

## EMERGING FROM THE OPPRESSIVE SHADOW OF MYTH: ORESTES IN SARTRE, RITSOS, AND AESCHYLUS\*

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In this article I compare *Orestes* by Yannis Ritsos and *The Flies* by Jean-Paul Sartre with Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*. In Ritsos's and Sartre's works, written in a context of censorship and political oppression, a problematic relationship with the past weighs on the protagonist to the extent that he desires to free himself from it. The contemporary Orestes detaches himself from the path set out by a usurping power belonging to the past, a path used to manipulate individuals and to block the way to freedom. In Ritsos's *Orestes* the speaker breaks from the ideal of antiquity, while in *The Flies*, it is not the past but rather the present circumstances that motivate Orestes to act freely. I read the protagonist's problematic relationship with the past as a *mise en abîme* of the critical distance of one (re)writing in relation to another and I compare all three texts from the point of view of the singular relationship maintained by the protagonist with his past.

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**A**ny (re)writing of a myth involves a critical engagement with intertexts on which it casts a new light and from which it sometimes seeks to detach or free itself.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, a (re)writing often says something about the pragmatic context of its production. It is through this critical engagement with its intertexts, and through the anachronisms and metaphors juxtaposing the past and the present, that the (re)writing enhances or questions its own context of production. This is especially common when the (re)writing of myths occurs under totalitarian regimes, in which case the new version is used to keep the censored voice hidden and sometimes to signal implicitly the dangers of abusive policies. The (re)writing of a myth thus places itself before the dominant ideology and the historical and political context in

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. On the intertextual dialogue between various (re)writings of myths, see Detienne 1980; Calame 1988; 2000; 2004; Heidmann 2003; 2008; Gély 2004.

which it came to be. From this perspective, the comparatist should favour a specific axis of comparison, i.e. the relationship within the plot and the discourse between the past and the present, whether it is familial, historical, political or literary. I propose to use this axis of comparison in order to analyse two contemporary (re)writings of Orestes's matricide as it is presented in Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*, namely *The Flies* by Jean-Paul Sartre and *Orestes* by Yannis Ritsos. In both these plays, written in a context of censorship and political oppression, a problematic relationship with the past weighs upon the protagonist to the extent of wanting to free himself as well as others from it.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, this problematic relationship can be read as a *mise en abîme* of the critical distance a (re)writing keeps from its intertexts. In totalitarian and oppressive regimes, where democracy is undermined, the emancipation from a literary fate comes to represent the ideological and political emancipation to which someone may aspire.

I will compare all three of these texts from the perspective of the singular relationship maintained by the protagonist with his past, first by looking into his anchoring in space and the way he has to disclose his identity in the discourse. Thereafter, I will compare the scenes of recognition where the encounter between the brother and sister allows them to be put back into a family context from bygone years and also determines their future action. Finally, I will compare the role of memory in all three texts. This *differential comparison* and textual discursive analysis will explore the differences between the three texts, which will help us grasp the unique relationship existing between each contemporary (re)writing and its own context of production.<sup>3</sup> My aim is not to study the ways in which the contemporary texts that tell the story of the Atréides, and of Orestes more specifically, exploit and integrate the literary tradition, but rather to put them into dialogue, through a specific axis of comparison, with the ancient play.<sup>4</sup>

The history of the House of Atreus was told and retold in different plays over the course of the 5th century and nobody would deny that Sophocles's *Electra* and Euripides's *Electra*, to name but the two most

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<sup>2</sup>. I have used for Aeschylus's play the edition of Page 1972 and Sommerstein's 2008 translation; for *The Flies*, Sartre 1947 and Sartre 1955 (Gilbert's translation); for Ritsos's *Orestes*, Ritsos 1972 and Ritsos 1993 (Green's & Bardsley's translation).

<sup>3</sup>. On this method of analysis, see Heidmann 2005; 2015.

<sup>4</sup>. On the influence of Sophocles's and Euripides's plays on Sartre's *The Flies*, see Gasti 2005. On this influence on Ritsos's *Orestes* cf. Liapis 2014.

obvious examples, have had a profound influence on both Ritsos's and Sartre's work and inform their treatments of Orestes.<sup>5</sup> I will refer to these plays when necessary, but I have chosen to focus on Aeschylus's *Choephoroi* for the following reason: more than in the other two plays, in Aeschylus's tragedy, it is mainly through the verbal confrontations of Orestes with the other characters of the play that we witness events. In Sophocles's *Electra*, it is Electra who dominates the dramatic action. Orestes appears on stage in the prologue and then in the third episode (v. 1098). Before that, it is Electra who confronts Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra. In Euripides, many other characters take part in the action, talk among themselves and stand in a particular relationship with Orestes and Electra. In *Choephoroi*, on the contrary, a consistent focus is given to Orestes.

*The Flies*, a play written between 1943 and 1944 and performed for the first time in 1944, (re)configures Orestes's journey in existentialist terms, with respect to the hero's freedom. The play depicts a rootless Orestes who gradually accedes to property and liberty. Aegisthus, an authoritarian tyrant and usurper who rules over the people by inspiring fear, is in control of Argos. In the name of the moral order supported by Jupiter and the King Aegisthus, a justification is found for every instance of immorality. The residents of Argos are made to believe in the return of the dead seeking revenge and, in order to face them, they must repent of all their sins. They are subdued and made to feel guilty, whereas Orestes, the exile, comes to the city and demystifies these distorted values, rituals and beliefs. This context of subjection will play a major role in the accomplishment of Orestes's action.<sup>6</sup> His fate takes shape little by little and is brought about by his successive acts. The matricide for which he is responsible is neither premeditated nor caused by a desire for revenge and, in this way, escapes the law of cause and effect as well as the talionic law that motivates Orestes's act in Aeschylus. His revolt is achieved instantaneously and Orestes thus becomes the master of his own destiny (cf. Laraque 1976). At the end of the play, Orestes, who nevertheless accepts full responsibility for his act of matricide, decides to take the

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<sup>5</sup>. On the myth of Orestes in Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles, see March 2001: 4-8.

<sup>6</sup>. Conacher 1954: 413. Conacher highlights the differences between Aeschylus's and Sartre's plays and the ways in which Sartre depicts Orestes in existential terms. The matricide follows his revolt against the reign of terror created by King Aegisthus and Jupiter. For Slochower 1948: 47, on the contrary, Orestes kills his mother for no reason at all. Regarding the influence of Sartre's philosophical principles on the plots of his plays, cf. Wreszin 1961.

blame for the sins of the Argives, to leave the city and to continue his journey, hunted hereafter by malevolent creatures.

*Orestes* (Ὀρέστης) is a long poem by the Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, also known for his social commitment, revolutionary ideals, and his deportations and exiles. Ritsos is a poet deeply affected by his family's tragic fate and, in addition to recurrent ill health, by his detention in prison, in concentration camps or under house arrest on different Greek islands (Makronissos, Limnos, Agios Efstratios, Samos).<sup>7</sup> In his poetry, and more specifically in his poetic collection *Pierres Répétitions Barreaux* (*Stones Repetitions Bars*), first published in a bilingual edition by Gallimard in 1971, and in the antique cycle entitled *The Fourth Dimension* (Τέταρτη Διάσταση), he revisited several Greek myths reflecting on the fate of the characters from both the Trojan war and Greek tragedy. In the dramatic monologues forming this cycle, the poet expresses the diachronic and existential questions faced by man (cf. Meraklis 1981; Métoudi 1989: 107-122). At the same time, and by overlapping eras and playing with anachronisms, he subjectivises the past and links it to his personal experience.<sup>8</sup> As Tziouvas has argued "through the use of myth, Ritsos creates a divergence between content and form, story and discourse, action and art".<sup>9</sup> Ancient Greeks are not ideals of greatness; they are much like ourselves, torn beings on a quest to find liberty.<sup>10</sup> In Ritsos's poetry, one can indeed observe a tendency to demystify the extraordinary power of the antique heroes as well as the admiration they aroused. The time in the past in which the myth takes place crosses paths with the present and cosmic time.<sup>11</sup>

*Orestes*, as the other monologues of *The Fourth Dimension*, is a long poem organised according to a three-part structure. In the first part, the setting, place, time, and characters are introduced. The second part is a

<sup>7</sup>. On the influence of biographical events on Ritsos's poetry, cf. Prevelakis 1981: 17-47; Prokopaki 1973; Métoudi 1989: 203-212. See Grandmont's biography of the poet in Ritsos 2001: 7-23, 371-380. On the poet's relationship to Greek history and politics cf. Métoudi 1989: 61-106. Cf. also Bien 1983, and Vitti 1979: 174-193, concerning his place in the «Generation of the Thirties».

<sup>8</sup>. On this topic, cf. Prevelakis 1981: 358-367.

<sup>9</sup>. Tziouvas 1996: 74. On the dialogic interactions between antiquity and modernity in Ritsos and Seferis, see Tziouvas 2017: 353-356.

<sup>10</sup>. Regarding the use of myth in Ritsos's works, cf. Métoudi 1989: 115-122; Sangiglio 1978; Bollas 1979 and Sokoljoug 1981. On the connections between autobiographical speech and the myth, see Veloudis 1979. Cf. also Olah 2013.

<sup>11</sup>. For Dallas 2008: 56-57, it is a temporal simultaneity, an "ομοχρονία".

lengthy monologue in the presence of a silent character, which could also be a long meditation. The third and last part is the epilogue providing the *denouement* and shedding retrospective light on the plot.<sup>12</sup> Written between 1962 and 1966 in free verse,<sup>13</sup> *Orestes* portrays a character who is not tempted by belligerent actions. He attempts to abolish the process of revenge brought about by a society obeying the talionic law.<sup>14</sup> This refusal to take any tragic action takes the form of the recurrence of memories of harmless, trivial and everyday deeds. Nevertheless, he ends up committing matricide, dies symbolically and, just like Christ, sacrifices himself in order to relieve the world by freeing it from its need for revenge: “to give this place, if possible, a breathing space” (γὰρ ν’ ἀνασάνει (ἂν γίνεται) τοῦτος ὁ τόπος).<sup>15</sup> Orestes represents the refusal to be part of a continued past, while at the same time finding it difficult to free himself from it so as to make his own way. The poem is devoid of action. It is like a freeze-frame, a contemplation, a meditation on the tragic action in the moments preceding the act of matricide.<sup>16</sup> The speaker expresses his effort to distance himself from the action that is likely to decrease his freedom. In the poem, the Chorus disappears completely. This decision to put aside one of the main distinctive features of the antique tragic genre could be the explanation for the choice of a poetic monologue, which serves the purpose of emphasising the protagonist’s loneliness and is also a reminder of the biographical poet. The removal of the Chorus also underlines, in a way, the refusal of revenge that might have been expressed by a collective subject.

Sartre’s play and Ritsos’s poem recount Orestes’s return in a very different manner than in Aeschylus’s *Choephoroi*.<sup>17</sup> This tragedy is the second play of the *Oresteia*, a trilogy that was staged for the first time in

<sup>12</sup>. Regarding the structure of these long monologues, cf. Prokopaki 1973: 30-33; Métoudi 1989: 109-110.

<sup>13</sup>. On the use of free verse by Ritsos that goes back to 1937, see Kokoris 1991. On the different stages of his poetical path in general, cf. Kouloufakos 1975 as well as Veloudis 1977: 12-22.

<sup>14</sup>. Ritsos’s treatment of the matricide has some similarities with Euripides’s version since in Euripides, Orestes is indecisive, whereas Electra insists on the matricide. Cf. Eur. *El.* 967, 969, 973.

<sup>15</sup>. Ritsos 1972: 89; Ritsos 1993: 80. Ritsos hesitated for a long time before arriving at the conclusion that Orestes should “die” in the poem. On the conversations about this matter between Ritsos, Kaiti Drosou and Aris Alexandrou, see Ritsos 2008: 20-31.

<sup>16</sup>. The sixties mark a turning point toward narrative and meditation in Ritsos’s poetry. Cf. Dallas 2008.

458 in Athens during the Great Dionysia. The play opens with Orestes, who is guided back to Argos by Apollo with the aim of avenging his father's murder. The matricide that he commits obeys the talionic law, a primitive logic. Orestes is free to disobey (v. 269-277), but he enforces the revenge demanded by the late Agamemnon (v. 306-314; 925), by Electra (v. 143-144) and by the gods (v. 641; 949) because he is too emotionally attached to his family's history, his homeland and to justice in its ancient form. This archaic form of justice is nonetheless perceived as out-dated in the *Eumenides*, the last play of the trilogy, and is replaced by the justice of the city-state of which Athena is the benefactress. Indeed, the goddess and the citizens exonerate Orestes at the end of the *Eumenides*.<sup>18</sup>

### 1. ORESTES'S IDENTITY AND ITS ANCHORING IN SPACE

Orestes embodies the character of the exile who comes back home and is urged to face his past. In the *Choephoroi*, in the prayer addressing Zeus and Chthonian Hermes (v. 1-19), Orestes seems determined to anchor himself in Argos and to repossess this space, which legitimately belongs to him. He claims his family heritage through the assertion of his origins, his identity and his attributes. The possessive pronouns (v. 14 : πατρὶ τῶμῶι, "my father"; v. 17: ἀδελφὴν τὴν ἐμὴν, "my sister") and deictic expressions (v. 4: τύμβου δ' ἐπ' ὄχθῳ τῶδε, "at the base of this tombstone"; v. 7 : τόνδε, "this one") underline the ties of blood and homeland (3: ἐς γῆν τήνδε "in this land"). In fact, throughout the play the land represents the authority of the deceased Agamemnon and embodies his identity as well as his past political authority.<sup>19</sup> The relationship with the land brings Orestes physically closer to his father, whom he addresses using the vocative form (v. 8: σόν, πάτερ, μόρον, "your fate, my father").

In Yannis Ritsos's *Orestes*, things are very different. The speaker claims no link with the house belonging to his family or with his mother, father or

<sup>17</sup>. On the story of Orestes before Aeschylus, see Garvie 1986: ix-xxvi. The matricide and the murder of Agamemnon are not mentioned in the Iliad but in the Odyssey. Hom. *Il.* 9, 142-145; 1, 113-115, and Hom. *Od.* 1, 26-54; 11, 385-464; 24, 192-202. The matricide is also mentioned in the *Catalogue of Women*, fr. 23 (a) M-W.

<sup>18</sup>. On the connection between human and cosmic justice, see Tzitzis 1982. Concerning the reversal occurring between the *Choephoroi* and the *Eumenides*, see Saïd 1983. See also the observations made by Parker 2009, regarding civic conciliation, in the *Eumenides*, of the tensions existing in the first two plays of the trilogy.

<sup>19</sup>. Concerning the metaphor of the land in the *Choephoroi*, cf. Nenci, Arata 1999. On Orestes's prayer, see Garvie 1970; Conacher 1987.

sister. He only aspires to a detachment from the space occupied by his ancestors, a place to which he came back reluctantly. In fact, he dreams of emancipating himself from his destiny, putting a distance between himself and the family seat, along with the heroic world brought about by this place. His desire to leave the land of Mycenae, the smells of “bronzecorruption” (σκουριαῖα χαλκοῦ) and of “black blood” (μαῦρο αἷμα) that are released there, clearly reveals his hatred for the world of heroic battles and of revenge portrayed in Homer’s epic poem or in tragedy (Ritsos 1972: 80; Ritsos 1993: 72). Accordingly, the proper nouns referring to locations and the spatio-temporal deictic expressions he uses are not meant to indicate the place where he seeks to settle but the one he wishes to leave behind (Ritsos 1972: 74; Ritsos 1993: 66).

Ἄς μακρύνουμε λίγο ἀπὸ δῶ, νὰ μὴ μᾶς φτάνει ἡ φωνὴ τῆς γυναίκα·

Let’s move a little away from here, so the woman’s voice won’t reach us;

μπροστὰ στὴν πύλη αὐτή, νιώθω ὀλότελα ἀνέτοιμος –

before this gate, I feel completely unprepared –

Moreover, his quest for liberty is conveyed by an emphasis on the versatility of the world around him. Indeed, the multiple questions, the uncertainties, the repetitive use of the words “perhaps”, “almost”, “do I”, frequently used in Ritsos’s poetry, indicate that the protagonist does not possess an absolute and inflexible truth. He is, however, in search of a meaning he is willing to recreate freely; he finds himself in a world that purports to be open to numerous possibilities. Not only does the speaker claim no connection with his homeland, but he also never clearly asserts his identity. He is never named in the poem, as is the case with the protagonists in the other monologues of *The Fourth Dimension*. Furthermore, he manages to remain undefined: he introduces himself throughout the poem using both the plural form (How did it happen that we, too, remained independent, “Πῶς νὰ γινότανε νὰ μέναμε ἀνεξάρτητοι κ’ ἐμεῖς”) (Ritsos 1972: 73; Ritsos 1993: 65) and the singular form (I don’t want to hear any more. I cannot stand it anymore, “Δὲ θέλω πιά νὰ τὴν ἀκούω. Δὲν τὸ ἀνέχομαι”) (Ritsos 1972: 80; Ritsos 1993: 72). One may argue that the alternations of I/we mean I/Orestes and you/Pylades who is named in the opening paragraph of the monologue. Nevertheless, these alternations between I and we, which are common in Ritsos’s poetry and even more so in poems dealing with mythological

topics,<sup>20</sup> reveal the search for identity but nevertheless imply that the fate of an individual is connected to everyone else's. In *Orestes*, this potentially common destiny becomes distinctly apparent at the beginning of the poem and in the rhetorical question that highlights the powerlessness of men before a fate mapped out in advance (Ritsos 1972: 73; Ritsos 1993: 65):

Πῶς νὰ γινότανε νὰ μέναμε ανεξάρτητοι κ' ἐμεῖς, μὲ τὴν ὠραῖα  
χαρὰ τῆς ἀδιαφορίας, τῆς ἀνεξιθρησκείας, πέρα ἀπ' τὰ πάντα,  
μέσα στὰ πάντα, μέσα μας – μόνοι, ἐνωμένοι, ἀδέσμευτοι,  
δίχως συγκρίσεις, ἀνταγωνισμούς, ἐλέγχους, δίχως  
νὰ μᾶς μετράει ἡ ὅποια ἀναμονὴ κι ἀπαίτηση τῶν ἄλλων.

How did it happen that we, too, remained independent, with the delightful  
pleasure of indifference, of tolerance, beyond everything,  
in the midst of everything, in the midst of ourselves – alone, together,  
under no obligation,  
without competition, rivalry, censure, without  
any expectations or demands placed on us by others?

The speaker appears in the discourse to be torn between two realities, two expectations, and two temporalities. He is both the one he truly wishes to be and the one that others wish him to be. This lacerated identity is illustrated by the metaphor of dismemberment (Ritsos 1972: 75; Ritsos 1993: 67):

Δυὸ ἐλξεις ἀντίρροπες μοῦ φαίνεται ν' ἀντιστοιχοῦν στὰ δυὸ μας πόδια,  
κ' ἡ μιὰ ἐλξη ἀπομακρύνεται ὄλο πιδὸ πολὺ ἀπ' τὴν ἄλλη  
φαρδαινόντας τὸ διασκελισμὸ μας ὡς τὸν διαμελισμὸ·

Two opposing forces seem to pull equally on our legs  
and one force moves far further away than the other,  
stretching the stride of our legs to the point of dismemberment;

The speaker is in fact torn between, on the one hand, those who focus on the past and yearn for revenge and, on the other, his own ambition to untie himself from the past so as to be immersed in the present and contemplate the world in front of him.

In fact, he is attentive to things that awaken his senses in the present. Throughout the poem, he is attracted by colours, sounds and scents. At the beginning of the monologue, his attention is diverted from his sister's

<sup>20</sup>. See also the second part of the collection *Stones Repetitions Bars*, in which the speaker in the poems expresses himself both in the I and we forms.

voice in order to contemplate the warm and peaceful night. In the course of the text, his gaze settles on the images that his sister is not able to see: the ladder “propped without reason” (τὴν ἀνεμόσκαλα, τὴ δίχως λόγο ἀκουμπισμένη), the “tassel of a corn-ear grazing the sole of a tiny cloud” (τὴ φούντα ἐνὸς καλαμποκιοῦ νὰ ξύνει τὸ πέλμα ἐνὸς μικρότατου σύννεφου) (Ritsos 1972: 80; Ritsos 1993: 71-72). He refers to the smell of “oregano, thyme, capers» (μυρωδιὰ ἀπὸ ρίγανη, θυμάρι, κάπαρη), to the “sperm of the forest” (τὸ σπέρμα τοῦ δάσους) (Ritsos 1972: 81-82; Ritsos 1993: 73), an insect that “hums politely in the ear of tranquillity” (ἔνα ἔντομο βομβίζει εὐγενικὰ στ’ αὐτὶ τῆς ἡσυχίας) (Ritsos 1972: 80; Ritsos 1993: 72), the “small drop of sound, charged with meaning, from her (the mother’s) long earring” (στάζοντας ἕναν ἥχο πολυσήμαντο ἀπ’ τὸ μακρὸν σκουλαρίκι τῆς στὸν ὤμο τῆς) (Ritsos 1972: 79; Ritsos 1993: 71).

In Sartre’s *The Flies*, Orestes initially remains at the surface. He says that he has been left “free as the strands torn by the wind from spiders’ webs that one sees floating ten feet above the ground” (tu m’a laiss   la libert   de ces fils que le vent arrache aux toiles d’araign  e et qui flottent    dix pieds du sol) and that he is “light as gossamer and walks on air” (je ne p  se pas plus qu’un fil et je vis en l’air) (Sartre 1947, acte i, ac  ne ii: 123; Sartre 1955: 61). He could be described as spectral, even though he had initially wished for the opposite: “I’m a mere shadow of a man; of all the ghosts haunting this town today, none is ghostlier than I” (J’existe    peine: de tous les fant  mes qui r  dent aujourd’hui par la ville, aucun n’est plus fant  me que moi) (Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, sc  ne iv : 176; Sartre 1955: 90). His difficulty in anchoring himself in his family sphere coincides with an incapacity to have attributes or to own property. This is shown by the use of possessive pronouns and adjectives in italics, initially introduced by negative verbal forms. It should be noted that the words in italics, frequently encountered in Sartre’s philosophical works, reflect in the first part of *The Flies* the belongings and property that Orestes does not yet own.<sup>21</sup> His uprooting and the distance he keeps with the things surrounding him are thus verbally emphasised. At the beginning, Orestes appears to be depersonalised and deracinated. It is only after the decision to commit matricide and after its enactment that the possessive pronouns in italics refer to the things that truly belong to him and give evidence of his anchoring in space: “You are *my* sister, Electra, and that city is *my* city. *My* sister!” (Tu es *ma* s  ur, Electre, et cette ville est *ma* ville. *Ma* s  ur)

<sup>21</sup>. On the function of italics in *The Flies*, see Hollier 1990.

(Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, scène iv: 180; Sartre 1955: 93); "I have done *my* deed, Electra, and that deed was good ... this is *my* path" (J'ai fait *mon* acte, Electre, et cet acte était bon ... c'est *mon* chemin).<sup>22</sup> As it happens, the play illustrates the end of Orestes's uprooting and the accession to his attributes.

In short, if in Aeschylus's play the protagonist asserts himself in his speech by the use of possessive pronouns and a vocabulary anchoring him to the land of his family and father, in Ritsos's poem the speaker's connection with the past and the space in which it is reflected is simply pushed away. Through the use of the plural form, the speaker is depersonalised and makes of his fate anyone's and everyone's fate. Instead of a vertical relation to the world, which would take him back to his roots in the world of the deceased and the Mycenaean land, he prefers to be anchored in the present, he chooses the horizontality of a river flowing away and of a contemplative gaze. In Sartre's play, Orestes manages to anchor himself in space and gain access to his own identity only when he freely decides to take action. His act does not aim to repair the past but to distance himself from it.

## 2. ORESTES'S AND ELECTRA'S RECOGNITION: REMEMBRANCE OF OR UPROOTING FROM THE PAST

The scene of recognition is crucial to our discussion. It allows us to understand the role assigned to Orestes's family's past. The comparison will show to what extent this recognition, in the contemporary texts studied here, is made particularly difficult insofar as it is deferred and even erased. The reason for this is the absence of ties linking the character to his past and his desire for emancipation from it. More specifically, if we observe a claim of family ties in Aeschylus's play, the recognition and the revenge it conveys are abandoned in Ritsos's monologue. In Sartre's play, the recognition does not occur immediately, precisely because there are no objects or physical attributes of the brother and sister that might make a connection between the past and the present.

In Aeschylus's *Choephoroi*, Orestes's family is brought together around Agamemnon's tomb. It is in the same location that the plan for revenge is

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<sup>22</sup> Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau ii, scène viii: 210; Sartre 1955: 108. Regarding this topic, cf. Burdick 1959, who focuses on the images materializing Orestes's situation, his uprooting and his strangeness in relation to the world around him. Cf. also Noudelmann 1993: 66-67.

devised.<sup>23</sup> In a way, gods, men and the deceased are all present in this scene and take part in the recognition.<sup>24</sup> Orestes begs Zeus and Hermes to hear his plea (v. 1-19), whereas Electra implores Hermes and the Chthonian gods to make her brother come back (v. 123-151). Brother and sister are reunited shortly after the completion of the prayers, as though their wishes had been granted by the gods themselves.<sup>25</sup> Later in the play, the Chorus, in its encouragement of Orestes, stresses the active presence of the deceased by claiming that the dead are growing irritated and complaining fiercely about their killers.<sup>26</sup> Here we are immersed in a world where men, the gods and the dead are communicating through ritual acts. It is a world where the deceased can hear and remember, in which the gods grant the wishes made by the mortals provided that they obey the divine laws and respect the borders that separate them from the gods.

Furthermore, the recognition, which is fuelled by a desire for revenge, is made possible by a series of hints that evoke memories, allude to the past and thereby bring Electra and Orestes closer together. Essentially, it is a matter of physical appearance and objects (v. 230: βόστρυχον τριχῶς, “the lock of hair”), his footprints leading to Agamemnon’s grave (v. 228: ἐν στίβοισι τοῖς ἐμοῖς, “the tracks of my feet”),<sup>27</sup> and a woven piece of fabric offered to Orestes by Electra in the past (v. 230-231: ἰδοῦ δ’ ὕφασμα τοῦτο, σῆς ἔργον χερῶς,/ σπάθης τε πληγᾶς ἠδὲ θήρειον γραφήν, “look at this piece of weaving, the work of my your hands, the strokes of the batten and the picture of a beast”). At the same time and by a subtle play on words, these hints indirectly point to the future murder. When Orestes tells Electra to contemplate the hunting scenes depicted on the piece of clothing, he uses the words “σπάθης τε πληγᾶς”. The term “σπάθη”, meaning “broad blade”, refers both to a loom and to a knife (see Sommerstein 1980: 64-65; Garvie 1986: 102). In this way, allusions are

<sup>23</sup>. As suggested by the Chorus (v. 265) and Orestes (v. 233), Agamemnon’s tomb was located close to the palace. See Taplin 1977: 338-340. This tomb is the place where the philia of the family is brought together again. Cf. Fartzoff 1997: 48.

<sup>24</sup>. Concerning the singularity of the scene of recognition in Aeschylus’s work, see Solmsen 1967.

<sup>25</sup>. Regarding the agency of the gods following Electra’s prayer, cf. Fartzoff 1997: 50-52.

<sup>26</sup>. Cassandra in Agamemnon had also announced the performative aspect of Orestes’s invocation of the father: “the pleading appeal of his slaughtered father will lead him to his goal”, (v. 1279-1285). See on this subject the interesting remarks made by Roberts 1985.

<sup>27</sup>. Concerning this interpretation as well as the hunting metaphors in the scene of recognition, cf. Jouanna 1997. On the hints in the scene of recognition, see also Solmsen 1967.

made both to this past gift and to Clytemnestra's future murder. Accordingly, present, past and future are intertwined in this scene of recognition, made possible by physical hints and facilitated by the prayer to the gods and the late Agamemnon.

If in Aeschylus's tragedy men, gods and the deceased play a major role in the recognition, this is not the case in *The Flies*, where the gods play no part. On the contrary, it is a parody, the ridiculing of the offerings made to the gods, that is the cause of the first encounter between Orestes and Electra. This encounter occurs at the foot of Jupiter's statue, where Electra has just thrown rubbish and insulted the god: "Yes, you old swine, scowl away at me with your goggle eyes and your fat face all smeared with raspberry juice—scowl away, but you won't scare me, not you !" (Ordure! Tu peux me regarder, va! avec tes yeux ronds dans ta face barbouillée de jus de framboise, tu ne me fais pas peur).<sup>28</sup> It is at that moment that Orestes introduces himself to his sister under a false identity. He claims to be a young man from Corinth named Philebus and invites her to flee with him.<sup>29</sup> Electra, who is unaware of the ruse and does not recognise Orestes, refuses to leave as she is awaiting the arrival of her brother, whom she believes to be enraged.

This scene of the first encounter between brother and sister is the exact opposite of the libations offered by the pious Electra in Aeschylus's play. Furthermore, while in the *Choephoroi* the meeting and recognition of the brother and sister are portrayed as the consequences of their prayers, in *The Flies* no prayer that might lead to a reunion is addressed to the gods. The world in which the characters evolve in *The Flies* is far from transcendent, quite the contrary: from the first scene on, the gods seem to be responsible for the lie and for the false values terrorising the citizens of Argos.<sup>30</sup> For example, when Orestes is surprised to learn that Agamemnon's killer has been reigning happily over Argos for fifteen years, Jupiter replies: "Wouldn't it be better to use such breaches of the

<sup>28</sup>. Sartre 1947, acte i, scène iii, p. 126-127; Sartre 1955: 64. Regarding this topic, cf. Burdick 1959, who focuses on the images that materialise Orestes's situation, his uprooting, his strangeness in relation to the world around him, by which he is imprisoned. Cf. also Noudelmann 1993: 66-67.

<sup>29</sup>. As suggested by Noudelmann 1993: 66-67, we can see here an allusion to Plato's *Philebus*. The subject of this Platonic work, concerning the definition of pleasure, alludes to the false identity of the young Philebus in *The Flies*, that of a young man from Corinth, a city where young people lead a pleasant, carefree and happy life.

<sup>30</sup>. On the new role assumed by the pagan gods and more specifically Jupiter in Sartre's *The Flies* and Giraudoux's *Amphitryon*, cf. De Mourgues 1988.

law to point a moral" (Valait-il mieux tourner ce tumulte au profit de l'ordre moral) (Sartre 1947, acte i, scène i: 112; Sartre 1955: 55). His reign of terror over the city is based on feelings of guilt, fear, and remorse. This becomes apparent in his words as he dismisses an old lady who is continuously repenting: "we have there the real thing, the good old piety of yore, rooted in terror" (Ou je me trompe fort, mes maîtres, ou voilà de la bonne piété, à l'ancienne, solidement assise sur la terreur) (Sartre 1947, acte i, scène i: 115; Sartre 1955: 57). The moral advocated by the god is far from justice, and even farther from the justice in the *Choephoroi*.

In *The Flies*, Orestes is so repulsed by the gods that he decides to take action to oppose their will. When Jupiter pours forth light around the stone before Agamemnon's grave, Orestes wonders if "that is the Right Thing" (Alors... c'est ça le Bien?), and announces in a tone he has not used up to this point that "there is another way" (il y a un autre chemin) (Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, scène iii: 179; Sartre 1955: 92). It is precisely at this instant that he decides to act. Disgusted by the fact that the meaning of good according to the gods is closely linked to obedience, resignation, cowardice and human injustice, he kills his mother and Aegithus.

The gods do not therefore contribute to the recognition. In addition, no importance is accorded to the physical appearance of the brother and sister, or to their attributes, either the piece of clothing or the lock of hair. Electra is incapable of recognising Orestes because she is deceived by her dream, in which she saw him as a revengeful soldier. When Orestes claims to be, in fact, her brother, she thinks that he is lying. Electra mentions Orestes by name for the first time in the second act, once he has decided to commit matricide (Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, scène iv: 183; Sartre 1955: 94). If Sartre does not exactly insist on Orestes's and Electra's outward appearances, it is because he gives priority to their actions. Significance does not lie in the world's materiality but in the relationship that man has with it, and more specifically the free action he exerts in order to change that world.

In this instance, and contrary to Aeschylus's play, the matricide does not stem from the scene of recognition. In Sartre's work, it is neither the past nor the gods, nor the reunion with his sister that incites Orestes to act. Moreover, brother and sister are constantly at odds with each other. When Electra is awaiting the return of her revengeful brother, he introduces himself under a false identity. When Orestes is ready to take action, she starts to doubt and appears to be frightened.

In *Orestes* by Yannis Ritsos, the scene of recognition is continuously postponed. The speaker starts by avoiding the encounter with his sister even though he is able to recognise her distressing voice. He does everything in his power to avoid a physical meeting or to hear to her voice. He also refuses to visit the grave that could physically or symbolically link him to his father and to the past of his family. Furthermore, he opposes the libations or any ritual gesture that might cause him to be recognised, as is the case in Aeschylus's play (Ritsos 1972: 74; Ritsos 1993: 66):

ἄς σταθοῦμε πιὸ κάτω· – ὄχι στοὺς τάφους τῶν προγόνων·  
ὄχι σπονδὲς ἀπόψε. Τὰ μαλλιά μου  
δὲ θέλω νὰ τὰ κόψω,

let's stand further down ; no, not at the ancestral tombs;  
no libations tonight. I don't want  
to cut my hair –

The perception he has of his sister reveals her stubbornness (Ritsos 1972: 77; Ritsos 1993: 69):

Κι αὐτὴ ἐπιμένει νὰ ἐτοιμάζει ὕδρομέλι καὶ τροφὲς γιὰ πεθαμένους  
ποὺ πιά δὲ διψοῦν καὶ δὲν πεινοῦν κι οὔτε ἔχουν στόμα  
κι οὔτε ὄνειρεύονται ἀποκαταστάσεις ἢ ἐκδικήσεις.

And she persists in preparing hydromel and food for the dead  
who no longer thirst or drink, no longer have mouths  
or dream of restoration or revenge.

His refusal to be recognised can be explained by the fact that his sister is stuck in the past, whereas he looks to the present and aspires to that which is only momentary and which he perceives thanks to his own senses. He seeks frivolity and lightness, whereas she values and becomes attached to anything voluminous, pompous and weighty (Ritsos 1972: 77; Ritsos 1993: 69):

...Φοβοῦμαι· δὲ δύναμαι  
ν' ἀποκριθῶ στὸ κάλεσμά της – τόσο ὑπέρογκο καὶ τόσο ἀστεῖο  
συνάμα –  
σ' αὐτὰ τὰ στομφώδη της λόγια, παλιωμένα, σάμπως ξεθαμμένα  
ἀπὸ σεντούκια “καλῶν ἐποχῶν” (ἔτσι ποὺ λένε οἱ γέροντες),  
σὰν μεγάλες σημαῖες, ἀσιδέρωτες, ποὺ μέσα στὶς ραφές τους  
ἔχει εἰσδύσει ἡ ναφθαλίνη, ἡ διάψευση, ἡ σιωπὴ, – τόσο πιὸ γερασμένες  
ὅσο καθόλου δὲν ὑποψιάζονται τὰ γηρατεῖά τους, κ' ἐπιμένουν  
νὰ πλαταγίζουν μ' ἀρχαιοπρεπες χειρονομίες πάνω ἀπὸ ἀνύπτου  
διαβάτες

...I'm afraid ; I'm powerless  
 to respond to her challenge – so exorbitant and at the same time so  
 comic –  
 to these pompous words of hers, old-fashioned, as if unearthed  
 in a linen chest “from the good old days” (as the old fools say),  
 like great flags, unironed, the seams of which have absorbed  
 naphthalene, denial, silence – so very old  
 that no one doubts their age, and they persist  
 in flapping with archaic gestures above the unsuspecting passers-by-

Surprisingly, it is only once he has accepted his fate, at the end of the poetic monologue, that the speaker proclaims the beginning of the recognition scene. He asks his friend to take the urn containing his “supposed ashes” with him, to which he adds (Ritsos 1972: 77; Ritsos 1993: 79):

καὶ μόνο ἐσὺ κ' ἐγὼ θὰ ξέρουμε πῶς μὲς σ' αὐτὴ τῆ λήκυθο  
 κρατάω, στ' ἀλήθεια, τὴν ἀληθινὴ μου τέφρα· – μόνο οἱ δυὸ μας.

and only you and I, only the two of us, will know that in this urn  
 I am holding my own real ashes.

Undoubtedly, here Ritsos plays with the Sophoclean scene in which Orestes carries an urn of his ashes in order to lead his opponents into thinking that he is dead (*Soph. El.* 54-58, 757-760, 1113-1125, 1142). What is particularly interesting is that in Ritsos, the speaker presents himself as the hero and the reader of an old myth of which he knows the plot and modifies it. This being said, the so-called recognition is not a true one, as the real Orestes has already died. From these circumstances one comes to the conclusion that Orestes refuses any possibility of true recognition and detaches himself from the old tale. If he decides to commit the act of matricide and thus to comply with the world that constrains him, he does so with the goal of freeing the world from its thirst for revenge. He wants “to give this place, if possible, a breathing space”, in other words to put an end to the old and bloody tales and to the diabolical logic of revenge. This fundamental refusal of recognition conveys his wish to break with the past and with a bloodthirsty society.

### 3. REMEMBRANCE: THE DRIVING FORCE OF ACTION?

Orestes's journey is determined by a past with which he must come to terms. The connection with this past becomes clear through the

importance given to the memory of Orestes's father and to his murder. It is crucial that this remembrance of the past is dealt with in different ways in each of the three versions: it either constitutes a driving force for action or promotes inaction. The strong connection that Agamemnon's children, in the *Choephoroi*, form with the memory of their father, as well as with the crime to which he fell victim, disappears or diminishes in *The Flies* and in Ritsos's *Orestes*, together with whatever may refer to determinism and to blind necessity.

The *kommos* in the *Choephoroi*, a lyric song of lamentation sung by the Chorus, Electra and Orestes, highlights the importance of remembrance and the hero's reputation for his achievements in war, a reputation that the children must now re-establish.<sup>31</sup> We are in fact immersed in a heroic universe similar to the one of Homeric heroes, namely a universe where forgetfulness is challenged, where the living must remember and praise the feats accomplished by heroes of the past, thus contributing to the immortalisation of their memory.<sup>32</sup> This is the reason why Orestes, Electra and the Chorus lament the dishonourable death of the king, who could have died gloriously at Troy and thus achieved his "glory" (v. 348: εὐκλειαν) in the eyes of the living and of the deceased among whom he would have reigned (v. 356-358).

In this universe, obsessed with the past, the lamentation song of the brother, the Chorus and the sister, as well as the libations offered to Agamemnon, all serve to compensate for the forgetfulness of which the king will likely be a victim. In fact, it amounts to the ritual lamentation owed to Agamemnon during his funeral but which had not taken place at the time. As pointed out by the Chorus, the due ritual enacted beside the grave of the deceased consists in a ritual song (v. 511: τίμημα τύμβου τῆς ἀνοιμώκτου τύχης, "paying recompense to his tomb for the time it lay unmournd") that suppresses the temporal distance of the murder, which belongs to the past, and the present, turning the past momentarily into the present and thus spurring Orestes to make the choice of matricide.<sup>33</sup> It must be emphasised that, at first, the young Atrides had not yet made up

<sup>31</sup>. On the impact of the *kommos*, cf. Fartzoff 1997.

<sup>32</sup>. On the transformation of the warrior's death into lasting glory and fame, see Vernant 1980, who demonstrates that the hero's memory in the epic poem is the equivalent of an extended funeral ritual. Cf. also Floyd 1980; Nagy 1994.

<sup>33</sup>. In the song Electra and the Chorus explicitly address Orestes. Cf. vv. 324, 372, 374, 439, 450. Their influence on his stance is clear. Cf. Fartzoff 1997: 60-63. On the way the Chorus of foreign slave women urge and drive those around him, see McCall 1990.

his mind about the type of vengeance he wished to carry out. He only had the absolute certainty that he would return to seek revenge (v. 18). The murderer's outrageous details given in the *kommos* by the Chorus and Electra strike Orestes's ear (v. 380-381) and cause him to feel anger towards his mother. He is told by Electra that his mother treated her husband as an enemy and that she did not give him the funerary honours to which he was entitled (v. 429-433). The Chorus, for its part, points out that Clytemnestra mutilated Agamemnon before burying him in such a state (v. 439-443).

Moreover, the desire expressed by Orestes and Electra to have their father remember the bath in which he was slaughtered, the net and chains by which he was held prisoner (v. 491-495), underline to what extent dwelling on past deeds can fuel decisions made in the present, as well as future actions. The memory of the murder explains the devising of a plan for revenge, a plan based on the logic of an ancient form of justice. The heroic world in which the characters evolve is one where the past is wished to be remembered, where oblivion is contended against, and where defamatory actions are reciprocated with other defamatory actions. The remedy for oblivion is precisely action.

Comparing these passages with excerpts from *The Flies* relating to the theme of memory allows us to observe fairly quickly that the tradition of the "belle mort" has become corrupted in Sartre's play. In *The Flies*, the living do not remember the deceased who perished gloriously, but instead devote themselves to the memory of those whose lives and deaths were atrocious. They are soldiers who died while blaspheming (les soldats qui moururent en blasphémant), the "downtrodden victims" (les malchanceux), those who were "children of disgrace" (les humiliés), and those "who died of hunger, whose last sigh was a curse" (les mors de faim dont le cri d'agonie fut une malédiction) (Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, scène ii: 156-157; Sartre 1955: 78-79).

Yet the most surprising turnaround in this play resides in the fact that the dead must remember and despise the living. King Aegisthus and the Church strive to instil in the residents of Argos the conviction that the dead are able to remember and can take revenge on them at any given time. On the day of the celebration of the dead, the high priest addresses them: "You, the forgotten and forsaken, all you whose hopes were dupes...you, the dead, arise; this is your day of days... I summon you to wreak your hatred on the living" (Vous, les oubliés, les abandonnés, les désenchantés, ... vous les morts, debout, c'est votre fête!...venez assouvir

votre haine sur le vivants!) (Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, scène ii : 156; Sartre 1955: 78-79). The deceased await this day and are delighted at the thought of the pain that they will inflict on the living. As for the latter, they live in constant fear and must remember the dead in search of revenge. Aegisthus's words addressing the crowd after the start of the celebration are eloquent in this respect "Dogs! How dare you bewail your lot? Have you forgotten your disgrace? Then, by Zeus, I shall refresh your memories" (Chiens! Osez-vous bien vous plaindre? Avez-vous perdu la mémoire de votre abjection? Par Jupiter, je rafraîchirai vos souvenirs) (Sartre 1947, acte ii, tableau i, scène II : 155; Sartre 1955: 78). This is how they are overwhelmed on a daily basis by their fear of the dead and are consequently driven to inaction and seclusion. Indeed, Argos is a city closed to the world, the windows "open on closed courtyards and turn their backsides to the street" (Elles les ouvrent sur des cours bien closes et bien sombres, j'imagine, et tournent vers la rue leurs culs) (Sartre 1947, acte i, scène i: 106; Sartre 1955: 52). Unlike the inhabitants of Argos, Orestes does not have the slightest memory either of his family's past or of the deceased. This explains why he is weightless and unable to anchor himself in the civic space. He himself admits that "memories are luxuries reserved for people who own houses, cattle, fields and servants" (les souvenirs sont de grasses nourritures pour ceux qui possèdent les maisons, les bêtes, les domestiques et les champs) (Sartre 1947, acte i, scène i: 123; Sartre 1955: 62). Unlike Aeschylus's Orestes, he is not driven to action by the memory of a father and his murder. The protagonist's action is not premeditated and does not conform to the logic of cause-and-effect ensuing from a remembered past.

As previously mentioned, in *The Flies*, it is not the past but rather present circumstances that motivate Orestes to act freely<sup>34</sup>. His move is one of rebellion against an abusive and usurping power, which keeps alive the memory of the dead and the recollection of a terrifying past. The Sartrean hero appears to be emancipated and free from the past once and for all. Orestes is the only one amongst the citizens of Argos who has no memories and who takes action. *The Flies* takes a completely different approach from that of the *Choephoroi*, as remembrance leads to inaction, whereas, in the end, a lack of recollection results in an act freely consented to.

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<sup>34</sup>. Cf. Royle 1972 and Liapis 2014, who focus on the ontological scope of the play.

In *Orestes* by Yannis Ritsos, the protagonist rejects his sister's voice because he refuses to remember (Ritsos 1972: 81; Ritsos 1993: 73):

“Έχω κ’ ἐγὼ μιὰ δική μου ζωὴ καὶ πρέπει νὰ τὴ ζήσω, Ὅχι ἐκδίκηση· –  
τί θὰ μπορούσε ν’ ἀφαιρέσει ἀπ’ τὸ θάνατο, ἕνας θάνατος ἀκόμη  
καὶ μάλιστα βίαιος; – στὴ ζωὴ τί νὰ προσθέσει; Πέρασαν τὰ χρόνια.  
Δὲ νιώθω μίσος πιά· – ξέχασα μήπως; κουράστηκα; Δὲν ξέρω.

I too have a life of my own and I must live it. Not vengeance –  
what could it bring back from the dead, one death more,  
and that a violent one? – what could it add to life? Years have gone by.  
I don't feel hatred any more; perhaps I've forgotten? grown weary?  
I don't know.

The speaker even wishes to forget his father's murder (Ritsos 1972: 81; Ritsos 1993: 73):

Θέλω κ’ ἐγὼ νὰ δῶ τοῦ πατέρα τὸ φόνο μὲς στὴν κατευναστικὴ τοῦ θανάτου γενικότητα,  
νὰ τὸν ξεχάσω μὲς σ’ ὀλόκληρο τὸ θάνατο  
ποὺ περιμένει κ’ ἐμᾶς.

I too want to see Father's murder in death's palliative generality,  
to forget it in that totality of death  
which awaits us too.

In fact, the vindictive and punitive memory represents a hindrance to freedom, as he highlights it (Ritsos 1972: 81; Ritsos 1993: 73):

... πᾶρ' το· σφίξε το· τὸ περιμένεις  
ἐλεύθερο ἀπὸ τιμωρίες, ἀντεκδικήσεις, ἀναμνήσεις...

...take it, clasp it ; you expect it to be  
free from retributions, reprisals, recollections,

As stated above, the speaker prefers the recollection of whatever strikes his sense of hearing, smell and vision to the memories of the dead, the murders and the acts of revenge. Accordingly, his sister's speech is repugnant to him, whereas his mother's pictorial vision of events is very close to him. She seems to honour all that may be perceived by the senses: "A butterfly came in through the window" ("μιὰ πεταλούδα μπῆκε ἀπ' τὸ παράθυρο"), "They should use more indigo on the linen napkins" (θὰ χρειαζόταν πιότερο λουλάκι στὶς λινὲς πετσέτες), "One note of this nocturnal fragrance escapes me" (μοῦ διαφεύγει μιὰ νότα ἀπ' αὐτὴν τὴν εὐωδιὰ τῆς νύχτας) (Ritsos 1972: 78; Ritsos 1993: 70). The mother does not come across as the murderer of Agamemnon but as an inspirational

authority to the persuasive and mysterious words (Ritsos 1972: 79; Ritsos 1993: 73):

... Τόσο άπλή και πειστική εΐταν ή μητέρα  
και δυνατή μαζι, έπιβλητική κι άνεξερεύνητη.

...Mother was so simple and persuasive  
and at the same time strong, commanding, and unfathomable.

The mother, whose voice is coercive and sweet, personifies poetic power, namely the power of words and expression. Indeed, as the speaker who remembers her says, she "can make the biggest words seem natural,/or the smallest, in their deepest significance" (μπορεί να προφέρει φυσικά τὰ πιό μεγάλα λόγια/ή τὰ πιό μικρά, στην πιό μεγάλη σημασία τους) (Ritsos 1972: 78; Ritsos 1993: 70). When she was fixing her hair before the mirror using the palm of her hand with a movement so graceful and light, "she might have been rearranging three or four stars on the world's forehead" (σάν να μετακινούσε τρία-τέσσερα άστέρια στο μέτωπο του κόσμου) (Ritsos 1972: 79; Ritsos 1993: 70-71). The terms "artful" (πολυδιάστατο) (Ritsos 1972: 78; Ritsos 1993: 70) and "charged with meaning" (πολυσήμαντο) (Ritsos 1972: 79; Ritsos 1993: 71) respectively referring to her laughter and to the sound made by her earring, lead us to envision the character of the mother as a metaphor for poetry. Consequently, one understands even better Orestes's desire to escape his destiny as a matricidal character: by killing his mother, he would kill his own inspiration and smother his own poetic voice. The poetic power through which the speaker describes his recollections shares the same expressiveness as the mother. Both the speaker and his mother speak the language of a poet, of Ritsos himself, one could argue.

In Sartre's and Ritsos's plays, the protagonist's desire for emancipation from his past becomes apparent also in the use of the same imagery in both the discourse and the plot. In both *The Flies* and *Orestes*, the same image conveys the weight of the past: that of a shadow suffocating the character. In *The Flies*, the need to mark a distance from this shadow is clearly expressed following Orestes's liberating act of matricide (Sartre 1947: acte iii, scène ii: 236; Sartre 1955: 121-122).

Mais, tout à coup, la liberté a fondu sur moi et m'a transi, la nature a sauté en arrière, et je n'ai plus eu d'âge, et je me suis senti tout seul, au milieu de mon petit monde bénin, comme quelqu'un qui a perdu son ombre! et il n'y a plus rien eu au ciel, ni Bien ni Mal, ni personne pour me donner des ordres."

Suddenly, out of the blue, freedom crashed down on me and swept me off my feet. Nature sprang back, my youth went with the wind, and I knew myself alone, utterly alone in the midst of this well-meaning little universe of yours. I was like a man who's lost his shadow.

In Ritsos's play, this shadow from the past, a true deadlock, a burden, also appears clearly (Ritsos 1972: 84-85; Ritsos 1993: 76):

Ἀπέραντος ἴσκιος ἀπλώνεται πάνω ἀπ' τὶς ἀψίδες·  
 μιὰ πέτρα ξεκολλάει καὶ πέφτει στὴ χαράδρα - ὅμως κανένας  
 δὲν περπάτησε -  
 ὕστερα τίποτε·

An immense shadow spreads out over the arches;  
 a stone works loose and falls into the ravine - and yet no one passed  
 by -  
 then nothing;

It is the shadow of antiquity, represented by the arcades, the stone and, later, the cups and jugs from banquets, the lyres and the sensible dialogues which are, along with objects of everyday life, thrown into bottomless wells. This shadow seems to weigh heavily, since the stone is detaching itself and falls down. On the contrary, the speaker's own shadow is light and pliant, as he asserts when he reminisces of a cow he once saw in Attica (Ritsos 1972: 87; Ritsos 1993: 78):

...Μιὰ τέτοια ἀγελάδα  
 σέρνω μαζί μου, μὲς στὸν ἴσκιο μου - ὄχι δεμένη  
 μονάχη της μὲ ἀκολουθεῖ - εἶναι ὁ ἴσκιος μου πάνω στὸ δρόμο  
 ὅταν ἔχει φεγγάρι· εἶναι ὁ ἴσκιος μου  
 πάνω σὲ μιὰ κλεισμένη πόρτα· καί, πάντα, τὸ ξέρεις:  
 ὁ ἴσκιος εἶναι μαλακός, ἀσώματος· κ' οἱ σκιὲς τῶν δυὸ κεράτων  
 μπορεῖ καὶ νᾶναι δυὸ αἰχμηρὲς φτεροῦγες καὶ μπορεῖ νὰ πετάξεις  
 κ' ἴσως μπορεῖς νὰ περάσεις ἀλλιῶς τὴν κατάκλειστη πόρτα.

...Just such a cow  
 I drag with me, in my shadow-not tied:  
 she follows me of her own accord-she is my shadow on the road  
 when there's a moon; she is my shadow  
 on a closed door; and you're always aware of this:  
 the shadow is pliant, bodiless; the shadow of her horns  
 may just be two pointed wings and maybe you can fly  
 and perhaps you can get past the locked door some other way.

Within this cow and, by the way, within the speaker who identifies himself with her, opposing forces are conjoined<sup>35</sup>. On the one hand, the cow symbolises abdication, since she is “familiar perhaps to resignation and obedience, implacability and hatred in her acquiescence” (ἴσως γνωρίζοντας τὴν ἄρνηση καὶ τὴν ὑποταγή,/τὴν ἀδιαλλαξία καὶ τὴν ἐχθρότητα μέσα στὴ συμφωνία) (Ritsos 1972: 86; Ritsos 1993: 78). She also bears a heavy weight since she holds between her two horns “the heaviest piece of the sky like a crown” (τὸ πιὸ βαρὺ κομμάτι τ’ οὐρανοῦ σὰν ἓνα στέμμα) (Ritsos 1972: 86; Ritsos 1993: 78). On the other hand, she becomes the symbol of lightness, of freedom, of the desire to fly and break through closed doors and confined spaces. She is, in effect, “unyoked” (ξεζεμένη) (Ritsos 1972: 86; Ritsos 1993: 77), moves freely and raises “her head from the water not touching anything,/herself untouched and calm, like a saint” (τὸ κεφάλι της, μὴν ἀγγίζοντας τίποτα,/ἀνέγγιχτη ἢ ἴδια καὶ ἤρεμη σὰν ἓνας ἅγιος) (Ritsos 1972: 86; Ritsos 1993: 78). She probably “ascended” (ὥσπου ἡ γελάδα ἀναλήφθηκε) (Ritsos 1972: 88; Ritsos 1993: 79), the speaker remarks. This intriguing image of the cow gives us a fair idea of what the speaker bears within himself: a past that weighs heavily and leads to revenge, on the one hand, the desire for lightness, carefreeness and peace, on the other.

#### 4. CONTEXTUAL ECHOES

Both *The Flies* and Ritsos’s *Orestes* keep a certain distance from heroic values and the thirst for revenge found in the *Choephoroi*. The plot of the ancient play is demystified by both contemporary (re)writings. In Aeschylus’s play, Orestes complies with the ancient form of justice and respects the traditions protecting the hero’s renown, while, conversely, the two contemporary plays witness his detachment and adoption of a critical perspective. This being said, the respect for the ancient form of justice based on the talionic law in the *Choephoroi* does not reflect the reality of the Athenian audience at the time of the play’s performance. Athenian citizens in fact witnessed the royal intrigues of the play from the distance of one who is immersed in a democratic context and therefore imbued with civic values. Contrary to the two contemporary (re)configurations, Aeschylus’s version was staged at a time when the

<sup>35</sup>76. On the conjunction of opposites in Orestes’s attitude, which informs also the image of the cow, see Liapis 2014: 143-146. Such a conjunction, Liapis remarks, is a fundamental tenet of existentialism.

democratic system in Athens was asserting itself and becoming stronger through major political and institutional transformations. The justice of men was henceforth based on written laws and applied in popular courts, and contrasted starkly with the old form of justice, which favoured punishing murder with murder<sup>36</sup>. Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Aeschylus chose to represent matricide as a perverted and corrupt ritual sacrifice, an act of blind revenge that keeps the city from peacefully continuing its existence<sup>37</sup>. Only in the *Eumenides*, the last play of the trilogy, do the court of the Areopagus and the citizens of Athens put an end to a family matter that had remained unresolved up to that point. In this way, the tragic poet challenges the notion of justice as it was performed in a remote past through a display of institutional practices, strongly inspired by those current in Athens during the 5th century, and in which the citizens played a crucial part.<sup>38</sup>

As for *The Flies*, it presents a close interaction between the character's path, his emergence in the discourse and the historical context of the play. The play was written and performed as France was shaken by the German occupation and Vichyist collaboration. In this divided France, the values of national revolution were glorified, and such principles as discipline, hard work, family and traditions were promoted. It is precisely these values, as well as the "meaculpism" favoured and upheld by the regime, that Sartre intends to oppose by writing *The Flies*.<sup>39</sup> It should be noted that the governing authorities at the time sought to maintain a form of guilt by constantly repeating the charge that France's defeat was caused by the previous administrations.<sup>40</sup>

Sartre's response entails resorting to the myth by depicting Orestes as one who frustrates the values and principles of such a regime, along with

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<sup>36</sup>. Cf. Jones 1987. See also Souzeau 1997, who focuses on the many meanings of the representation of Argos in Athens during a period when the city-state was undergoing political and institutional transformation.

<sup>37</sup>. On the theme of corrupt sacrifice in the Oresteia, cf. Zeitlin 1965.

<sup>38</sup>. Regarding the connections of the trilogy with the Athenian political system and institutions, see Rosenbloom's study 1995, for whom the trilogy challenges Agamemnon's conquest and indirectly warns the Athenians about the dangers of an imperialistic policy based upon naval power. Cf. also Dover 1957; Podlecki 1966; Dodds 1973 and Macleod 1982, who studies the connections between Athens and Argos in the 5th century, similarly echoed in the trilogy.

<sup>39</sup>. On this political reading of the play, see McCall 1969 and Royle 1972. Cf. also Noudelmann 1993: 20-22.

<sup>40</sup>. See Sartre's own remarks on the subject, in Sartre 1949: 35-36.

the religious and political powers. Sartre's vision of theatre aims to spur the French people to take action and challenge the existing power, as well as some of the moral and political values it supported (Conacher 1954: 405). In addition, the action of Sartre's hero might encourage the French people not to be solely paralysed by remorse but to move forward by taking responsibility for their actions.

In *Orestes*, Yannis Ritsos also attempts to break from the ideal of antiquity. The mindsets of reconciliation and sacrifice take the place of the mentality of blind vengeance. Much like in the other works found in *The Fourth Dimension*, this monologue includes the assertion of a free will through which one can make his voice heard beyond the struggles for power and bloody revenge. This libertarian aspiration is particularly significant for the poet whose works had been censored and whose voice was nearly silenced during his several incarcerations, house confinement and exiles. Its importance is also fundamental in the context of the royal family preventing democracy from asserting its true value. In Greece, the intrigues and power plays precipitated by the King and Queen were actual impediments to democratic renewal. An allusion is perhaps made to this conservative and nationalistic form of power in "these pompous words of hers, old-fashioned" (αὐτὰ τὰ στομφώδη της λόγια, παλιωμένα) and in "great flags, unironed flags" (μεγάλες σημαίες, ασιδέρωτες) (Ritsos 1972: 77; Ritsos 1993: 69).

From this perspective, we can observe that the expression "these pompous words of hers, old-fashioned" may allude to the purified language used by the Church, monarchy and governments in this period. Furthermore, in Makronisos the official language of propaganda in the local magazines as well as the official speeches heard by the prisoners through loudspeakers used some forms of *katharevousa* (the puristic language), whereas the prisoners used demotic in their everyday lives as well as in the poems they were writing and plays they were staging<sup>41</sup>. This linguistic register is linked to antiquity insofar as it is closer to ancient Greek than to demotic Greek (see Mackridge 2009). Ritsos's references to that which is "aged" and "pompous", as well as to the arcades, cups, banquets and lyres all shrouded in shadow, could be read as allusions to antiquity and to the

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<sup>41</sup>. On the magazines published by the Makronisos operation and on the ideological use of Classical Greece and the national rhetoric on antiquity in the concentration camp of Makronisos, see Hamilakis 2007. On the *katharevousa* during the fifties and sixties, see Fragoudaki 2001: 73-93.

perception of it as glorious from the viewpoint of the oppressive power against free speech and dissenting voices.

It should also be noted that Ritsos fell prey to the division of Greece between 1945 and 1949, a time during which the communists were fighting for power against the royalists and the right-wing movement. As a matter of fact, his devotion to the communist ideal caused him to be sentenced to the many deprivations of liberty detailed earlier. The divide referred to by the protagonist in the poem could therefore be that of a country which perpetuates the hate of its people against one another. But on the other hand, as Prevelakis has argued, Orestes's fate in the poem could be seen as a projection of the tensions between the political commitments of Ritsos and his willingness to be free of any ideological constraints.<sup>42</sup>

Does the poem celebrate the futility of all human struggle and a meaningless universe through a subversive and pessimist reading of myth, as Liapis (2014) argues in his rich and interesting article on the existentialist underpinnings of Ritsos's *The Fourth Dimension* and *Orestes* in particular? I would put into question this interpretation. By initially stepping backwards, Orestes emerges from the shadow of myth, embraces lightness, remembers and creates poetic images, even though he finally commits the matricidal revenge. The decision to accomplish an act that, in the end, is well considered and for which he assumes complete responsibility, undoubtedly reveals how powerful the past is. Nevertheless, the process that leads to this decision makes possible the emergence of a poetic voice and the accomplishment of the poem. It is in this sense that we should understand the meaning of the oxymoronic statement the speaker makes in the penultimate stanza of the monologue<sup>43</sup>:

... Διαλέγω  
τὴ γνώση καὶ τὴν πράξη τοῦ θανάτου ποὺ τὴ ζωὴ ἀνεβάζει.

...I choose  
the knowledge and the action of death that enhances life.

<sup>42</sup> 91. Prevelakis 35-366. Cf. Green 1996: 105-107. Prokopaki 1973: 55, and Colakis 1984: 126 argue that the autobiographical interpretation may lead to oversimplification. See also Green 1996 and Liapis 2014: 154.

<sup>43</sup> 93. On the use of oxymoron in *Orestes* and in the *The Fourth Dimension*, cf. Tziouvas 1996: 73-75. According to Tziouvas 1996: 77, myth in *The Fourth Dimension* foregrounds "the complexities of existence and poetry".

The 20th-century *Orestes* are to some extent a reflection of the artists/philosophers who created them: they are at odds with the political, ideological, cultural and artistic norms disseminated by the powers that be. From this viewpoint, the two contemporary (re)writings are exemplary inasmuch as they thematise, through a process of *mise en abîme*, the critical distance of one (re)configuration in relation to another. Such a critical distance from a literary fate leads to an artistic creativity and reveals the desire for an ideological emancipation. Consequently, and given the possibilities that it offers for concealment, detachment and identification, nothing is more effective than a myth that a literary work challenges and questions.

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