a carpet, which is intended for this very purpose. Nevertheless, the term εἴμασι (Aesch. *Ag.* 921) has often been rendered as "carpet" and the whole scene came to be known as the "carpet scene".

37. "Servants, why are you waiting, when you have been assigned the duty of spreading fine fabrics over the ground in his path? Let his way forthwith be spread with crimson" (Aesch. *Ag.* 908–911).

38. Aesch. *Ag.* 944–945. In Ritsos, Clytemnestra takes Agamemnon's sandals off, after they have entered the palace, a detail provided in the opening scene directions; on this see Skiadas (1981: 618).

Ritsos' "carpet scene" is significant, for it serves to throw into relief another major theme of the poem, namely the inevitability of death. While entering the palace Agamemnon comes face to face with his own mortality (symbolised by the red carpets unrolled by the servants) and perceives himself as a being-towards-death. Even though death was everywhere in the battlefield, back then it seemed "easy" because everyone was caught in the whirlwind of war (Ritsos 1993: 56). The "carpet scene" rather forces Agamemnon to face death head-on from a metaphysical point of view and perceive it as the supreme and normative possibility of human existence. It is through this lens, I would suggest, that we should comprehend the bloodcurdling "shiver" that he feels running up his spine. The nothingness of human existence also finds a profound expression in Ritsos' comparison of the "dusty tracks" left on the carpet from Agamemnon's sandals to the fishermen's corks that float over a sunken net. In addition to evoking the net imagery and its deadly connotations in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*,<sup>39</sup> this association also echoes *Choephoroi* 504–507, where one's children are compared to the corks that float over a sunken net, the point of comparison being that a father can transcend death through his offspring.<sup>40</sup> Ritsos' twist of the tragic simile is noticeable because, by playing down the idea of metaphorical deliverance from death present in the Aeschylean comparison, it throws into relief the notion of nothingness. At the same time, the metaphor also allows us to infer that, even though death is fated, humans can also choose the moment of their death; if the corks that prevent the death-like net<sup>41</sup> from sinking are Agamemnon's own tracks, the implication is that Agamemnon can exert a certain control upon his own death.

The interpretation proposed here is enhanced if we read the scene in conjunction with the Homeric digression that precedes it and which serves to elucidate the overpowering "tiredness" that ensnares Agamemnon upon his arrival at Argos (Ritsos 1993: 51–52). It was neither anger nor antagonism,<sup>42</sup> Agamemnon claims, that forced Achilles to withdraw his con-

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39. See Aesch. *Ag.* 1114–1115, 1380–1383, 1611. See also 355–360, where the net is associated with the capture of Troy. On the net-imagery in the *Agamemnon* see Ferrari (1997: 1–45).

40. Aesch. *Cho.* 505–507: "For to a dead man his children are the fame that preserves him; like corks they bear the net up, keeping safe the spun flax that stretches up from the depths"; see also Liapēs (2008: 370).

41. Cf. Cassandra's vision in Aesch. *Ag.* 1115: "Is this a net of death?" (ἢ δίκτυον τί γ' Ἄιδου).

42. Contrast Homer's *Iliad*, where the rage (μῆνις) of Achilles constitutes the poem's main theme.

tingent from the war, but rather a feeling akin to his own fatigue, a feeling that equates "victory with defeat, life with death" (Ritsos 1993: 51): the confrontation with his mortality. When Achilles retires from the war, he knows, by means of his mother, that he is destined to live either a short but glorious life or a long life in obscurity (Hom. *Il.* 9.410–416). Ritsos implies that Achilles retires from the battlefield exactly because he feels overwhelmed by the foreknowledge of his own death.<sup>43</sup> It is this foreknowledge that seems to be symbolised by the black dog that becomes attached to Achilles "one fall night with a full moon" and remains devoted to him until the very day when the hero consciously chooses to face death by re-entering the battle in order to take revenge for the death of Patroclus,<sup>44</sup> although knowing that this would make his own death imminent.<sup>45</sup> The extensive and skilfully wrought reference to the death-like dog merits particular attention, in so far as its mourning for Achilles' death, as well as its "fasting" and hunger, all allude to Achilles' mourning over the loss of his beloved friend.<sup>46</sup> I would suggest that, by transferring Achilles' grief for Patroclus to the dog's grief for Achilles, Ritsos manages to depict death as a kind of devoted companion, always following us and "anticipating with the same delight a caress or a kick" (Ritsos 1993: 51). Death's inevitability is manifested in the dog's eternal hunger (αιώνια πείνα); whether we accept it or not, death is always among us and always "hungry".<sup>47</sup>

Agamemnon's confrontation with, and acceptance of, his mortality is a liberating experience in as much as, by being jolted into an acceptance of his "finitude", he ceases to embrace death with a sense of morbid anticipation (Reynolds 2006: 50). Moreover, this acceptance has broader implications because it brings Agamemnon face to face with the nothingness of existence, or what Orestes defines as the "vast nothing" in the monologue named after him (Ritsos 1993: 78). This idea is figuratively expressed through the notion of transparency: suddenly all things turn into transpar-

43. This possibility is, in fact, indirectly alluded to by Patroclus in *Iliad* 16. 36–39.

44. As Zanker (1994: 100) remarks, after the loss of Patroclus, "death totally loses relevance to his [Achilles'] decision-making processes".

45. This piece of information is revealed to him by Xanthus, his immortal horse (Hom. *Il.* 19.408–417).

46. See Hom. *Il.* 18.22–27; 19. 4–5; on his denial to eat see 19.199–214, 305–308 and 340–351.

47. This last point echoes Odysseus' advice to Achilles in *Il.* 19.225–227, where he tries to convince him to eat, emphasising that in war death is omnipresent and that it is impossible for humans to "deny their belly" every time that a man is dying.

ent glass,<sup>48</sup> and Agamemnon can now see through them, thus confronting their very essence – their nonbeing:

Little by little everything was stripped, became calm, glassy,  
 walls, doors, your hair, your hands –  
 exquisitely transparent glass – not a breath of mortality clouds it –  
     behind the glass  
 you can distinguish nothingness, indivisible – something ultimately  
     whole –  
 that first complete wholeness, unwounded, like nonbeing. (Ritsos 1993: 54)<sup>49</sup>

### NAUSEA

All of Agamemnon's thoughts and musings cited above are enclosed by two references that he makes to a peculiar nauseous feeling that possesses him. The first such reference occurs at the opening of the monologue, immediately after the ant vignette. The smoke and smell of roasting meat for the celebrations held for his homecoming, in conjunction with the estrangement that he feels from everything and everyone, inflicts upon Agamemnon a peculiar, gripping feeling, which he calls "nausea":

And the fires on the altars – this smoke  
 and the smell of roasting meat – nausea – no, not from the storm at all –  
 something acrid in the mouth, a fear  
 in the fingers, the skin – as when, one night, in summer,  
 I started up from sleep, a crawling stickiness over my whole body;  
 I couldn't find the matches; I stumbled, lit the small lantern:  
 on the tent, ground, sheets, shield, helmet,  
 thousands of slugs; I stepped on them barefoot. I went outside. There  
     was a faint moonlight,  
 naked soldiers had started a fight, laughing, fooling  
 with those hideous crawling creatures – and they were hideous  
     themselves, their cocks  
 shook like slugs. I plunged into the sea; the water did not cleanse me;  
 the moon dragged at my left cheek, and it too was sticky,

48. On the notion of transparency see Sangiglio (1978: 119).

49. Agamemnon's new piercing vision is figuratively exemplified further down, through reference to the "third eye", placed in the middle of his forehead (56–57). A similar image occurs in "The Dead House" (Ritsos, 1993: 93): "And the messenger was announcing the brilliant victory / at the cost of two thousand dead – not even counting the wounded – / with loads of booty and banners and carriages and slaves / and a wound – he said – in the middle of his forehead / like a new and wonderful eye from which death kept watch, / and now the master could see right through to the inner guts / of landscapes, objects, people, as though / they were all made of transparent glass."

yellow, yellow, viscous. And now – all this cheering. (Ritsos 1993: 50)

Agamemnon ventures to disassociate this feeling from the storm that befell their ship during their homeward journey and rather describes it as an “acrid” taste in his mouth and a kind of “fear” that penetrates his fingers and skin. This overpowering feeling reminds Agamemnon of a past experience in the camp – in essence another bout of nausea – when he woke up one night only to find himself among thousands of slugs. Even though he plunged into the sea in order to cleanse himself of the slugs’ slime, his efforts were vain, in so far as the water was also sticky, yellow and viscous. The whole world was, in a way, nauseous, and he could hardly escape from it.

In a desperate attempt to find respite from the bout of nausea that attacks him again in Argos, Agamemnon initially clings to two things from his past – the only things from his past that he does not renounce outright: a) the ashtray, where at night he used to leave his cigar to smoke itself, “like a distant chimney in a tiny Ithaca”, or like his “private personal star”,<sup>50</sup> an object that seems to symbolise Agamemnon’s vicarious travels and dreams; b) his wife’s young body, which he prefers to remember “outside time / like a marvellous statue” (Ritsos 1993: 51). Nevertheless, as the monologue progresses, Agamemnon realises that his “refuge” in the past is actually vain and illusory – an escape from reality. His closing remarks *vis-à-vis* action – namely that it is the only thing that counts<sup>51</sup> – and the repulsive decay of the human body<sup>52</sup> cancel out, tacitly but decisively, the potential of both the ashtray and the memory of Clytemnestra’s young body to afford him the sense of order and stability he is craving; the for-

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50. Ritsos (1993: 51): “Only that ashtray with the carved base (if it is still around) / where sometimes, at night, I left my cigar to smoke itself, / like a distant chimney in a tiny Ithaca, or like my / private personal star, while you slept beside me - that I would like”. Thomadakē (1991: 84) argues that the ashtray is imbued with an erotic tinge because it epitomises the “good old days” and Agamemnon’s “erotic passion” for his wife. See also Philokyprou (2004: 67) who argues that the ashtray symbolises that Agamemnon’s dreams had turned to ashes. Of course, the reference to the smoke of the cigar along with the name of Ithaca are also clear allusions to the *Odyssey*, more specifically to the smoke that Odysseus, trapped in Calypso’s island, longs to see leaping up (*καπνὸν ἀποθρῶσκοντα*) from Ithaca before he dies (1.57–59). Whereas in *Odysseus’* case, though, Ithaca is far away, Ritsos’ Agamemnon used to have ready at hand everything that Homer’s Ithaca stands for: family, homeland, happiness.

51. See below p. 45–46.

52. Ritsos (1993: 59–60). Note that, whereas Agamemnon carefully excludes Clytemnestra from all his previous references to physical decay and old age, here his remarks refer to her as well.

mer because it symbolises dreams that were never actualised, the latter because it is no longer young. Consequently, even though Agamemnon's first bout of nausea abates temporarily, this realisation leads to another one – more severe this time. Agamemnon does not explicitly describe this last experience as “nausea”; this is figuratively implied though through the image of the aquarium that emphatically leads to the “epiphany” he has just before leaving the dining room in order to take the “deadly” bath prepared for him by Clytemnestra:

A little while ago

everything was glass – faces, bodies, objects, places, you, me, our children –  
 glassy, exposed, gleaming – of hard, clear glass. I observed them with interest,  
 almost with exultation – as I could, in an aquarium, the movement of beautiful, small, strange fish  
 or even of large, ugly, vicious, bloodthirsty ones – all strange. And so, suddenly  
 as if the glass had softened – no longer held its shape, was no longer transparent,  
 as if it had never had shape or been transparent – it fell in a heap on the ground  
 with all it contained – a turbid mass, like a grimy sack  
 where they let dirty underclothes pile up to be washed one day,  
 and don't wash them – they're tired of them; they lie there forgotten  
 (they want to forget them), thrown  
 on the floor, near the door – they trip over it, give it a kick on the way out  
 and, more often, on the way in to the house. And they have indeed forgotten them,  
 and what will they do to remember? – the stuff's rotted completely, shut up  
 in its own smell of ancient sweat, urine, and blood. (Ritsos 1993: 60)

Whereas up to this point Agamemnon's realisation of the absurdity of life endows him with a new “vision” that allows him to see through things and discover their very essence – their nothingness – suddenly things start to jell and form a turbid, shapeless, gelatinous mass. As a result, all categories and concepts through which the world is perceived are nullified; things are disengaged from their conventional labels of name and function, and Agamemnon is confronted with bare existence – a naked reality, disgust-

ing and meaningful, dexterously compared to a sack filled with dirty underclothes, redolent of sweat, urine, and blood.

The term “nausea” *per se* and its particular usage in Ritsos’ “Agamemnon”, in conjunction with the notions of excess and stickiness pointedly associated with it in the two passages cited above, cannot but evoke Sartre, more specifically his first novel bearing the provocative title *Nausea* (*La nausée*, 1938). The novel is written in the form of a personal diary and chronicles the daily life of Antoine Roquentin, a newcomer to a small town called Bouville, where he settles in order to finish a book on the biography of M. de Rolleston, an 18th-century adventurer. Estranged by everyone and everything, Roquentin finds no meaning in life and is often affected by a strange “sweetish sickness” which he calls “nausea” (Sartre 2007b: 15). The first such bout of nausea he experiences on the seashore when, in his attempt to throw a pebble in the sea, he is put off disgusted by the pebble’s sliminess:

The stone was flat and dry, especially on one side, damp and muddy on the other. I held it by the edges with my fingers wide apart so as not to get them dirty (Sartre 2007b: 9).

Roquentin’s nausea, however, reaches a climax during one of his walks to the park, where his contemplation of the root of a chestnut tree leads to an epiphany: all of a sudden everything that surrounds him starts to melt and become gelatinous and disgusting:<sup>53</sup>

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the beach, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer has melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder – naked, frightful obscene nakedness. [...] It was there, in the garden, toppled down into the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, a jelly”; “I shouted “filth! what rotten filth!” and shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth but it held fast and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless: I stifled at the depths of this immense weariness (Sartre 2007b: 105 and 109).

This epiphany – highly reminiscent of Agamemnon’s description of his own nausea also associated with the notions of thickness, filth, and dis-

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53. Sartre (2007b: 104–110). On the passage see among others, Harrison (1992: 143–148); Linsenbard (2010: 35–38).

gust – is crucial, for it helps Roquentin to comprehend his intermittent bouts of nausea and find the “key to Existence” (Sartre 2007b: 107).

As can be deduced from Roquentin’s diary entries, “nausea” is not merely a reaction triggered by a stimulus but rather a psychosomatic experience – the feeling of discomfort and unease that emanates from one’s meditation of the contingency of existence. As such, “nausea” is an ontological feeling – a phenomenon of being. We are inside nausea, nausea is not inside us, as Roquentin emphatically points out.<sup>54</sup> Just like Roquentin, during his last attack of nausea Agamemnon finds himself detached from any fixed meaning and realises even more the absurdity of the human condition. Weighed down by this realisation, he consciously chooses death over life.

### DEATH AS A CONSCIOUS CHOICE

In light of the above, Agamemnon’s final decision is not a spontaneous reaction to a critical situation, but constitutes the outcome of an agonising and painful process. His gradual awareness of the absurdity of human existence is reflected in the five references to the bath that he entreats Clytemnestra to prepare for him, and the way in which the bath is envisioned in each particular case. Apart from being an overt intertextual link to Aeschylus,<sup>55</sup> the references to the bath serve to divide the poem into five sections, each of which discloses a further, more advanced stage in Agamemnon’s realisation. In the first instance, which follows Agamemnon’s reference to his nausea, the bath is associated with relaxation and catharsis – that is why Agamemnon specifically asks Clytemnestra to make it “very hot”, associating it with the innocence of his childhood:

Prepare me a hot bath, very hot – have you prepared it already?  
with leaves of mastic and myrtle? I remember their scent,  
pungent, tonic – a release, as if once more you smelled  
your childhood, with trees, rivers, cicadas. (Ritsos 1993: 50)

In the second reference the bath is envisioned as a means by which Agamemnon can assuage the shiver that he feels running up his spine, while treading on the crimson carpet strewn on the ground for him: “A shiver /

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54. “The nausea is not inside me: I feel it over there in the wall, in the suspenders, everywhere around me. It makes itself one with the café. I am the one who is within it” (Sartre 2007: 35).

55. In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* the bath is the place of Agamemnon’s murder: 1107–1111, 1128–1129, 1540–1541.

ran up my spine. That's why I asked you to prepare me / a hot bath" (Ritsos 1993: 52). As the poem progresses, however, the bath loses its cathartic and soothing associations and is invested with ominous connotations, only to be associated in the third reference with Agamemnon's own death:

Before I get into the bath  
I look at the myrtle leaves floating on the water and the swelling clouds  
of steam rising up to the ceiling, thick round the skylight. I can even  
sense the approximate hour of my death (Ritsos 1993: 54).

The last two references, placed near the end of the poem, encase Agamemnon's ultimate bout of nausea in the form of a ring composition. In the first instance Agamemnon persistently asks Clytemnestra if the water she has prepared for him has cooled, only to conclude in the second that it must have cooled:

Tell me, has the water  
you prepared for me cooled? No need for you to come with me;  
I can manage by myself – I got used to it back there; and perhaps it's  
better that way. (Ritsos 1993: 59).

To the bath, to the bath,  
the water will cool, it will have cooled. I'm going. You stay here – it's  
not necessary. You insist? – Come. (Ritsos 1993: 60)

Here, the bath is no longer perceived as a palliative for the "shiver" that Agamemnon feels during the "carpet scene", but rather turns into that very "shiver": it becomes death itself. Disgusted and overwhelmed by his ultimate bout of nausea, Agamemnon consciously yearns for the death-like bath. His exhortation to Clytemnestra not to follow him to the bath attests to his determination to put an end to his life, and constitutes a clear indication that he does not just succumb mechanically to her fatal scheme.<sup>56</sup> At the end Agamemnon concedes to Clytemnestra's insistence to accompany him. The poem, however, ingeniously concludes with his imperative "Come".<sup>57</sup>

Even though Agamemnon's murder takes place "backstage", it is alluded to in the closing stage directions both through Cassandra's scream-

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<sup>56</sup> Agamemnon's "preparedness" echoes the stance adopted by a man called Philemon at a symposium held during the war. Philemon was the only one who did not get drunk during that event. When Antilochus started taunting "his calm and his sobriety" Philemon just smiled uttering with steadfastness a single phrase: "I am ready"; see Ritsos (1993: 56).

<sup>57</sup> Likewise Thomadakē (1991: 81).

ing<sup>58</sup> and through Aegisthus' appearance on stage with a bloodstained sword.<sup>59</sup> Ritsos' Agamemnon is murdered in his bath, just like his tragic counterpart. *His* death, however, is a conscious one. It is no coincidence that in her prophetic cry alluding to Agamemnon's murder Cassandra merely declares that "the golden fish *is* in the black net", and not that it was "caught" or "trapped" within it.<sup>60</sup>

### DEATH AS THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE TO NOTHINGNESS?

In his discussion on the use of myth in "Agamemnon" Jeffreys (1994: 87) argued that, whereas in "Philoctetes" and "Orestes" the mythic method<sup>61</sup> is used "largely to explore existentially the choice between commitment and inaction", during the years of the dictatorship it is deployed in order to provide "a poetic dimension for political failure, grief and imminent death".. The grim tone and bitterness that permeate Ritsos' "Agamemnon" have often been stressed by researchers and even led Prevelakēs to liken the poem to an "elegy of pessimism" (Prevelakēs 1981: 427). We know that, while writing "Agamemnon", Ritsos believed that he was about to die due to his failing health (Köttē 2009: 153–159). Accordingly, it would be legitimate to assume that Agamemnon's musings upon death, the nothingness of life, and the absurdity of war reflect Ritsos' own feelings, his own weariness, and bitter disappointment. Yet, in spite of Agamemnon's ultimate preference for death over life, it would be wrong, I think, to maintain that the monologue advances death as the only possible alternative to the wasteland of human emptiness, or that it is utterly pessimistic.

At the end of his *Nausea* Sartre provides – albeit tentatively – an alternative that may give some respite from the stifling feeling of nausea engendered by Roquentin's grasp of the world. The alternative is art – both its creation and its consumption. When in his favourite café Roquentin finds his nausea quelled by the melody of a jazz recording. The experience incites him to engage with a similar project: to embark upon writing. By

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58. Ritsos (1978: 61): "Citizens of Argos, citizens of Argos, the great golden fish in the black net, and the sword uplifted, two-tongued, citizens of Argos, citizens..."

59. Aegisthus' appearance indicates that Ritsos follows the Homeric version of the myth, according to which Agamemnon was murdered by Aegisthus, not Clytemnestra.

60. Ritsos (1993: 61). Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 1114–1117 and 1126–1129 where Cassandra's prophecy clearly brings to fore the notions of "trap" and "snare".

61. The term was first used by T.S. Eliot in his review of Joyce's *Ulysses* (1923). As he put it, the "mythic method" "is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance, to the immense panorama of utility and anarchy which is contemporary history". On this issue see, e.g., Donoghue (1997).

committing himself to the actualisation of this task, Roquentin hopes both that he can find meaning in life and help others by bringing relief from their nausea. As he realizes, though, if he is to reach this end, he must not limit himself to chronicling historical events (as he did by piecing together the biography of M. de Rollebon): he will need to write something that will exist outside time and will offer an ideal form of existence: a novel.<sup>62</sup>

I would suggest that similar ideas are to be traced in Ritsos' "Agamemnon" as well. The poem contains many references to art, especially at points which are closely related to death and decay: note, for instance, the comparison of Clytemnestra's young body to a "marvellous statue", the sculpted pediment representing Patroclus embracing Xanthus and Balius (Achilles' immortal horses) just before his death,<sup>63</sup> and the white *lekythos* etched with one crimson and one blue bird in commemoration of Antilochus' death (Ritsos 1993: 51, 54, 56). The last example is of particular interest, as the two birds engraved on the vessel are the ones mentioned in Antilochus' invocation to the Sun just before two crows swoop on him, as soon as he finishes his prayer.

While aware that art clearly plays a significant role in Ritsos' "Agamemnon", I would rather turn to the notion of committed action that Sartre's *Nausea* also brings to the fore through Roquentin's decision to commit himself to the writing of a novel. In Ritsos this idea is foregrounded in the symposium scene recalled by Agamemnon before his final bout of nausea:

At a banquet, back there, during a three-day truce in the fighting,  
when everyone was drunk (not so much on wine as on death),  
they were smashing their glasses on the rocks and it seemed to me as if I  
saw the broken glasses,  
whole again, uncracked, gleam in a splendid line to the horizon's edge,  
sparkling in the torchfires; last of all  
the half moon shone out – a silver cup, shimmering calmly  
full of warm milk (Ritsos 1993: 59).

The symposium reached a climax when a twenty-year-old man called Ion

threw off his chiton and, naked as a god, leaped up on the table,  
kicked aside plates and wine jars, poured a pitcher of wine over his curly

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62. Sartre (2007b: 140–143). On the finale of *Nausea* and the significance of the jazz melody see Carroll (2006: 398–407).

63. Because of Achilles' denial to return to the battlefield, Patroclus entered the war with Achilles' horses; *Iliad* 16.144–151.

head,  
soaked himself, stood there dripping, gleaming. "The unbroken *does* exist," he  
shouted,  
"The unbroken *does* exist!" (Ritsos 1993: 59)

Ion hurled his glass, but it did not break. He hurled it again, several times, but it remained intact. The next day Ion was killed in the battle. Agamemnon searched for the glass in his tent, but could not find it; Ion's words, however, remained indelible in his memory. The scene closes with Agamemnon indicating that the only measure of what a person is capable of is what one actually does ("Only action can be counted and counts"), a remark which he ascribes, though, to Clytemnestra.<sup>64</sup>

Ion here stands for the individual that dedicates his life to a purpose and is prepared to die for it, even though this purpose may at first seem unfeasible, even illogical. He is the individual that has faith in the "unbroken", as Ritsos succinctly puts it. In fact, his faith is so strong, that he can even render possible the impossible. At the end Ion is killed – he "breaks" like a glass, unable to break free from his mortality, the "ineluctable law" (Ritsos 1993: 58) of human nature. His deeds, however, survive, as do all the broken "glasses" which Agamemnon confesses to have envisioned forming part of a continuum of whole glasses.<sup>65</sup> Read in this way the Ion episode seems to add a tinge of hope to the otherwise grim atmosphere of "Agamemnon" and to mitigate – up to a certain degree – its pessimism, in so far as it leaves it to be inferred that no action is ever lost.

Before bringing my discussion to an end, I would like to pause for a second on the mysterious figure of Ion featuring in this symposium. Researchers normally take Ion to be a name chosen at random,<sup>66</sup> but I am sceptical whether Ritsos would have chosen a character named arbitrarily for such an important scene. I propose rather that Ritsos' Ion and the peculiar symposium described by Agamemnon may allude to Kazantzakis' *Symposium*, more particularly to the figure of Kosmas, apparently a per-

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64. Ritsos (1993: 59). See Sartre (2007a: 37): "Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realises himself; therefore, he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life".

65. The idea that behind the broken glasses one can still see the "unbreakable" is reminiscent of another important Sartrian concept, that of "nihilation". For Sartre "nihilation" is "the operation by which some being is reconstituted with negativity" (Gardner 2009: 65). The implication of this is that non-Being can form part of Being and that it belongs to the fabric of reality. As noted above (n. 34) the vehicle of this negativity is consciousness, in so far as only consciousness has the power to nihilate; see the discussion in Gardner (2009: 61–69).

66. See the comments by Green and Bardsley in Ritsos (1993: 316).

sona of another Ion, namely Ion Dragoumis.<sup>67</sup> Kazantzakis' Kosmas represents the man who devotes himself to a purpose which he strives to fulfil, regardless of the difficulties and obstacles that he may encounter. To put it crudely, Kosmas, like Ritsos' Ion, exemplifies the man of action *par excellence*.<sup>68</sup>

Kazantzakis started working on the *Symposium* in 1922, along with his *Askētikē*, and finished it in the autumn of 1924. Yet, the manuscript was lost for a long time.<sup>69</sup> In fact, the first public reference to this work was made by Pantelēs Prevelakēs in his 1958 monograph on Kazantzakis' *Odyssey*.<sup>70</sup> In addition to providing a brief summary of the *Symposium*, Prevelakēs also identified its four main characters (Arpagos, Kosmas, Myrōn and Petros) with their historical counterparts.<sup>71</sup> With regard to Kosmas, Prevelakēs specifically remarked that his portrayal was very similar to the way in which Kazantzakis described Iōn Dragoumēs in the article that he wrote in 1926 as a tribute for the sixth anniversary of his death.<sup>72</sup>

The *Symposium* was published only in December 1971 by E. Ch. Kasdaglēs, several months after Ritsos had completed his "Agamemnon" (October 1970). Nevertheless, this does not necessarily contradict the association proposed here, in so far as it is possible that Ritsos knew the plot of the *Symposium* either through Prevelakēs' note or from Prevelakēs himself, considering that the two men had an amicable relationship (Plakas 1988: 132–135). Another possibility could be that the "Agamemnon" was revised after the publication of the *Symposium*, especially if we take into

67. Born in Athens in 1878, Iōn Dragoumēs was a prolific writer, a diplomat, and a politician. He was an emblematic figure of Greek nationalism and was considered to be a prototypical nationalist. On Dragoumēs see Vakalopoulos (1991).

68. Illuminating in this respect is the following quotation from Dragoumēs' work *Μαρτύρων και Ηρώων Αίμα* (1907): Τίποτε δεν είναι αδύνατο. Τα δυνατά από τα αδύνατα τα ξεχωρίζει μια ψιλή γραμμή. Μα είμαστε τόσο κολλημένοι κάτω στα εύκολα, τόσο μουνδιασμένοι που δεν μπορούμε να πηδήξουμε από πάνω από την ψιλή γραμμή.

69. On the history of Kazantzakis' *Symposium* see Kazantzakis (2009: 206–233).

70. Prevelakis (1958: 290–291); also cited in Kazantzakis (2009: 231–232).

71. Prevelakis (1958: 290): Arpagos = Kazantzakis; Kosmas = Ion Dragoumis; Petros = Angelos Sikelianos; Myron = Myron Gounoulakis.

72. The article was published in the Newspaper *Ελεύθερος Τύπος* on 1 August 1926. One could also mention here a poem that Kazantzakis wrote about Dragoumis at a later stage, in 1941, due to the similarities it shares with Ritsos' portrayal of Ion. In that poem, Dragoumēs is presented as "folded in his curly (σγουρή) flame", refusing to drink from the "glass of Forgetfulness" (από το ποτήρι της Λησμονιάς) or become "a beggar of fate" (ζητιάνος της μοίρας). He is also the man who "takes the measure of boundaries and the measure of our mind" (τα σύνορα μετράει, μετράει το νου μας).

account that Ritsos kept revising his poems even after their ascribed date. In fact, in a letter that he sent to Kaitē Drosou on 4 October 1971 he specifically refers to some revisions that he had made to his "Agamemnon".<sup>73</sup>

In light of the above, even though Ritsos' "Agamemnon" contains obvious allusions to Sartre, the Ion episode rather seems to be indebted to Kazantzakis – in many ways a proto-existentialist – whom Ritsos knew and admired.<sup>74</sup> Just like the Kosmas / Ion of Kazantzakis, Ritsos' Ion is a man who embodies Kazantzakis' fundamental idea of heroic nihilism;<sup>75</sup> even though he is conscious of the absurdity of life, he freely and consciously commits himself to a purpose and actively strives to fulfil it.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Even though Ritsos' "Agamemnon" diverges from Aeschylus' tragedy of the same title on several points, these deviations reveal a deep, sensitive, and knowledgeable understanding of the ancient Greek play. In addition to its Aeschylean debts, though, Ritsos' "Agamemnon" also foregrounds a wide range of ideas and themes that pertain to Sartrian existentialism (e.g. bad faith, transcendence, anguish, nausea). This association finds its most eloquent expression in Ritsos' delineation and treatment of Agamemnon's nausea – an unmistakably Sartrian notion – as well as in Agamemnon's final decision, which renders him a quintessential example of an existentialist hero. The reading of "Agamemnon" (and of the *FD* as a whole) through this spectrum not only helps us to unlock many of the poem's opaque sides, but also broadens its scope and opens up trajectories that a purely biographical reading overshadows and leaves in abeyance.

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73. Ritsos (2008: 88). See also p. 30, where, according to Drosou, Ritsos kept revising his "Orestes" for several years.

74. Kōttē (1996: 103). Antonis Petrides tells me that the *νάδα* by which Ritsos opens the Ion episode (μοῦ φάνηκε ἂν *νάδα* τὰ σπασμένα ποτήρια: and it seemed to me *as if I saw* the broken glasses) could also be a playful allusion to Kazantzakis. See, e.g. Kazantzakis' *Tertsi-nes*, where "nada" is hailed as one of the greatest words ever been found.

75. On this see Petrides (2015).

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