

## KYRIAKOS CHARALAMBIDES AND THE HOUSE OF ATREUS: FOUR POEMS\*



**ABSTRACT:** In this article I examine the reception of Greek tragic myth in the work of Greek-Cypriot poet Kyriakos Charalambides (1940-). Classical literature, myth, and history are staples of Charalambides' poetry. Especially from "Meta-History" (1995) onwards, (tragic) myth and history, now a dominant thematic, are used as instruments for exploring disquieting issues of destiny and identity, increasingly distanced from the specifics of Cyprus. In his most recent collections ("Desire", 2012, and "In the Language of Weaving", 2013) Charalambides puts myth and tragedy in the service of almost purely aesthetic and metaliterary concerns. In the second part of the article, by way of example, I offer close readings of a group of poems that concern the House of Atreus, the most populated group of tragedy-related poems in Charalambides. In chronological order, I discuss: from "Meta-History" (1995), "Ardana II"; from "Quince Apple" (2006), "Clytemnestra, Dreaming and Waking"; from "Desire" (2012), "Agamemnon"; and from "In the Language of Weaving" (2013), "Orestes".

### *I. Myth, history and tragedy in the context of Charalambides' poetic career*

"Occasionally I compare my own way of writing with that of my colleagues from Greece. They tell me sometimes: 'You, Kyriakos, come from a completely different world'. For Cyprus is indeed a different world; it has the stamp of tragedy, and this has given the island a different perspective, a different potential for interpreting the world, the tragic feeling".

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1. Charalambides in Petrides (2014); cf. also Charalambides (2009d) 144–146.

THE CLOSE ENCOUNTER WITH MYTH and history, that is, with the great mythical archetypes of classical literature and the complete spectrum of Greek (and Cypriot) history from antiquity to the present, has been a staple of Kyriakos Charalambides' poetry from the beginning. This interest is less insistent and obvious in his youthful poetic prelude, *First Fountain* (*Πρώτη πηγή*, 1961), but it escalates increasingly as the poet gradually comes to his own, first in *The Ignorance of Water* (*Η άγνοια του νερού*, 1967), and then, even more emphatically, in *The Vase with the Figures* (*Το αγγείο με τα σχήματα*, 1973). This book was the result of the poet's stay in Munich and his tour around the great capitals and museums of Europe, rich as they are in Greek and other antiquities. The experience was pivotal:<sup>2</sup> along with a concurrent move away from Takis Papatsonis' mysticism and towards Cavafy's irony<sup>3</sup> and Seferis' neoteric tropes, his European sojourn planted in Charalambides the seed of "historiomythical" thinking.

From 1973 on, myth and history (or history *as* myth and vice versa — what the poet later shall call *μεθιστορία*, "meta-history")— form part of an ever-developing poetics, which Charalambides, in conscious emulation of such literary predecessors as Seferis and Elytis, communicates also in a steady stream of theoretical essays and interviews, beyond his poetry proper.<sup>4</sup> *The Vase with the Figures* still belongs in Charalambides' formative period. The poet's maturity was in fact heralded by the three pivotal Cyprus-themed collections published after the Turkish invasion of 1974: *Coast of the Achaeans* (*Αχαιών ακτή*, 1977); *Famagusta Reigning City* (*Αμμόχωστος βασιλεύουσα*, 1982); and *The Dome* (*Ο θόλος*, 1989). In these collections, and from then to this day, the Greek Cypriot poet's historical consciousness and his poetic reuse of collective memory consolidates into a grand narrative about the nature and fate of mankind in general and what he perceives as the tragic destiny of his native island in particular; in a nutshell, a personal historical vision of the Tragic, determined by the historical fate of Cyprus but intended to be universal in its applications.

Such a kind of specifically Cypriot "tragic feeling" —historically determined but constantly redefined and nuanced, far from nationalistic oversimplifications— inundates Charalambides' poetry even before his overt preoc-

2. Cf. Charalambides in Petrides (2014): "[In Munich] a whole world was opened up to me: I saw the museums, I saw the great capitals of Europe; these are great things for a soul that craves to see and to learn. To reach an aesthetic result, one needs to see a lot. Talent is not enough".

3. On Charalambides' irony in especial relation to history, see Papaleontiou (2007).

4. Now collected in Charalambides (2009).

cupation with reworking tragic myth per se in the third, current phase of his poetic career. In the period immediately following the Turkish invasion, tragedy is naturally translated as a sense of loss. There are very few, if any, overt references to tragic narratives in the three collections Charalambides publishes in the years 1977–1989; what transpires is almost exclusively the “tragic feeling”. In *Famagusta Reigning City*, the eponymous town morphs into a translucent and trans-temporal object of erotic desire,<sup>5</sup> tragically fleeting away from the poet’s amorous touch, as it becomes the baton in a relay race of successive conquerors (rivals of the poet’s love).<sup>6</sup> Since the erotic union is constantly deferred, the historical vision, too, cannot solidify: the poet’s pursuit of his beloved city is a march “through the shattered glass of time”.<sup>7</sup> In *The Dome*, which, like *Famagusta Reigning City* but in stark contrast with the collections about to follow, does not contain one single “historical” or “mythical” poem per se, the poet’s tragic vision of history becomes a sort of consolation in mourning (what the ancients called *παραμυθία*). Poetic language itself, as it implies a sense of depth and as it seeks to transubstantiate tragic loss into something positive for those left behind, becomes the funerary rite and the tomb, which finally embraces the bodies of the missing persons (*αγνοούμενοι*). Inasmuch as the collection’s title evokes both the monumental dome-shaped tombs of the Mycenaeans and the domes of orthodox churches, it becomes clear that the beloved missing relatives, presumed dead but still unburied, hence restless, receive through the poet’s verses what history proper has denied: an honorable Christian funeral and a grave (in fact, a grave worthy of epic heroes and kings, a hyperbole allowed in the expression of grief and especially in the tradition of the *moiroloi*).<sup>8</sup>

The third, current phase of Charalambides’ career, which was launched with *Meta-History* (*Μεθιστορία*, 1995) and continued with four further collections dating from 2000 to 2013 — *Dokimin* (*Δοκίμιν*, 2000), *Quince Apple* (*Κυδώνιον μήλον*, 2006), *Desire*<sup>9</sup> (*Ίμερος*, 2012), and *In the Language of Weaving* (*Στη γλώσσα της υφαντικής*, 2013)<sup>10</sup> marked a significant shift in

5. The inaugural poem of the collection (Charalambides 1982, 9–11) is aptly titled “The beginning of a romance” (“Η αρχή ενός ειδυλλίου”).

6. “Baton” (Σκυτάλη) in Charalambides (1982) 116–122.

7. “March to Famagusta” (“Πορεία προς την Αμμόχωστο”) in Charalambides (1982) 100–103. Important critical studies of *Famagusta: Reigning City* include Herodotou (1989); Pieris (1991) 285–300; Raizis (1997); Tsiannikas (1998), (2003); and Christodoulidou (2001).

8. For a critical study of *The Dome*, see Herodotou (1983).

9. The ancient Greek word *ἴμερος* spans a wide semantic field ranging from “longing” and “yearning” to strong sexual desire.

10. Between *Dokimin* and *Quince Apple*, Charalambides published a slim volume, *Aiyal-*

Charalambides' poetic treatment of tragedy and the "tragic feeling". Charalambides is now less orientated towards the expression of grief and more preoccupied with myth and language as instruments for exploring disquieting questions of historical identity and destiny. In his most recent collections —from *Quince Apple* (2006) onwards— Charalambides seems to be outgrowing even these concerns and to be turning towards more purely aesthetic and metaliterary explorations.

From 1995 onwards, a kind of Mythic Method is a persistent, almost singular concern of Charalambides' poetry — perhaps to a fault, at least according to some critics.<sup>11</sup> Charalambides' collections after *Meta-History* consist, overwhelmingly, of modernist (often also postmodernist) forays into the continuity of the Greek tradition, which is seen as a unified historical, mythical and linguistic whole.<sup>12</sup> With *Meta-History* Charalambides renews his poetic idiom drastically: engaging in dense intertextual dialogue with Seferis and Cavafy, but also harking directly back to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, Charalambides' poetry now almost exclusively dramatizes episodes from the modern, medieval and ancient history of Greece and Cyprus. In some cases, as in "The Late Bronze Age" ("Υστερη Εποχή του Χαλκού"), the poem is palpably conflating the most recent with the most ancient vagaries of the island's history.<sup>13</sup> But in other cases, the modern insinuations are more oblique, almost intractable, and the historical material is in and of itself a performative poetic statement: an *enactment*, as it were, of tradition as "time in-temporal" and an affirmation of the poet's position within it. This is how the poet unpacks the character of his poetry in this latter phase:

I would say that *Quince Apple* is the natural conclusion of an evolutionary line, which began with *Meta-History* (*Μεθιστορία*, 1995) and continued with *Dokimin* (2000). All three of these books attempt to assimilate the multiple levels of our Greek tongue and culture through the stratification of history. Mainly, they correspond to my theory that that essence of art lies in the transformation of life and history into myth. [...] In the foundational *Meta-History*, mostly Cypriot themes dominate (ancient, byzantine and modern). This is a first attempt to touch upon elements of Greek diachronicity in

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*oussa Visited* (*Αιγιαλούσης Επίσκεψις*, 2003; first published in the journal *Indiktos*, vol. 16, 2002), containing "a poem and a comment". The "comment" is actually an extended theoretical essay on his poetics.

11. In his later books, Charalambides drew (perhaps excessive) criticism that he has allowed his *doctrina* to be reduced to a *manière*: see Papaleontiou (2013). Charalambides responded to his critics in Charalambides (2014). For a collection, and a history, of critical responses to Charalambides' work, see Pylarinos (2009).
12. On Charalambides' modernism and postmodernism, see Christodoulidou (2010) and (forthcoming).
13. Charalambides (2000) 77; see Petrides (2012).

combination with ‘poems on poetics’ (“ποιήματα ποιητικής”). In *Dokimin*, which is divided in twelve sections (in the form of the zodiac), I seek to express, as I wrote elsewhere, the existence of a Universe, I mean a whole Cosmos, which includes countless aspects of external history and internal human geography. In *Quince Apple*, which is my tenth poetic book, the evolution of myth but also the linguistic form that accompanies it come to an emphatic peak. The consciousness of an identity is aided by the consciousness of a language, but both escape their framework, since they become ecumenical values, or, more accurately, aesthetic qualities of a geometrical testimony of life (“αισθητικές ποιότητες γεωμετρημένης μαρτυρίας της ζωής”).<sup>14</sup>

The titles of these collections themselves are suggestive of the poet’s method. With the new-fangled term *Μεθιστορία*, Charalambides is making a multiple pun, which points simultaneously (a) to Seferis’ *Mythistorima* (1936), the cornerstone of Greek modernism, hence Charalambides’ natural point of departure along with Cavafy’s ironic historical glance, and (b) to the ability of poetry to supersede History, to *go beyond* the reductive linearity of time towards a more introvert, experiential chronotope, where the multiple temporal and spatial localities merge into one:

One of the staples of my work is the transformation of history into myth. This means that many things deriving from contemporary reality are not restricted within it, but instead they extend reality towards a meta-historical (*sc.* post-historical or trans-historical) dimension. And this comes across as the crystallization of history in the receptacle of memory, which implies odd synapses and a thousand flashes of the mind.<sup>15</sup>

*Μεθιστορία*, Meta-history, or perhaps more accurately Post- or Trans-History, is the negation and the renewal of history, its transformation into myth and into a tragic grand-narrative. As Charalambides notes:

My poetry is less about history and more about its negation. However, for something to be negated it first has to exist; and this attests to the essential importance of History as material that lends itself to various kinds of reversal.<sup>16</sup>

The essential difference, however, between *Meta-History* and the earlier collections lies elsewhere. As the book’s composite title can also suggest —“*meta*-history” as theoretical reflection on history through the practice of historical verse— Charalambides now develops a more discursive and

14. Charalambides (2009b) 313–314.

15. Charalambides (2013b).

16. Charalambides quoted in Hadjicosti (2008). Cf. also Charalambides (2009a) vol. I, 20: “The historian cannot provide us with any kind of revelation; much less, of course, can the politician. The interpreter of history or the maker of history cannot achieve revelation; revelation can only come through him who negates it. The poet negates History, because he has been given the grace to remake it”.

“scholarly” approach to poetry. He becomes a self-conscious *poeta doctus*, in the sense of digging deep both into the vaults of historical memory and into the various layers of the Greek language in its evolution through time. For the idiosyncratic, personal version of the Mythic Method in Charalambides includes collapsing the boundaries of time and space in terms of language as well:

I want to fit into my poetry the multiple levels of our linguistic history. Our language itself teaches that we should conceive of it as a collection of strata and varieties. I labor with language and I study it in depth; unreservedly, I utilize anything it has to offer from its different phases as building material for my work. [...] I wish to render our language the strainer of our cultural elements (“το στραγγιστήρι των πολιτισμικών μας στοιχείων”).<sup>17</sup>

*Dokimin* gives an agonistic, clearly Seferic twist to the poet’s relationship with this *doctrina*.<sup>18</sup> The title of the collection is sometimes reductively translated as “ordeal”; however, to allow its polysemy freely to unfold, it is best to leave it un-translated.<sup>19</sup> Δοκίμιν is a shrewdly selected word, which encapsulates all at once the quintessence of Charalambides’ mythic project and what one could call the “chronotopicity” of the Greek tongue: its geographies (δοκίμιν is a phonetically streamlined form of the Cypriot dialectic word δοτζίμιν or διτζίμιν), which are diverse but yet constitute a unified cultural space, and its outstretched temporal dimensions, which do not preclude continuity (δοκίμιν has contemporary, but also byzantine and ancient associations).

In itself the title of the collection is a journey through Greek space and time and a welding thereof into a united poetic chronotope. In the Cypriot dialect, δοτζίμιν or διτζίμιν is a heavy rock used in an eponymous popular game of masculine prowess still played in village squares usually on Easter Monday. Its purpose was to decide who was the community’s greatest *palikári* and most eligible bachelor.<sup>20</sup> The winner was the contestant who could not only lift the rock from the ground but also carry it around on his shoulders. As a metaphor, δοκίμιν is the trial of history, in a sense that harks back to Dionysios Solomos,<sup>21</sup> but most importantly the weight of cultural tradition (of language, history, and myth), similar to that proverbial “marble head”, which George Seferis, in *Mythistorima* III, had found thrust into

17. Charalambides (2009b) 314–315.

18. For a critical study of *Dokimin*, see Dallas (2001).

19. This is the judicious choice of David Connolly in Charalambides (2011).

20. On the erotic overtones of the title word, see Charalambides (2009e) 302–303.

21. Cf. Dallas (2001) 353.

his hands (“ξύπνησα με το μαρμάρινο τούτο κεφάλι στα χέρια / που μου εξαντλεί τους αγκώνες και δεν ξέρω πού να τ’ ακουμπήσω”). So *δοκίμιν* is the “trial” (*δοκιμασία*) of the poet who shoulders this weight (*δοκιμασία* being a term evoking the ancient Athenian legal process whereby the legitimacy of new citizen registrations was determined), as well as his “attempt” (*δοκιμή*) to assimilate the sundry elements of tradition into a new poetic whole. Finally, it is the suggestion that he has indeed succeeded in doing so, and can be now considered the tradition’s legitimate heir (*δόκιμος*).<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, condensing all the above, the title “*Δοκίμιν*,” in the spirit of reflective, analytical meta-poetry suggested by *Μεθιστορία*, embodies the poet’s ambition to contribute a new kind of poetic communication by way of a poem that “exploits the form of the essay” (*δοκίμιον*). This technique can be seen to culminate in the collections to follow.

In equal measure as the mythologization of history proper, in his current poetic phase Charalambides is also consistently redrafting the major mythical archetypes of ancient Greece into “four-dimensional” (to borrow Yannis Ritsos’ term) poetic symbols. In this respect, one can discern an ascending pattern, a crescendo, as it were, from *Dokimin* (2000) to *Desire* (2012). *Meta-History* contains only two mythological poems (“Virgin Helen”, “Parergon”), albeit long and ambitious ones,<sup>23</sup> whereas in the overwhelmingly “historical” *Dokimin*, despite the odd reference in other poems, the purely mythological compositions are again only three (“Palinode”, “In the palace of Proteus”, and “Penelope recognizes Odysseus”). On the contrary the first section of *Quince Apple*, consisting of fourteen poems in total, is titled “Μυθοπραξία” (which can be loosely translated as “doing things with myths”) and remakes such diverse mythical narratives as Theseus and the Minotaur (“Minoan”, “Archegony”, and “The apology of Theseus”), the House of Atreus (“Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking”, “The tricks of Oenomaus”), the story of Odysseus (“Penelope, wife of Odysseus”), Helen (“For the sake of a bone”), the Labdacids (“Creon”), as well as a number of poems focusing on deities: Persephone (“The Wise One”), Zeus and Hera (“Promiscuous heaven”), Hephaestus (“The shield of Hephaestus”, “Hephaestus slipping”), Dionysus (“Dionysus”), and Artemis (“The misfortune of Artemis”).

Nonetheless, Charalambides’ most “mythological” book to date is by

22. Cf. Charalambides (2009e) 303: “...the sense of stylistic accomplishment (“το δόκιμον του ύφους”) that a poet in his sixties would hope to have achieved”. On the similar function of the title *Κυδώνιον μήλον* as a condenser of historical memory and linguistic history, cf. Charalambides (2009b) 311–313.

23. Discussed by Maronitis (1995).

far *Desire*, at least two thirds of which revolve, one way or another, true to the collection's themes, around the four major ancient Greek paradigms of female sexuality; namely, in order of significance, Aphrodite (at least ten different poems), Helen (eight poems), Penelope, and Clytemnestra.<sup>24</sup> In *The Language of Weaving*, precedence is once again given to "historiomyths" (a coinage used as an epigraph in the second section of *Quince Apple*). The mythological poems in this collection are only seven (eight if one also counts "Cepheus and Praxander", the legendary founders of the kingdoms of Lapithos and Kyrenia): "Odysseus", "Orestes", "The sting of death" (on Thetis and Achilles), "The tale of Aphrodite", "Tithonos", "Narcissus" and "Aphrodite's old age".

Nonetheless, amidst all this mythological material, *tragic myth* per se, in the sense of narratives as articulated in the surviving plays of the three great tragedians of the fifth century BC, is in relatively shorter supply in Charalambides' oeuvre.<sup>25</sup> Greek tragedy has a small presence in *Meta-History*, mainly in the prose poem "Ardana II",<sup>26</sup> which Charalambides once dubbed "a veritable scene from Greek drama".<sup>27</sup> More fleetingly, in the poem "Saint Helen in Cyprus", lines 4–6, the eponymous saint's visit to Cyprus—a fable, not a historical fact—is debunked in the words of Euripides' Helen: "I've never set foot in brave Troy', / so the fair Helen would say, too, / 'everything is a lie, believe me'"'.<sup>28</sup>

Tragedy's presence in *Dokimin* is slightly more substantial, but still comparably small. Apart from the fleeting references to Euripides' *Bacchae* (in "Συντυχία")<sup>29</sup> and *Hippolytus* (in "Potiphar's Wife"),<sup>30</sup> two poems turn

24. On the figures of Helen and Penelope in Kyriakos Charalambides, see, respectively, Christodoulidou (2007) and (2012). On Clytemnestra, see Christodoulidou (2010), (2011a) and (2011b). See also Voskos (1998), more generally on Charalambides' Homeric models.

25. Some references to tragedy are found dispersed in the collections prior to *Meta-History*: e.g., *The Vase with the Figures* contains a poem titled "The horses of Rhesus" (Charalambides 1973, 89); in "Bizarre Dream" from *Famagusta Reigning City* the titular nightly vision is transformed, first, into an Erinys pursuing the poet-Orestes, then into an Electra "emerging from the House of her fearsome Father".

26. Charalambides (1995) 93.

27. Kyriakos Charalambides in Petrides (2014).

28. Charalambides (1995) 35 = Charalambides (2011) 8.

29. In accordance to the poetic program underpinning this collection, this poem's title can mean, simultaneously, "chance encounter" or "coincidence" (from the ancient word συντυχία) and "conversation" (from the Cypriot συντυσιά). The poem is both those things: a chance encounter (the poem notices an oddity in Seferis' notes on Othello) and a conversation with Seferis himself.

30. Charalambides (2000) 80–81.

again to Helen of Troy, this time with more or less clear allusions to tragic theater in general and to Euripides in particular. “Palinode”,<sup>31</sup> a long “poem of poetics” (ποίημα ποιητικῆς), dramatizes Stesichorus’ formidable encounter with Helen (the backstory to Euripides’ tragic play) as an answer to a question: “how can anybody, and indeed a poet, survive, even biologically speaking, in an era that fears the truth?”<sup>32</sup> To recover his eyesight, Charalambides’ Stesichorus succumbs to Helen’s violence and accepts to recant his previous version of her story — articulating the “palinode”, which also inspired Euripides’ tragic play. But in Charalambides he does so only seemingly; for his palinode is the definition of doublespeak, eventually transforming the tragedy of his life into a comedy of errors at Helen’s expense (“this is how life’s tragedy, that comedy, / concludes: with a palinode”). Ostensibly, Stesichorus gives Helen what she wants: “You’ve never cheated, / never set foot, never went / never left / never stayed / never loved / never saw”. In reality, though, this devious palinode is simultaneously his revenge: it does not absolve Helen of her crimes, it annihilates her; the refutation is so absolute that it cancels her very existence. In other words, this is not a denial but a (mutual) deletion: if Stesichorus’ poetry cannot exist (and it does not, without the right to tell the truth), then Helen cannot exist either: Helen and Stesichorus, poetry and truth, develop such a dialectical relationship that, in their attempt to become separate, they cancel each other out.<sup>33</sup>

Immediately after “Palinode” comes the poem “In the Palace of Proteus”.<sup>34</sup> This composition steps even more firmly on the tracks of Euripides’ *Helen*, as it rehashes the dialogue between Helen and Teucer in the play’s prologue, especially lines 115ff. The poem’s theme is similar to that of the tragic play, namely the authenticity of vision; only in Charalambides, instead of the archetypal contrast between εἶναι and φαίνεσθαι, the opposition is between the physical sight of the eyes and the autonomous inner vision — the inner vision of the poet, one suspects, who is able to pierce through the illusory phenomena (“You should know, Helen, / different things the mind does hear and see.”) Although in a more indirect way, “In the Palace of Proteus” can also be read as a poem of poetics.

In *Quince Apple*, the most important reworkings of tragic characters and themes are located in two poems. “Creon”<sup>35</sup> imagines the fall of the guilt-ridden Theban king after the murders of Antigone and Haemon. “Clytemnestra,

31. Charalambides (2000) 111–114 = Charalambides (2011) 25–27.

32. Kyriakos Charalambides in Petrides (2014).

33. Cf. Charalambides (2009c) 163.

34. Charalambides (2000) 15.

35. Charalambides (2006) 24 = Charalambides (2011) 73.

dreaming and waking”,<sup>36</sup> analyzed in detail below, is in line with the tradition of *apologiae* in favor of Agamemnon’s wife initiated, to a certain extent, by Euripides’ *Electra* and developed extensively in modern feminist readings of the myth. Four more poems in this collection contain less sustained moments of dialogue with tragedy, either in the form of fleeting references or of freewheeling poetic elaborations of tragic passages and themes. “For the sake of a bone”<sup>37</sup> mentions the famous “empty shirt” of Helen referencing Euripides through Seferis. However, Charalambides’ Helen is no phantom. As in the *Iliad*, she is a tantalizing physical presence stirring animal passions in Menelaus and Paris, who duel for her graces like two dogs tearing each other apart for a bone. The poem “Dionysus”<sup>38</sup> is also Euripidean in its intertextual associations: it hints at the *Bacchae* amidst a plethora of other quite impressionistic references to the god, couched in the ornate, polyspermic language that characterizes the collection as a whole. “The Misfortune of Artemis”<sup>39</sup> sets out from Euripides’ *Hippolytus*, 1395–1396, and develops Artemis’ thoughts, as she finds herself unable to show physical emotion for the hero’s anguish. Finally, the “Glasswork of the Sultans”,<sup>40</sup> which focuses on Xerxes and his infamous enchainment of the Hellespont, refers to the *Persians* of Aeschylus (and Herodotus’ *Histories*), to comment ironically on issues of cultural relativity, ethnic divide and self-indulgent prejudice. Evidently, then, tragic intertextuality peaked in *Quince Apple* compared to its infrequent presence in the earlier collections, but in the otherwise pronouncedly mythological *Desire* (2012), as well as *In the Language of Weaving* (2013), it dwindles again. The only clear example of Charalambides’ interaction with tragedy in *Desire* is “Agamemnon”,<sup>41</sup> which is written in the style of folk poetry (analyzed in the second part of this article). The poem “She who Captivates the Men” (“Ελανδρος”),<sup>42</sup> despite the obvious Aeschylean echo in the title (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 688–689), has broadly mythological rather than tragic subject matter. Similarly scarce is the presence of tragedy in Charalambides’ most recent book, *In the Language of Weaving*, where tragedy is exploited in one single poem, albeit a sizable and significant one, “Orestes”,<sup>43</sup> also discussed extensively below.

36. Charalambides (2006) 15–17 = Charalambides (2011) 70–71.

37. Charalambides (2006) 20–21.

38. Charalambides (2006) 31.

39. Charalambides (2006) 32.

40. Charalambides (2006) 47 = Charalambides (2011) 79–80.

41. Charalambides (2012) 35.

42. Charalambides (2012) 25.

43. Charalambides (2013) 24–27.

Of the poems mentioned above, in what follows I shall discuss in detail a group of four compositions, which refashion the tragic stories concerning the House of Atreus. In chronological order, I shall examine: from *Meta-History*, “Ardana II”; from *Quince Apple*, “Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking”; from *Desire*, “Agamemnon”; and from *In the Language of Weaving*, “Orestes”. My choice is determined by the fact that the poems relating to the House of Atreus constitute the most populated thematic group among the tragedy-related compositions of Charalambides. Moreover, since all four of these poems come from the current phase of Charalambides’ production, which establishes, but also gradually hones and develops, the ‘historiomythical’ character of his poetry, it is also my intention to showcase, by way of this selective presentation, some of the most important recent trends in the poet’s work.

Beyond the obvious narrative thrills offered by such archetypal stories of human conflict (betrayal, human sacrifice, adultery, murder, revenge, matricide, madness, redemption) and the enticing prospect to engage in multi-directional intertextual dialogue with a number of literary and other predecessors,<sup>44</sup> the allure of this mythology for Charalambides and many others in Greece and abroad is owed, I think, to two further, overarching factors (not specific, certainly, to this mythological cycle alone but certainly operative in it par excellence). First is the possibility they afford for various shifts of focalization. Moving the narrative spotlight, as indeed was the case in many a modern example, from Clytemnestra to Electra or from Agamemnon to Orestes and even Pylades,<sup>45</sup> let alone upgrading marginal personages, such as Electra’s morganatic husband (Euripides’ *ἀδελφολύκος*),<sup>46</sup> provides significant leeway for originality. Second, revisionist, even heretical treatments of the myth have also proven possible by way of re-imagining, often drastically, the character and role of each major protagonist. Charalambides’ poems take full advantage of all these opportunities. In terms of focalization, “Ardana II” and “Orestes” zoom in on the son of Agamemnon, whereas “Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking” and “Agamemnon” focalize mostly the murderous

44. For an overview of the myth of the House of Atreus and its modern receptions (with bibliography), see the relevant entries in Moog-Grünwald (2008): “Agamemnon und Klytemnestra”: 27–32; “Atreus und Thyestes”: 180–3; “Elektra”: 247–52; “Orestes”: 512–21; cf. also Liapis (2008) 333–408 and (2014), Komar (2003) and Bakogianni (2011). For Modern Greek theatrical receptions in particular, see Pefanis (2001/2), Chassapi-Christodoulou (2002), and van Steen (2002).

45. As in Scene 3 of Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Electra or the Fall of Masks*.

46. Used, for instance, by Iakovos Kambanellis in *The Supper* (named Pholos), Marguerite Yourcenar in *Electra or the Fall of the Masks* (named Theodoros), and others.

queen. In terms of revisionist content, too, his “Clytemnestra” joins the long line of Greek and Western, ancient and modern *apologiae* for Agamemnon’s wife, whereas his Orestes shifts from a hapless, pitiful exile in “Ardana II” to a “horrid arch-sacrificer” in “Clytemnestra” and finally again to an almost paralytically indecisive young boy with a strong Oedipal complex in “Orestes”.

## II. *Orestes and Pylades in Cyprus: “Ardana II” (“Meta-History,” 1995)*

“Ardana II”, a prose poem, reprises an earlier composition of the same title, included in *Famagusta Reigning City*.<sup>47</sup> Charalambides annotated the first “Ardana” as follows:

“Ardana is a village on the mountain range of Pentadaktylos, eighteen miles away from the city of Famagusta and five and a half miles away from the castle of Candara. [...] Andreas Maragos, a theater director and actor, born in Ardana, inspired some elements of the composition. The idea for the poem, after all, was founded on his description of a dream he had about his village. One day he came up to me and said: ‘Kyriakos, you write so many poems about your hometown, Famagusta. But my own thoughts go to my own village, Ardana. Nobody speaks of it, poor and humble as it is. But this village is what I am yearning for, for this I suffer. So you keep on writing about Famagusta. After all some day it will be returned to you. But who will ever care about my Ardana? We shall never go back, I know it by my dreams. I think we have lost it forever.’ But the situation is even more tragic as far as Famagusta is concerned, I reflected later. We are talking about a city which we used to have in our possession and which we let slip from our fingers; which we see and do not see; which, even when we take it back, will not belong to us. Except if...”.<sup>48</sup>

The first “Ardana” elaborates on this tragic dilemma: which is worse, seeing the city and knowing it can only be regained on humiliating terms,<sup>49</sup> or not seeing it but having the illusion that you are?<sup>50</sup> “Ardana II” describes a second dream related to Charalambides by Maragos,<sup>51</sup> eleven years after

47. Charalambides (1982) 106–108.

48. Charalambides (1982) 159–160. On the theme of the “return” to one’s native town by way of the dream, with especial reference to the collection *Famagusta Reigning City*, see Christodoulidou (2006).

49. Charalambides (1982) 107: “If, he said, we have allowed Famagusta / to slip from our hands / one day for sure we shall retake it / on humiliating terms: this much is true”.

50. Charalambides (1982) 108: “Only know this: either you see her / and you cannot regain her on equal terms / or you don’t see her and you have the illusion / that you do, because it looks that way”.

51. Christodoulidou (2001) 358 comments as follows on the importance of dreams in *Famagusta Reigning City*. Her analysis applies more generally to the poetics of

the first, on July 1, 1992, when time was shrouding the refugee's memories even further. The question is now different: is the Return (νόστος) ever truly possible?

## ΑΡΔΑΝΑ ΙΙ

Να της μιλήσω Τουρκικά δεν ήξερα.

- Μιλάτε Αγγλικά;
- Καταλαβαίνω.
- Αυτό είναι το σπίτι μου;
- Αυτό είναι το σπίτι σου.

Κι αρχίησα ένα κλάμα μες στον ύπνο μου. Εκείνο του αποχαιρετισμού. Μα τ' αναφιλητά μου μ' ανασήκωναν σαν καρυδότσουφλο και ξύπνησα, Πυλάδη.

Βρεγμένο το κρεβάτι μου — τ' όνειρο μήπως έσταζε από την οροφή του; — εμείς οι δυο το βλέπουμε, το ξέρουμε, το ζούμε κιόλας: “Χάθηκε ό στρατός μας!” Τίποτα πια, κανένα πλοίο εν όψει, καμιά στεριά, κανένα σπίτι, φίλε.

Και όμως το ξωπόρτιν ήταν το ίδιο, το στενοσόκακο ίδιο, ο λάκκος ήταν ίδιος, η τερατσιά, ο φούρνος, το τρακτέρ, η μάντρα ήταν ίδια. Κι εγώ καμιά σχέση με το σπίτι. Δεν τ' αναγνώριζα. Στεκόμουν στην αυλή μου κι ένιωθα τόσο άβολα, στοιχηματίζω, αν με θωρούσες, θα 'βαζες τα κλάματα.

Μες στην αυλή μου και δεν ήμουν πια στο σπίτι μου, δεν ήμουν στο χωριό μου — ένας ξένος, που η ψυχή του αναπαμό δεν είχε.

— Τί φής; Απέξω από το σπίτι σου κι ούτε που τ' αναγνώριζες, αλήθεια;

— Δεν ήτανε δικό μου πια, δεν ήταν. Το σπίτι που γεννήθηκα, Πυλάδη! Και μάλιστα τη ρώτησα: Κυρία, αυτό είναι το σπίτι που γεννήθηκα; Is this the house I was born? Και μου 'πεν η Τουρκάλα: “Ναι, αυτό είναι”.

Μυστήριο! Πού ήξερε πως ήταν το σπίτι αυτό που εγώ το φως του ήλιου πρωτόειδα, πώς ήταν τόσο βέβαιη;

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Charalambides: “...the poet often detaches himself from the real historical events providing the background to the poetry and by way of imagination reveals to us a world which acts and moves in the realm of connotation, of dreams, but also of wakefulness: ‘I saw her then in my sleep or in your waking.’ The role of dreams is particularly defining and important, since ‘the miracle was in the dream’. Only in dreams does one enjoy the privilege of infiltrating the invisible”.

## ARDANA II

I could not speak to her in Turkish.

- Do you speak English?
- I can understand.
- Is this my house?
- This is your house.

And I started weeping in my sleep. That cry of farewell. But my sobs were rocking me like a cockleshell, so I woke up, Pylades.

My bed was moist — could the dream have been leaking from its roof? We two can see that, know that, live that even: “Our army is gone!” Nothing remains, no ship in sight, no land, no home, my friend.

And yet the front door was the same, the narrow street the same, the well the same, the carob tree, the clay oven, the tractor, and the fold, all were the same. And I had no relation with the house. I did not recognize it. I was standing inside its yard and I was feeling so uncomfortable; I bet, if you could see me, you would break down in tears.

Inside my yard, and yet I was no longer in my home, no longer in my village — an alien, whose soul just could not rest in peace.

— Τί φής;<sup>52</sup> Outside your house and you couldn’t even recognize it, is that true?

— It was no longer mine; it was not. The house I was born in, Pylades! I even asked her: “Madam, is this the house I was born?”<sup>53</sup> And the Turkish woman told me: “Yes, this is it.”

What a mystery! How could she know this was the house, where I first saw the light of day, how could she be so certain?

Charalambides’ poem partakes in a long tradition of *νόστος*-literature thematising the *impossibility* of a return to the same. Prime Modern Greek examples of this tradition are the folk ballad “Ο γυρισμός του ξενιτεμένου” and Seferis’ homonymous composition.<sup>54</sup> The latter is especially relevant here. “Ardana II”, like Seferis’ poem, is structured as a dialogue between two old friends, of whom the first returns home in search of his childhood memories. As in Seferis, the returning subject cannot recognize the new environs: the house is there, but still it is gone. The childhood friend (“παλιέ μου φίλε”) is there, but the two can no longer connect.

52. “What are you saying?”

53. English in the original.

54. See Alexopoulou (2006). On the folk ballad, see also the discussion of Charalambides’ “Agamemnon” below.

As mentioned above, however, Kyriakos Charalambides characterized “Ardana II” specifically as “a veritable scene from Greek drama”. In fact, Charalambides’ poem, dominated as it is by the personae of Agamemnon’s son and his companion, is indeed, above all else, a bitterly ironic reversal of Sophocles’ *Electra*, and particularly the prologue, where Orestes, accompanied by Pylades, returns to Argos and is introduced by his Pedagogue to all the major landmarks of his hometown, including, of course, the palace of his royal *oikos* (Sophocles, *Electra*, 1–10). In Sophocles as in Charalambides, the rightful owner, who had to flee under threat of death, is re-introduced to his house and property after a significant amount of time. In both cases, house and property have been usurped. But this is where the similarities end and the reversals begin. Unlike “Ardana II”, and also unlike most tragedies in which the νόστος-theme is employed,<sup>55</sup> Sophocles’ *Electra* is not a play about an impossible return, quite the opposite: the return of the Sophoclean Orestes is that of a triumphant avenger and liberator, who comes to reunite with his renowned family and his inheritance (and that he does; even the terrible prerequisite of this return, the matricide, is downplayed in Sophocles’ play).<sup>56</sup> Charalambides’ Orestes, on the contrary, returns tentatively as a hapless, powerless, anonymous refugee. Sophocles’ hero is a young boy, full of energy and hope, returning to a royal city and a splendid palace; Charalambides’ is a worn out mature man, who revisits an obscure village and a humble abode. Instead of illustrious temples, glorious greens and busy marketplaces, Charalambides’ hero is looking at carob trees, animal folds and tractors. The Sophoclean hero enters the scene in a blast of the most luminous sunlight, as the dawn breaks bringing with it the promise of liberation from the usurpers (Sophocles, *Electra*, 17–19). Charalambides’ Orestes, quite the reverse, “returns” in the dead of night and in the illusion of a dream. His return is punctuated — in an instance of tragic overdetermination — by echoes of Aeschylus’ *Persians* intimating total catastrophe (“Our army is gone. Nothing remains”; cf. Aeschylus, *Persians*, 255: στρατός γὰρ πᾶς ὄλωλε; 260: πάντα γ’ ἔστ’ ἐκεῖνα διαπεπραγμένα). In the background one possibly hears also the folk laments (θρήνοι) for the loss of Constantinople and Asia Minor.

55. See Alexopoulou (2009).

56. Pace Alexopoulou (2006) 5, who believes that Orestes’ return “is marred by his act of revenge”, this is not Sophocles’ attitude in *Electra*. Quite the contrary, Sophocles’ Orestes shocks the audience by how little the horrible prospect of slaying his mother concerns him and by how resolutely he pursues the ἔργον of vengeance not so much as the punishment of two wrongdoers but at the necessary step for his own reinstatement as Agamemnon’s true heir.

Above all, Charalambides' poem is underscored by the motif of memory, which is tightly connected with the archetypal theme of the Return. Sophocles' Orestes left Argos as a child. He has no real memories either of the city or of the great landmarks the Pedagogue is so grandiloquently introducing him to. He is even free from the painful recollection of his father's murder, which plagues his sister Electra day and night. Orestes' lack of memory is liberating; it frees up his energy for action instead of lament. Charalambides' tragic hero takes a leaf out of Seferis' book: he is also memory-free, but the effect of this amnesia on him is devastating. He left not as a child, but as a mature man; therefore, he *should* remember his village but he cannot, he *should* recognize his house but he does not, he *should* be familiar with the surroundings but he is not. The external shell of both the house and the village is the same, but its essence, its soul, is gone. He himself is like an empty cockleshell, rocked by his lament. His birthplace, his home is now as unfamiliar to him as the English language that carries his rudimentary communication with the current owner. This foreign woman, like Sophocles' Pedagogue, introduces the modern Orestes to his own house and seems to have a firmer hold of the house's, and its owner's, past than the owner himself. "This is ancient Argos, which you longed to see for so long", says the Pedagogue to Sophocles' Orestes (Sophocles, *Electra*, 4); "This is your house", says the Turkish woman, too, to Charalambides' hero. But unlike Sophocles' Orestes, who entertains no doubts as to where he is and what he is supposed to do, Charalambides' tragic persona is drowned by a series of cruel questions: "Is this my house?"; "Is this the house I was born?" (*sic* in the original); "Outside your house and could not recognize it, is that true?" How can anyone be certain of any answer? Charalambides' Orestes, like his Sophoclean namesake, returns to "Argos". But this adulterated place is now so alien to him that it is as if he has landed on the land of Tauris instead.

Sophocles' Orestes returns to re-conquer. The *νόστος* of the modern Orestes, on the contrary, is a dream, although, when he realizes, as soon as sleep violently subsides, that he has been completely and irrevocably alienated from his native land, the dream's effect on him is all too real: "And I started weeping in my sleep. That cry of farewell. But my sobs were rocking me like a cockleshell, so I woke up, Pylades". The introduction of Pylades at this particular juncture, to mark the transformation of Maragos' dream into a universal (i.e. mythic) experience, comes as a surprise. Nothing in the preceding verses prepared us for this mythical expansion of the poem. True to his Sophoclean (and Aeschylean) self, and in contrast with the talkative companion of the exile in Seferis, Pylades remains silent in the poem, apart from one single line of text, which begins with the famous tragic interjection of

astonishment: τί φής? But despite this single point of similarity, Charalambides' Pylades is starkly different from any of his ancient equivalents in the background. In both Aeschylus and Sophocles Pylades may speak little, but he is perfectly attuned both with the situation at hand and with his comrade. Charalambides' Pylades is not: in terms of poetic technique, the linguistic incongruity of the ancient Greek phrase he opens with seems also to emphasize, on top of his genuine surprise, this dissociation. Pylades is incredulous and uncomprehending. Despite Orestes' good hopes in the beginning ("we two can see that, know that, live that even"), Pylades cannot truly and fully share in the event. Unlike his ancient models, he did not even follow Orestes in his journey; he is just the audience of a story told after the event.

The tragedy of Charalambides' Orestes is measured by his loneliness in front of a prophetic dream, whose cold truth — that even if we are allowed back, after so many years we may have nothing truly to go back to — he cannot endure. This loneliness is neither Aeschylean nor Sophoclean; it is Seferic: like the exile's companion in Seferis' poem, Charalambides' Pylades, too, "sinks" and is gone ("πια δεν ακούω τσιμουδιά / βούλιαξε κι ο στερνός μου φίλος") much like the hope for a return to the same.

### III. *Set free — by the knife: "Clytemnestra, Dreaming and Waking"* ("Quince Apple", 2006)

In the following poem, Orestes is yet to come, but his return looms in the background as an ominous certainty. The poem focalizes Clytemnestra and her anguished thoughts, moments before (or moments after, this remains purposely ambiguous) the fateful murder. This poem, too, revolves around a dream — two dreams, to be exact, both visited upon Clytemnestra, interrupted by moments of anguished alertness. Faithful to the archaic and early classical tradition, Charalambides gives the dream a corporeal existence, a treacherous, *masculine* subjectivity, in a poem where the gender factor is prominent: it is not just a dream, but the Ξένος Όνειρος ("Shocking Dream,")<sup>57</sup> which overwhelms Clytemnestra twice in two different ways. In its initial visit, as in Aeschylus and Sophocles, the Dream is violent and

57. David Connolly translates "Ξένος Όνειρος" as "Unknown Dream". Ξένος, in ancient Greek, indeed suggests what is alien and strange, but also what is unusual, surprising, odd or bizarre. To the same effect, qualifying όνειρος, Pindar uses the adjective θαυμαστός (*Pyth.* 4.162: ταῦτά μοι θαυμαστός όνειρος ἰὼν φωνεῖ). The latter sense, in my opinion, is more applicable to "Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking". It is also the one used by Charalambides in the poem "Ξένος Όνειρος", included in *Famagusta: Reigning City* (Charalambides 1982, 96–99). "Bizarre Dream" seems more appropriate

disturbing, causing the murderous queen great psychological distress. In its second visit, however, the dream is deceptive and pernicious: soothing like a cradle song and providing images of calmness and normality, the Shocking Dream lulls Clytemnestra back to sleep. To underscore this effect, the poem abandons the modernist trope and the free verse at this point and turns to traditional versification and imagery suggestive of folk songs and the Cretan Renaissance.<sup>58</sup> This time Clytemnestra is never to awaken from her sleep, as the slaughterer's knife will cut her life short. Does she truly want to wake up, though? There is a surprising twist in the conclusion of the poem, as I show further down, which nullifies the Dream's devious plan and gives control back to Clytemnestra.

All this time Clytemnestra is lying next to Aegisthus, who now disgusts her. His slumber is deep and untroubled like a corpse's, as if he is already dead (Clytemnestra imagines that she herself could be one of his executioners). In the moments of waking, in-between the two visits of the Dream, Clytemnestra addresses an unidentified "old man" (apparently, a synecdochic allusion to the chorus of tragedy and particularly to the old men forming the chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*). Her monologue reads like an *apologia pro vita sua*. Charalambides' poem here is vaguely reminiscent of Iakovos Kambanellis' *Letter to Orestes*, also a dramatic monologue. Unlike the Clytemnestra of Aeschylus or Sophocles but similar to that of Kambanellis, Charalambides' heroine, ahead of the cruel fate that is unavoidably in store for her, is indignant rather than fearful. In both Kambanellis and Charalambides, she regrets her act, though not out of guilt or consideration for Agamemnon, but out of outraged cognizance of the forces that led her to this situation: patriarchal power, male perfidy, and Love. For in a patriarchal environment even Love (in archaic poetry, also a material external presence rather than an internal sentiment) is eventually a force of oppression against women, if the exercise of uninhibited erotic choice on their part more often than not results in social denigration, excommunication, and even death. A woman's fate becomes even more regrettable, if the man, for the sake of whom the woman breaks the patriarchal protocol, in this case Aegisthus, proves to be disastrously disappointing.

Kambanellis' Clytemnestra is anguished by the prospect of Orestes' return. She does not care for her own survival, however; what causes her angst

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a translation for the *Famagusta* poem, but the nightly vision in *Quince Apple* has more disturbing qualities; hence "shocking" is, I think, preferable.

58. *Quince Apple* ends with a clear allusion to Vicenzos Kornaros' epic romance *Erotokritos* (in the poem "Of the table"; Charalambides 2006, 156). Charalambides (2011) 312 attests to the importance of the Modern Greek epic in the overall conception of his book.

is the fact that murdering his mother under Electra's poisonous influence, the young and innocent Orestes stands to lose his own soul. Charalambides' Clytemnestra, on the contrary, entertains no tender feelings for her son, "the horrid and impious arch-sacrificer", whom she sees as an extension of his father, another instrument of patriarchal viciousness. She is certain of his determination to commit his impious act, and yet she strangely acquiesces to her fate. In stark contrast to Kambanellis, Clytemnestra in fact *wants* to die, not because she feels that she deserves it, but because under these conditions dying is for her a more meaningful act than living: being slaughtered by Orestes seems to be the ultimate form of resistance to patriarchal tyranny (see below).

For ultimately, *pace* Christodoulidou (2011a), who sees the heroine as embodying all the negative stereotypes associated with the female, thus living up to her traditional role in classical literature, "Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking" is a poem about the Female as the victim of the Male; about woman as the perennial underdog in a man's world, in which she is by definition alone and defenseless. The "hell-fire" of her passionate love for Aegisthus —the fact that she dared unleash her sexuality in defiance of male regulation— sets Clytemnestra on a collision course with patriarchal authority, which results in Agamemnon's murder in the bath. This murder, and the subsequent erotic union of Clytemnestra with the object of her desire, signals a temporary vindication of female power. But then patriarchy insinuates itself upon Clytemnestra once again. Aegisthus fails to fulfill his gendered role, after having satisfied his carnal needs. Once objectified as Clytemnestra's feckless minion (Charalambides' Aegisthus is not even an accessory to the murder, only its dishonored beneficiary), Aegisthus is eternally a non-male. His emasculation, however, is more ominous for Clytemnestra than for himself, as she is now exposed to Agamemnon's avenger, who is drawing near through deception and stealth, abetted by the male Όνειρος, a projection of patriarchal will.

I cite the poem before commenting on it in closer detail:

#### ΚΛΥΤΑΙΜΝΗΣΤΡΑ, ΚΑΤ' ΟΝΑΡ ΚΑΙ ΚΑΘ' ΥΠΑΡ

Στην Κική Δημουλά

#### I

Η Κλυταιμνήστρα ξύπνησε απ' ένα θόρυβο μαβή.  
 Την έτσουζαν τα χέρια της,  
 αγέρηδες, σεισμοί  
 πληθαίναν στην καρδιά της.

Ξένος Όνειρος  
 (τον πρόφταξε με του ματιού την άκρη  
 να βγαίνει απ' το παράθυρο)  
 έσπασε, λέει, το τζάμι του προσώπου της.

Α, μοίρα! Πιο καλά, ω κακότυχη μητέρα Ήρα,  
 ο φύλακας γραφιάς  
 εντεταλμένος να χαράσσει γραμμικά  
 σε δέλτους (σε κιτάπια ιστορικά  
 που καταπίνουν μύθους) τα συμβάντα  
 περιτυλίγεται τη φρουκτωρία!  
 Το ρυαχτό  
 στο βάθος του οκτώσχημου κορμιού μου  
 γεννά και τίκτει μέγα σαματά.  
 Τα κρόταλά μου ηχούν, τη γέενα για να κρύβουν  
 του παθιασμένου μου έρωτα. Κι ο Αίγισθος,  
 ο Αίγισθος κοιμάται.

Μήτε λοιπόν των άστρων το ροχαλητό  
 κι ο ρόχθος του πελάου που κατακλύζει  
 ώσμε δυο πήχες το κλινάρι μας μπορεί  
 να τον σηκώσει από το πτώμα του —  
 εζόν κι αν τον σκοτώσουν, είτ' εγώ είτε άλλοι.

Καταλαβαίνεις, γέροντα, πως άλλα έχω στο νου μου  
 κι αλλού άλλα με τραβούν· να περιφέρομαι  
 γυμνή και πελιδνή, χωρίς τα πέδιλά μου,  
 κάνε χωρίς πυξίδα κι αφικασίδωτη,  
 να κάνω τρεις φορές του παλατιού το γύρο  
 και δέκα να εκστομώ κατάρες για τον έρω  
 που μ' έσυρε ως τ' αστράπτοντα ψάρια που ρυμουλκούν  
 το ποθεινό λουτρό μου.  
 Μόλις και προλαβαίνω  
 να δέσω τα μαλλιά μου, την πανοπλία ν' αρμόσω  
 του αργυρού μου απελπισμού, να σαρκωθώ έναν ταύρο  
 κακοπελεκημένο, δανεικό,  
 που μάχεται στη θλάση του να σώσει  
 το ξόανο της θεάς.

## II

Ο Ξένος Όνειρος ξανά στο παραθύρι  
 πουλάκι στήθηκε γλυκό μ' ανθρωπινή ομιλία.  
 Και τι ταράζεσαι, κυρά; Όλα είναι σαν και πρώτα  
 γαληνεμένα· τα παιδιά στην κούνια τους κοιμούνται,  
 πρωί πρωί ο αφέντης σου κινεί την άμαξά του  
 να σπείρει δέντρη και βουνά, να σπείρει άστρα και πλάτη  
 κι όσα δε χώρεσε η σοδειά του νου και το παλάτι.  
 Καλοκοιμήσου κι αγρυπνώ τον ύπνο σου να υφαίνω  
 μ' όλα του κόσμου τα καλά και των δακρύων τον αίνο.

Δεν πρόλαβε να της το πει και κείνη αποκοιμήθη.  
 Γλυκόμηλο είχε στην καρδιά και ρόδι απά στα στήθη.  
 Δώδεκα πήχες ουρανός κρεμόταν πάνωθ' της·  
 τον είχε ο Αγαμέμνονας με προσταγή της Θέτης  
 φέρει μαζί του, ν' απλωθεί μακρύτερα η φωνή της  
 σαν θα την έσφαζε ο φρικτός κι ανόσιος αρχιθύτης.

## CLYTEMNESTRA (DREAMING AND WAKING)

(transl. David Connolly)

*To Kiki Dimoula*

## I

Clytemnestra was woken by a mauve noise.

Her hands were smarting,  
 winds, earthquakes  
 multiplied in her heart.

An Unknown Dream

(she just managed to catch a glimpse of it  
 leaving through the window)  
 shattered, she said, her face's glass pane.

Ah fate! Or better, O ill-fated mother Hera,  
 the guardian scribe

commissioned to linearly inscribe  
 the events (in historical ledgers  
 that swallow up myths) on tablets  
 is engulfed in the beacon's glow!

The growl

in the depths of my figure-eight body  
 sirens and bears a great racket.

My rattling resounds, to hide the hell-fire  
 of my passionate love. And Aegisthus  
 Aegisthus is sleeping.

So neither the stars' snoring  
 nor the roar of the sea that inundates  
 our bed two cubits deep can  
 raise him from his slumbering corpse —  
 unless he is murdered, by me or others.

You see, old man, that I have other things in mind  
 yet something else leads me elsewhere; to wander  
 naked and sallow, without my sandals,  
 without pyxis<sup>59</sup> or make-up  
 making the rounds of the palace three times  
 and ten times uttering curses for the love  
 that dragged me to the glistening fish that tow

59. Πυξίδα in Modern Greek can mean the ancient pyxis, but also the compass: Clytemnestra wanders around in distressed unkemptness, feeling a sense of disorientation.

my coveted bath.  
 I only just manage  
 to tie my hair, to don the armor  
 of my silver despondency, to embody a bull,  
 ill-fashioned and borrowed,  
 that in its contusion fights to save  
 the idol of the goddess.

## II

Again at the window stood the Unknown Dream  
 a sweet little bird with human voice.  
 Why be alarmed, lady? All is calm  
 as before; the children are asleep in their cradles,  
 early in the morning your master drives his cart  
 to sow trees and hills, to sow stars and heavens  
 and whatever the mind's harvest and palace couldn't hold.  
 Sleep well for I keep vigil to weave your sleep  
 with all the world's blessings and the tears' praise.  
 No sooner had it said this than she fell asleep.  
 A sweet apple in her heart and pomegranate on her breast.  
 Twelve cubits of sky hung above her;  
 at Thetis' command Agamemnon had brought it  
 with him, that her voice might carry further  
 when the horrid and impious arch-sacrificer would slaughter her.

The poem starts with images of mental distress. Clytemnestra sits up, suddenly awoken by a “mauve noise” (“απ’ ένα θόρυβο μαβή”). Mauve, or purple, is the color of royal power, of Agamemnon who is coming. It is also the color of the garments, which in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra lay in front of her oblivious husband’s feet luring him to his death inside the palace (as mentioned, the poem’s time frame is deliberately obscured: we cannot firmly determine whether we are located before Agamemnon’s return, as suggested also by the subsequent Aeschylean reference to the Guard and the beacon, or after his murder, as the mention of the bath and Aegisthus’ carefree torpor might imply). The impact of the Dream on Clytemnestra’s psyche is evoked by means of a lively metaphor: it is as if the Dream, like a violent intruder, shuttered the glass pane of her visage.

Clytemnestra is thrown into maelstrom. Her thoughts turn immediately to “ill-fated mother Hera”, a feminist symbol both in her paradigmatically unhappy marriage to Zeus and in her unconventional ways to react to it (in Homer’s *Iliad* and elsewhere). Clytemnestra is in anguish, body and mind. But amidst the “great racket” that her voluptuous body and passionate heart “sire and bear”, Aegisthus is fast asleep. With these two latter verbs, the poet is undermining the patriarchal tendency to prioritize the male’s role in reproduction over that of the female: as a rule (and as Aeschylus’ Apollo will

try to argue in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*),<sup>60</sup> the man "sires", γεννά, whereas the woman is simply the vessel; she only "bears", τίκτει. Clytemnestra, though, is doing both: in her passionate love affair with Aegisthus she is both the woman and the man. Aegisthus, after all, is already as good as a cadaver.

As her hatred for Aegisthus boils up, Clytemnestra confesses to her addressee, the old man, that the course of events has long been out of her control: "I have other things in mind / yet something else leads me elsewhere". Love as a magnetic force draws a reluctant Clytemnestra to the fateful bath. She curses love or rather wishes she had the luxury to do so.<sup>61</sup> She does not: she has "to don the armor of her silver despondency" and adopt the image of a bull: she, the woman, *has* to play the man, because Aegisthus, the man, has abandoned the fight. This image neither suits her (it is "borrowed" and foreign to her) nor empowers her (it is "ill-fashioned"). It is simply alien to her nature, a mask, which she puts on unwillingly and which leads her to disaster.

The first part of the poem ends with an enigmatic phrase: "In its contusion [*sc.* the bull] fights to save / the idol of the goddess"). The verse seems to allude to an obscure ancient custom according to which the testes of sacrificed bulls were placed in front of the cult statue of Artemis in Ephesos<sup>62</sup> — Artemis being another symbol of feminine, and feminist, power. The accuracy of this piece of information is contested;<sup>63</sup> but if it is indeed what Charalambides has in mind here, it serves him well: Clytemnestra's obligatory usurpation of Aegisthus' role effectively castrates him, but she can only go so far trying<sup>64</sup> to save "the idol of the goddess", the divine feminine principle. The Dream ensues again, for the second time, and the female is once again victimized by the treachery of the male.

60. Apollo, though, uses τίκτω to describe the role of "he who mounts [the woman]" (ὁ θρόσκων, *Eumenides*, 660). The pedantic distinction between γεννῶ and τίκτω found in later sources was not there in classical Greek: contrast, e.g., Sophocles, *Electra*, 1412: ὁ γεννήσας πατήρ, to Aeschylus, *Suppliants*, 48: Ἐπαφον ἐγέννασεν (of Io). The closest ancient equivalent to the later dictum Charalambides has in mind here is perhaps Plato, *Republic*, 454d 10: τὸ μὲν θῆλυ τίκτειν, τὸ δὲ ἄρρεν ὀχεύειν.

61. The details of her actions evoke practices of popular magic. She makes the palace's rounds *three* times and curses love *ten* times (both three and ten being numbers with especial magical and mythological significance: ten were the years of Agamemnon's absence in Troy).

62. See Seiterle (1979).

63. See LiDonnici (1992).

64. Charalambides uses the verb μάχεται, which in common Greek indeed can mean "fight", as Connolly translates, but in the Cypriot dialect it also has the sense "to try", indeed trying to no avail.

As Part II of the poem begins, the poetic medium changes. Free verse is substituted by the traditional 15-syllable iambic, and the neoteric mode by the language, the imagery and the tropes of folk poetry. The rhyming couplets further add something of the romantic atmosphere of *Erotokritos*, as the perfidious Dream, now as treacherous as its Homeric counterpart in *Iliad* 2 (the *Ὀνειρός* who cheated Agamemnon), plants into Clytemnestra's mind the erotic vision of a dominant husband (the exact opposite of Aegisthus, the inert adulterer), fast approaching. The Dream is no longer the ominous violent intruder of Part I, but the proverbial human-tongued bird of folk poetry, the bringer of tides. The news the bird breaks concerns the return of Agamemnon, who upon his imminent reappearance is ready "to sow trees and hills, to sow stars and heavens". The image of Agamemnon sowing the seed of his patriarchal power recalls unmistakably Clytemnestra's dream in Sophocles' *Electra* (417–425): Sophocles' Agamemnon, upon his visualized return, inserts his scepter (symbol of both his phallus and his power — the two are practically one and the same thing) deep into the center of the hearth (again a double symbol of the vagina and of the earth as an object of masculine control). From this scepter "sprouted a leafy branch which shaded all the Mycenaean land" (transl. Jenny March): this is Orestes, the fresh *θαλλός*, who comes to restore and renew his father's power over the kingdom. Momentarily, Charalambides' Clytemnestra is taken in by this image of domestic normalcy and seems to be oblivious to the dangers hidden in the Sophoclean intertext. Indeed she calms down, as the Dream bids her to do, and falls back asleep. Orestes is drawing close, and Clytemnestra has lowered her defenses: the end is nigh. But the last four verses overturn this impression.

Experiencing the second dream, Clytemnestra is overcome by a sense of sweet delight. Is it because she is ultimately complicit to patriarchal oppression, having internalized, like most women do in traditional societies, the discourses of male domination? Precisely in the moment when such thoughts insinuate themselves upon the reader, the poet's gaze is lifted upwards to a painting of the starry sky on the ceiling wall, which Thetis bade Agamemnon to bring back from Troy. Thetis, who was forcefully married to Peleus, is yet another female victim of male control over female sexuality, yet also an emblem of resistance, as she abandoned her mortal husband soon after she gave birth to Achilles. This starry sky, Clytemnestra now imagines, will carry her voice as far and wide as possible, as soon as the sacrificer will commit his "impious and horrid" act of slaughter. So it transpires that the cause of her sweet delight may paradoxically be this prospect exactly. All Clytemnestra has is the reverberation of this voice, the death cry, which

other female sacrificial victims, for example her daughter Iphigenia, were denied. To avoid polluting the sacrifice, Iphigenia was gagged (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 234–236). Clytemnestra will not be. Her death cry is a cry of resistance to male violence and oppression and, at the end, a protestation of fundamental innocence.

“Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking” is clearly a feminist recasting of Clytemnestra.<sup>65</sup> In Charalambides, Clytemnestra’s voice, for all the brutality of the butcher’s knife, remains unfettered, to roam the sky denouncing the discontents of patriarchy.

#### IV. *From tragedy to folk song: “Agamemnon” (“Desire”, 2012)*

In a short poem that could be considered among the most accomplished compositions of *Desire*, Kyriakos Charalambides returns once again to the accursed House of Atreus, this time in order to recast the famous scene from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in which Clytemnestra attracts her husband to his death, having persuaded him first to commit sacrilege by purposelessly destroying the wealth of the house (a clear analogy to his wanton neglect for the value of human life both in Troy and in Aulis).

Charalambides quotes Aeschylus in the motto (*Agamemnon*, 959: ἔστιν θάλασσα· τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσει;). In the body of the poem this particular verse becomes a cross between Aeschylus and Seferis (cf. *Mythistorima*, XX: “τη θάλασσα τη θάλασσα, ποιος θα μπορέσει να την εξαντλήσει;”), but the meaning of the verse remains Aeschylean: it is not about the endless sea of tradition, as in Seferis’ *Mythistorima*, but about the limitless vanity of man, as in Aeschylus’ play. Above all, Charalambides’ poem engages in direct intertextual exchange with a folk poem, the παραλογή of “The Migrant’s Return” (“Ο γυρισμός του ξενιτεμένου”). Apart from the first two verses, the poem is written itself in the style of the folk ballad. To echo that style in the English translation, I tried, as far as possible, to imitate the rhythm of the Greek 15-syllable iambic:

#### ΑΓΑΜΕΜΝΩΝ

ἔστιν θάλασσα — τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσει  
ΑΙΣΧΥΛΟΣ, *Ἀγαμέμνων*

Στόμα της Κλυταιμνήστρας που φιλούσε

65. Charalambides, of course, is not the first to attempt such a recasting; for further examples, see Komar (2003), who focuses particularly on late-20<sup>th</sup> century revisionist approaches by women writers.

- τ' ακοίμητο και πορφυρό χαλί:  
 — Τη θάλασσα, τη θάλασσα, και ποιος θα τηνε σβήσει;  
 — Εγώ, της λέει ο άντρας της, θα μπω να τηνε σβήσω.  
 — Δώσε μου λόγια της αυλής, τρανέ καρaboκύρη.  
 — Έχει στη μέση ένα δέντρο με τροφαντά λεμόνια  
 κι αν σκίσεις το τραγούδι τους, πάλι λεμόνια θα 'βρεις.  
 — Είσαι, του λέει ο άντρας μου, που θα μοιρολογήσω.

## AGAMEMNON

*“There is a sea — and who shall ever dry it up?”*

AESCHYLUS, *Agamemnon*

Mouth of Clytemnestra kissing  
 the sleepless, purple carpet:

- The sea, the sea! And who shall ever dry it up completely?  
 — I will, her husband says, I'll be the one to dry it.  
 — Give me some talk about the yard, oh ye, the mighty captain.  
 — Right in the mid there is a tree heavy with luscious lemons,  
 and if you tear their song apart, lemons again you'll find.  
 — You are my man, she says to him, whom I'll be keening over.

Charalambides' poem is divided in two distinct parts, despite the fact that no typographical space separates them. The first part, clearly evocative of Aeschylus, shows Clytemnestra laying the trap. The poetic lens centers on her mouth as she is kissing the purple carpet: as in Aeschylus, the irresistible sexuality of the female is explicitly connected with her guile. The male is defenseless in front of these two overwhelming forces. His bloated ego is bound to take the better of him in the end: “I shall be the one to dry it up” (“θα μπω να τηνε σβήσω”). The original Greek is more clearly allusive of the fire, or the thirst, of love, which supposedly burns inside the female<sup>66</sup> and which the man boasts he can quench with his sexual prowess: θα μπω, literally “I shall enter”, is an obvious reference to sexual penetration. Charalambides builds on the machismo of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' original scene, but he glosses over the Greek hero's hesitancy (if only fleetingly, Aeschylus' Agamemnon senses that he is being coaxed into committing hubris).

In the second part of the poem, Charalambides pushes Aeschylus aside. Following “The Migrant's Return” instead, he styles his poetic dialogue as a traditional recognition scene between the returning husband and his wife. The allusion is unmistakable, as Charalambides quotes the folk ballad almost verbatim: “δείξε σημάδια της αυλής και τότες να πιστέψω” (“show

66. The sea is a common Greek analogy for the woman; in Aeschylus' *Persians*, for example, this is paramount.

me signs of the yard, and then I may believe you”). The transformation of the folk song’s Migrant into “a mighty sea captain” (“τρανὲ καρραβοκύρη”) may be intended to accentuate the Odyssean overtones of the ballad, and thus ironically to prepare the reader for the completely un-Odyssean twist in the last verse of Charalambides’ poem: the *Odyssey*, itself, after all, plays regularly on the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra as the foil for Odysseus’ νόστος.<sup>67</sup>

The erotic atmosphere of the first part continues, this time with further echoes of Modern Greek folk poetry: the “luscious lemons” Charalambides’ Agamemnon mentions as “talk of the yard” (“λόγια της αυλής”), substituting the folk poem’s references to other domestic trees, plants and products, are a well-known symbol of the bittersweet graces of a woman, perhaps specifically of the female breasts (remember, for example, the Epirotic folk poem “Μωρή κοντούλα λεμονιά”). More importantly, the sexual connotations of the lemons as recognition tokens allow Charalambides to conflate the folk poem’s second and third signs (signs of the bedroom and of the woman’s body) into one, and hence to proceed to the *anagnorisis* (and from there to the crucial twist) with a quicker pace.

The twist is hidden in the poem’s last hemistich. “My dear foreigner”, says the woman in the folk narrative having been convinced by the signs, “you are my husband, you are my loved one”. “Είσαι, του λέει, ο άντρας μου”, Charalambides’ Clytemnestra, too, begins, only to add *παρὰ προσδοκίαν*: “που θα μοιρολογήσω” (“whom I shall lament”).

V. *The matricide between Aeschylus and Freud: “Orestes”*  
 (“*In the Language of Weaving*”, 2013)

Charalambides’ “Orestes” is an extensive and challenging composition dominating the collection *In the Language of Weaving*. The poem, which is not made for easy reading, is a study of Orestes’ subconscious meanderings, his crippling indecision, as he ponders the horrible act of matricide. The whole 82-line composition stretches, and turns inwards, with painful persistence and intensity, that minuscule morsel of “real” time between Orestes’ paradigmatic *τί δράσω* (Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*, 899) and the eventual insertion of his blade into Clytemnestra’s chest. Charalambides’ hero, not unlike his ancient Aeschylean self but with the Freudian element in much starker relief, oscillates between steely determination and hesitancy, murderous anger and erotic fascination, sexual attraction and jealousy, hatred

67. See, e.g., Olson (1990).

and idealization of a mother who stands out all at once as both a mythical monster (a Scylla, an Empousa, a Medusa) and a saintly, virginal figure led to undeserved martyrdom (the exemplum of St. Agatha). The poem's form, its vertiginous complexity, stubborn obscurity and stream-of-consciousness-like narrative rhythm, reflects the wavering hero's endless self-contradictions and his ultimate incapacity to carry out the act.

The poem is divided in three parts structured chiefly by the change of narrative voices. The first part (lines 1–35) is a dramatic monologue delivered by Orestes, who in a matter-of-fact and cold tone sets out the task at hand. The second part (ll. 36–71) switches initially to a third-person focalizer delving into the deepest secrets of Orestes' psyche by way of free indirect discourse (ll. 36–57), but soon turns back to first-person and more importantly second-person utterances, as Orestes now apostrophizes his mother directly (ll. 58–71). The third and final part of the poem (ll. 72–81) is arranged as a theatrical/tragic *amoibaion* between Orestes and a Chorus.

#### ΟΡΕΣΤΗΣ

Του Συμβούλου Χριστού και του Απόλλωνα ο χρησμός  
 ορίζει εγώ τη μάνα μου να παραδώσω  
 μέσα στο άλσος του σεπτού Ελικώνος  
 και με το τελεσίδικό μου χέρι  
 και της μαχαίρας μου τα επιχειρήματα  
 να υποδείξω προς αυτήν το θάνατο.

Οι γυμνικές φωνές του στήθους της  
 δεν με τρομάζουν ουδέ κι αναχαιτίζουν την ορμή  
 με την οποία στης γοής το κέντρο  
 τον άξονα της φρίκης θέλω στήσει.

Οι άλλοι ας λεν το πάθος πως μου λείπει  
 κι ότι στεγνώνω το αίμα μου· αλλά τι;  
 Ο λόγος είναι, αλήθεια, για το δίκαιο  
 που χάθηκε στην άμμο και βουλιάζει  
 χωσμένο εκεί που κρύβει ο μέγας ήλιος  
 το κολονάτο του άναμμα, τις χρύσιες επωμίδες.

Ο Τιτύος, ο Τάνταλος και ο Σίσυφος,  
 η Σκύλλα, μ' έξι τους λαιμούς  
 τις τρεις σειρές τα δόντια  
 και τα ποδάρια δώδεκα, δεν επαρκούν  
 του άδικου το είδωλο ν' αποτυπώσουν.

Το φίδι στην Αυλίδα τρώει εννιά στρουθιά,  
 εννιαχρονίτες ταύροι ράβουνε τ' ασκί  
 του Αίολου με το δέρμα τους —

είν όλα παραμύθια  
 τόσο αδρά και τόσο αληθινά  
 όσο το φάντασμα της μάνας του Οδυσσέα  
 στον Άδη κάτω, που ξεφεύγει τρεις φορές  
 απ' την αγκάλη του ήρωα και τ' απομένει ο κόπορ.

Στου λογικού τα σπλάχνα σπλάχιση καμιά  
 κι αδήριτη σαν σίδηρο η ανάγκη  
 μες στον αναβρασμό να μαστιγώνεις  
 του Ποσειδώνα τ' άλογα με το δοξάρι  
 του εκηβόλου Απόλλωνα που περιφράσσει  
 στο κέντρο του νοός κάθε συναίσθημα.

⌘

Λόγια του κόρφου, υγραίνοντας τη μοίρα  
 και πώς να γονατίσουν τη μεγάλη  
 ψυχή του Ορέστη που παράμερα στραγγίζει  
 της φόρμιγγάς του την παλικάριά,  
 τα χάρδια του πολύτριχου πατρός του  
 και την ευγένειά του, αλίμονο, σαν βλέπει  
 απά στον ώμο της ζωθιάς μητρός του  
 νυχτερινής ηδυπαθείας τατουάζ.

Τόσο πολύ βαθιά του αυτός να μελανίσει θέλει  
 της ατιμίας το τίναγμα, με χέρι που διασχίζει  
 σαν το πεσούμενο άστρο χίλιους αιώνες,  
 αλλά η μουριά στα νώτα του “γαλήνεψε” του κρένει.

Κι αν τον διχάζει δάκρυ που διστάζει,  
 εκλογικεύει ωστόσο το σωστό  
 του πάθους του διαμάντι με τον χόλο  
 μιας εντολής που ανθρώπινα δεν πάλλει.

Της εκλογής ο κίντυνος τώρα δικός του:  
 Στιγμή που κράτησε τριακόσια χρόνια  
 μέσα στο άλσος από μαύρες λεύκες  
 και σε λουτρό που η μαιφόνος είχε  
 θεά των όφρων ξαναγεννήσει  
 την αγελαδομάτα παρθενιά της.

Συ που τον άντρα σου έσφαξες με το διπλό πελέκι,  
 σύρε γοργά στον Άδη ωσάν Παιδίσκη,  
 Νύμφη και Χήρα κι Έμπουσα με χάλκινο σανδάλι  
 και μη γυρίσεις πίσω να κοιτάξεις  
 τ' αριστερό μου χέρι και τις χρυσές ταινίες  
 που δένουν στα πλευρά μου δυο λαιμούς  
 φολιδωτά φιαλίδια με το αίμα  
 της Μέδουσας ή τάρου του ιερού,

Μη με συστρέψει ο ίλιγγος και μη δε σ' αφανίσει  
σταγών ολέθρου, σταλαγμό αντίρροπο αποτάσσοντας.  
'Οτι θ' αλυσοδέσω την οργή μου  
να μη αποδράσει και σε δίσκο τα βυζιά σου,  
σαν της Αγάθης του Τιεπολο, θα βάλω  
και τον ομφάλιο λώρο θ' αποσχίσω.

✠

Λόγια του Ορέστη σκηνοθετημένα:  
“Μίαν άλλη Κλυταιμνήστρα να 'χα μάνα,  
των παθών της ν' αλάφραινα το κλέος  
κι ημίθεος ο θάνατος να τη σκεπάζει”.

Λόγια Χορού: “Αν τη μάνα σου να θανατώσεις θέλεις,  
φόνευσε πρώτα εντός σου το θείο πρόσωπό της,  
χτύπα το καταγής και κάνε το χταπόδι  
όσο μπροστά σου ορθώνεται η επιφάνειά της  
κι όσο οι θεοί κινούνται κεντρισμένοι  
απ' τα δικά σου αισθήματα, διαθλώντας  
φύλλα, κορμό και κάθαρση παθών”.

#### ORESTES

The oracle of Christ the Counselor and of Apollo  
prescribes that I deliver my mother  
in the grove of holy Helicon  
and with my unequivocal hand  
and with the arguments of my blade  
that I point her to death.

The naked<sup>68</sup> voices of her breasts scare me not  
nor do they check the vehemence  
whereby the axis of horror I shall set  
in the center of the wail.

Let others say that I lack the passion  
and that I dry my blood; but what?  
In truth, it's all about justice  
lost in the sand and sinking  
buried where the great sun hides  
his columnar fire, his epaulettes of gold.

Tityos, Tantalos, and Sisyphos,  
Scylla, with her six necks

68. In fact, as the reader notices, Charalambides is using the adjective *γυμνικός*, not *γυμνός* to describe the voices. *Γυμνικός*, in both ancient and Modern Greek, often qualifies the noun *ἀγῶνας*, in reference to the athletic games of antiquity in which the athletes competed naked. Clytemnestra's cries constitute an agon with her life being the prize for either one of the contestants.

her three rows of teeth  
and her twelve legs, do not suffice  
to imprint the idol of injustice.

The snake in Aulis eats nine sparrows  
nine-year-old bulls sow the bag  
of Aeolus with their hides —  
it's all tall tales  
as solid and real  
as the ghost of Odysseus' mother  
down in Hades, which slips away three times  
from the hero's embrace, his labors gone to no avail.

In the entrails of logic there is no mercy  
and dire like iron is the necessity  
to whip amidst the agitation  
Poseidon's horses with the bow  
of Apollo the far-shooter, who encloses  
every emotion in the center of the mind.

☞

Words of the bosom, they moisten fate,  
how could they ever hope to make the soul of great  
Orestes kneel, who stands aside wringing dry  
the courage of his phorminx,  
the caresses of his hirsute father  
and his nobility, alas, as soon as he sees  
his fairy of a mother bearing on her shoulder  
tattoos of nocturnal indulgence.

How much, how deep inside, he wishes to blacken  
the jolt of knavery, with a hand that crosses  
a thousand centuries like a falling star,  
yet on his back the mulberry bids him to calm down.

And if a tear that hesitates splits him in two,  
still he rationalizes the right  
diamond of his passion with the bile  
of an order that does not throb in human fashion.

The danger of choice is now his:  
a moment which lasted for three hundred years  
in the grove of black poplars  
and in a bath where the blood-stained  
goddess of snakes had begotten yet again  
her oxen-eyed virginity.

You, who slayed your husband with a double axe,  
run fast to Hades like a Maiden,  
a Bride<sup>69</sup> and a Widow, an Empousa of a copper sandal

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69. Charalambides uses the intentionally ambiguous word Νύμφη (with a capital N),

and don't turn back to look at  
my left hand and the golden bands  
that tie on my side two necks  
scaly ampoules with the blood  
of Medusa or of the sacred bull.

May I not be contorted by vertigo, may you not avoid being consumed  
by a drop of ruination, discharging a counterpoising dribble.

For I shall chain my anger,  
lest it escapes, and on a platter I shall place  
your breasts, like those of Tiepolo's Agathe,  
and the umbilical cord I shall tear asunder.

☞

Words of Orestes, staged words:  
'I wish I had a different Clytemnestra for a mother,  
to lighten the fame of her Passion  
so that by death, a demigod, she might be covered.'

Words of the Chorus: "If you want to put your mother to death,  
first kill her godlike face deep inside you  
batter it on the ground, make it an octopus,  
while her epiphany rises before you  
and while the gods are moving prodded  
by your own emotions, refracting  
leaves, trunk and catharsis of passions."

Orestes begins by defining the task at hand. He makes a clear reference to the oracle as the agency legitimizing the action in association, surprisingly, with "Christ the Counselor"<sup>70</sup> (the importance of the Christian theme will be made clear towards the end of the poem). The irony is clear: the words of Apollo are anything but a "counsel"; they are a command. Orestes' strong words ("prescribes") determine the inflexible necessity of this duty and the cold blood whereby it needs to be carried out ("the arguments of my blade"). The use of the verb *ορίζει* is meaningful; it harks directly back to Aesch. *Ch.* 927, Clytemnestra's death sentence as proclaimed by Orestes: *πατρός γὰρ αἵμα τόνδε σοῦρίζειι μόρον*. The language also has a legal, indeed judicial coloring ("τελεσιδικο χέρι, επιχειρήματα, να υποδείξω"), which introduces the theme of justice, the central theme of the *Oresteia*, developed further in stanzas three to five (11–29).

The second stanza (ll. 7–10) shifts the focus on Clytemnestra's breasts,

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which can mean "bride" but also "nymph" (evoking the earlier characterization of Clytemnestra as *ξωθιά*, "fairy").

70. "Christ the Counselor" is a small church within the sovereign area of the British military base in Episkopí, Limassol, Cyprus.

a crucial point of attention later in the poem, providing through denial (“δεν με τρομάζουν”) the first intimation of Orestes’ internal conflict. The visualization of Clytemnestra wailing as she is being cut down, and the admission that the act to be committed is horrid, contrast starkly with the absolute certainty of the previous stanza. Yet, Orestes insists, as things are now, with Clytemnestra triumphant and unpunished, Justice has sunk into the sand and has been buried “εκεί που κρύβει ο ήλιος / το κολονάτο του άναμμα, τις χρύσιες επωμίδες”. According to Greek poetic imagination, the sun’s hiding place, where he seeks refuge every night, is the depths of the Ocean: as long as Clytemnestra remains scot-free, justice is practically vanished from the world altogether. The association of Justice with the Sun (the Sun of Justice, Christ, who demands retribution) reinforces further the undercurrent of Christian imagery.

In lines 17–21, Clytemnestra is equated first with the three Great Sinners of antiquity (Charalambides here alludes to *Odyssey*, 11.576–600), then with an archetype of female monstrosity, Scylla, whose description in the poem is again Odyssean (*Odyssey*, 12.89–92). But even these horrifying exempla, says Orestes, pale in comparison to the enormity of Clytemnestra’s crimes (“δεν επαρκούν / του άδικου το είδωλο ν’ αποτυπώσουν”). The reference to Aulis in line 22 introduces Clytemnestra’s traditional line of defense against these charges, as expounded primarily in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* (1412–1418): her husband, *ώς οὐ προτιμῶν* (“as if he did not see any special value in them”, *Agamemnon*, 1415) and for his own selfish interests and whims, wantonly destroyed innocent lives (young sparrows and bulls: the men of Greece and Troy, but of course also Clytemnestra’s own offspring, Iphigenia); so he received his just desserts. The reference to the snake in Aulis devouring nine sparrows comes from the prophecy of Calchas in *Iliad* 2.299–329, who predicted that it would take nine years and numerous casualties, the myriad deaths of innocent people, before Troy would eventually fall.<sup>71</sup> Also Homeric, actually this time Odyssean (10.19–20), is the story of the nine-year old bull killed by Aeolus for his hide: on the face of it this story is unrelated to the Atreid king, but again the act of destroying such a magnificent crea-

71. The reference to the snake, however, recalls also several different passages from Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*: on the one hand, picturing Clytemnestra’s enemy as a snake (either as Orestes or as Agamemnon himself, as some scholars believe) is a feature of Clytemnestra’s prophetic dream (cf. also *Choephoroi*, 928–929, where the dream’s meaning finally dawns on her); on the other hand, both in *Agamemnon*, 1233, and in the great *kommos* of the *Choephoroi* (247–249) Clytemnestra herself is the “fearful viper” who has choked “the brood of the eagle father”, that is, Orestes and Electra, in her twisting coils (cf. also *Choephoroi*, 994).

ture for the mean and self-serving purpose of making a bag is proposed as a manifestation of blatant disregard for the sanctity of life, such as displayed by Agamemnon himself. Orestes, to be sure, dismisses these arguments out of hand: “εἶν’ ὄλα παραμύθια”, illusory shadows like Odysseus’ mother in Hades (*Odyssey* 11).

The first part of the poem ends the way it started, with a punning reference to the cold-bloodedness that needs to accompany Orestes’ act: “στου λογικού τα σπλάχνα σπλάχνιση καμία”. It is absolutely essential that the revenge should be an act of the *λογικόν*, the logical part of the mind, not the *θυμοειδές* or the *ἐπιθυμητικόν* (Charalambides here refers to Plato’s tripartite soul). These latter two parts, more animalistic and thus more genuinely human) are weak, imperfect, hence more susceptible to showing mercy. Orestes needs to isolate his human emotions, keep them out of his way, control them the way Poseidon Hippios controlled wild horses, in order to strike “with the bow of Apollo, the far-shooter”. The Iliadic reference to Apollo the avenger mercilessly shooting arrows of doom on his feeble enemies works on Orestes like an enclosure that keeps out the dangerous enemy of human weakness. It also brings Orestes’ dramatic monologue to a close: Orestes started and finished with Apollo.

In lines 36–43, as the poem switches to a third-person focalizer, it follows Aeschylus’ *Choephoroi*, 885–930, quite closely. In this crucial juncture of Aeschylus’ play, of the trilogy in general, Orestes instructs his mother to follow him inside, for her to be slain next to the dead body of her illicit lover. Clytemnestra desperately pleads for her life: bearing her breasts (*Choephoroi*, 896–898) she reminds him that she was the one who raised him from small child to man and warns him of the power of a parent’s curse (implying the pursuit of the Erinyes). Despite a momentary weakness, from which Pylades, silent until that instant, jolts him back, Aeschylus’ Orestes does not budge. In Charalambides’ poem, too, the son of Agamemnon seems determined to go ahead, unmoved by his mother’s pleadings: such “λόγια του κόρφου” aiming to “moisten fate”, to make it less harsh and unbending, could not possibly derail his course.

Nonetheless, lines 36–43 also introduce the first undeniable signs of an Oedipal fascination on Orestes’ part with Clytemnestra’s sexuality. Orestes’ “nobility”, and by that the poetic narrator must be referring to the hero’s ability to remain collected as he is carrying out Apollo’s order, vanishes as soon as he discerns the physical signs of sexual activity on his mother’s body (“tattoos of nocturnal indulgence”). Orestes is enraged, repulsed but at the same time also irrepressibly captivated by the sexuality of his mother, who is described, equivocally, as a “fairy” (fairies, or nymphs, are simultaneously

an idealized embodiment of female beauty but also, in Greek mythology and elsewhere, sexual predators enchanting and entrapping the male). Part of Orestes' complex set of reactions to his mother's sexual energy is also the curious image of a "hirsute" father offering "caresses". For a split second, until the connotations of the adjective *πολύτριχος* are grasped, the reader is allowed to believe that these "caresses" may be the tokens of fatherly love once bestowed upon Orestes, which now remind him of his duty to take revenge. The adjective, however, does not fall in with this interpretation, quite the contrary: it ushers in connotations of revulsion, perhaps mixed with jealousy and a feeling of sexual rivalry towards the father.

Orestes' ambivalence towards his mother culminates from line 44 onwards. Orestes is trying to steel himself for the final act, to overcome his human limitations ("τον διχάζει δάκρυ που διστάζει", l. 48), in order, by way of cold rationality, to face "the danger of choice that is now his" (l. 52) and "blacken the jolt of knavery" ("να μελανίσει... της ατιμίας το τίναγμα", ll. 44–45), thus cleansing his House from "a thousand centuries" of transgression. At this juncture, Clytemnestra as a monster (Empousa, Medusa) is naturally brought back to the foreground. But the imagery now is desperately confused, as the mythological and other exempla clash with one another creating a sense of utter bewilderment, contradiction and, ultimately, indecision and doubt: an impression of Orestes' soul, baffled as it is by the enormity of the task. Time and again, in Orestes' mind Clytemnestra oscillates between monstrosity and holiness, between vilification and idealization, as the youth is desperately wavering between a dutiful certainty for a just cause and a deep-seated uncertainty for an act that is possibly corrupt, unnatural and evil.

To begin with, in lines 44–47, Orestes imagines his vengeful hand dropping upon Clytemnestra "like a falling star" ("σαν το πεσούμενο άστρο"). The line is puzzling, not only because it seems contradictory, self-undermining, for Orestes to liken the action of his justice-bearing hand with the death of a star, but also because the verse is a clear, and surprising, reference to Dionysios Solomos' *The Free Besieged* (Draft II, Section III, l. 11): "τέλος μακριά σέρνει λαλιά σαν το πεσούμεν' άστρο / τρανή λαλιά, τρόμου λαλιά, ρητή κατά το κάστρο". Intertextual memory, creeping up on his glorious vision of just revenge and catharsis, is damning for Orestes: inasmuch as Solomos' line describes nothing else but the action of the Arab's, the hateful and unjust enemy's, "mocking trumpet" ("περιπαίχτρα σάλπιγγα"), Clytemnestra is by extension identified with the besieged castle and its terror-filled, saintly defenders. Thus Orestes' own "mocking trumpet" may be deriding his mother's pointless "words of the bosom", but inevitably he is

adding layers of bumptious criminality — and therefore guilt — onto his own actions.

Given this psychological milieu, it is understandable that, as Orestes' hatred is boiling up, a mysterious *μουριά* bids him to calm down — again with a verb, *κρένει*, which seems to allude to Solomos (*Free Besieged*, Draft II, Section II, l. 12: “*με χίλιες βρούσες χύνεται, με χίλιες γλώσσες κρένει*”). This cryptic reference to the sycamore or mulberry tree is noteworthy: in Egyptian mythology, the sycamore, a tree of magical properties, stood between the worlds of the living and the dead, as Clytemnestra is right now, but more importantly it was considered to be the manifestation of the goddess Isis. In Orestes' jumbled consciousness, Clytemnestra, the hated Empousa, is also the Ideal Mother or Wife of Egyptian lore. This is a motif that goes on until the end of the poem.

Further down, l. 56, Clytemnestra is “the goddess of snakes” (“*θεά των όφρων*”). The phrase clearly has an ominous ring, being accompanied by the ancient Greek and indeed “tragic” adjective *μιαφόνος*, but especially as it weaves a dense nexus of equally negative allusions to the *Oresteia* and the way Clytemnestra is imaged there (see above, n. 71). However, yet again there is contradiction: in the history of ancient religion, the goddess of snakes is in fact *not* a negative presence; quite the reverse, she is a deity of fertility and growth. The ambiguity is strengthened by the phrase immediately following: in the bath, in the locus of Agamemnon's murder, the goddess of snakes, “has begotten again her oxen-eyed virginity” (“*την αγελαδομάτα παρθενιά της*”). The verse is nothing if not equivocal. The reference to the cow that kills the bull in the bath is directly reminiscent of Cassandra's nightmarish vision in Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1125–1128:

ἄ ἄ ἰδὸν ἰδοῦ· ἄπεχε τᾶς βοῶς  
τὸν ταῦρον· ἐν πέπλοισιν  
μελαγκέρω λαβοῦσα μηχανήματι  
τύπτει· πίτνει δ' ἐν ἐνύδρῳ τέχει.  
δολοφόνον λέβητος τέχραν σοι λέγω.

Yet the mention of Clytemnestra being re-virginized by means of the murder is strange and certainly not Aeschylean. “Oxen-eyed” is also a choice of words that ushers in contradictory allusions: the adjective, epic in provenance, forms part of a formula qualifying Hera (*βοῶπις πότνια Ἥρη*), an archetypal goddess of family, suffering from her husband's infidelity (remember Clytemnestra's invocation of Hera in “Clytemnestra, dreaming and waking”). It could also qualify, albeit less commonly, the virgin goddess Artemis (Bacchylides, 10.99).

The contradictions continue in the following two stanzas (ll. 58–71). Orestes now addresses Clytemnestra directly and bids the husband-slayer to run to Hades like the blood-sucking, seductive man-eater that she is. Nevertheless, Empousa is not the only qualification of Clytemnestra in these lines: on a contrary note, and in the same muddled way, she is described by the triple capacity that spans the lifetime of an *honest* woman: a Maiden, a Bride and a Widow.

Above all, in lines 66–71, at the precise moment when Orestes feels his resolve at its weakest (“may I not be contorted by vertigo, may you not avoid being consumed / by a drop of ruination discharging a counterpoising dribble”) and that he decides “to chain his anger”, to keep it in check, lest pity or love takes the better of him, Orestes alludes to the exemplum that mostly undercuts his outward resolution: “on a platter I shall place / your breasts, like those of Tiepolo’s Agathe”. This Agathe, whose martyrdom was famously painted by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in 1756, is St. Agatha of Sicily (AD 231–251), a virgin Christian martyr, tortured to death for her faith by a would-be lover, whose erotic advances she had spurned. Her tormentors cut off her breasts. In Tiepolo’s painting the severed organs are placed on a silver platter in reference to the separated head of another Christian victim of a lustful antagonist, John the Baptist. Clytemnestra’s bare bosoms, which had been introduced obliquely once before (“λόγια του κόρφου”), the breasts of an older, sinful woman, symbols of both her lust and, in Aeschylus’ play, of her treacherous attempt to escape punishment, now take center stage, but in a totally counter-intuitive manner. They are startlingly identified with the severed mammaries of a girl that is her exact opposite: young, blameless, and virginal, tormented for her adamant refusal to give in to illicit sexual temptation. The reference to Saint Agatha is strengthening at the utmost the theme of Orestes’ confusion and his contradictory attitude towards Clytemnestra on the brink of the matricide: the mixture of revulsion and veneration, of guilt-ridden Oedipal attraction and asexual idolization, and above all the conflict between the rational duty to execute revenge and the subconscious unwillingness of the child ever to separate from the mother (expressed here *e contrario* as a violent phantasy of tearing asunder the umbilical cord).

Clytemnestra as Empousa *and* as St. Agatha (with the Christian connotations of *ἀγαθός* —a virtuous, pure and irreproachable Virgin— looming large): this is the archetypal Freudian duality of the Mother —a sexless saint as well as the first object of desire— condensed in one single, extraordinary poetic correlation, which marks Orestes’ ultimate incapability to fulfill the obligation of the murder. This incapability is stressed in the third and final part of the poem, in the *amoibaion* between Orestes and a Chorus (ll. 73–

81). Orestes continues to contradict himself. He wishes that Clytemnestra were somebody else, a different woman, so that her demise be less ignominious than the one in store; yet her imminent death by his hand is still dubbed “τα πάθη” (l. 74), an expression which points to the Passion of Christ as well as the *passio* of St. Agatha herself. Orestes cannot make up his mind.

In the final part of the poem, Orestes’ words are “staged”; they are a theatrical *rhēsis*. This is a strong intimation that at the crucial moment Orestes, like an actor, is indeed “split in two”: on the one hand, there is the role of Orestes the matricide (as staged by Apollo and Christ the Counselor), on the other hand, there is the person who plays the role but cannot fully identify with it, hence running the risk of failure. The Chorus picks up on this eventuality: if you truly want to kill your mother, you need to bring her down from the pedestal on which you have placed her (“first kill her godlike face deep inside you”). And there is no better time to do it than now, while she is standing right in front of you, the memory of her crimes not whitewashed by time, and while the divine will and yours are coordinated (the Chorus allows for the possibility that Orestes is staging Apollo rather than the other way round).

The poem ends abruptly here in a fashion that is again reminiscent of Kambanellis’ *Letter to Orestes*, only the other way around: in Kambanellis we are privy to Clytemnestra’s ultimate thoughts. Like Kambanellis’ dramatic monologue Charalambides’ poem concludes moments before the murder is committed (for, despite his crippling hamletism, even Charalambides’ Orestes cannot but be mythologically predetermined to kill). Both Orestes and the reader are left hanging in the balance.

## VI. Conclusion

The four poems analyzed above showcase some of the commonest techniques employed by Charalambides in the treatment of ancient Greek material in his current, third poetic phase. They also display the internal evolution of Charalambides’ poetic medium within this segment of his career. In “Ardana II” (from *Meta-History*, the inaugural collection of Charalambides’ third phase), the ancient myth is offered to explicit modern analogies by openly breaking down the temporal boundaries and rendering time porous and transparent, in the fashion suggested by T. S. Eliot<sup>72</sup> and Seferis (in this poem the tragic heroes merge with their modern equivalents). In terms of

72. Cf. T. S. Eliot, “The Four Quartets”, I: “Time present and time past / are both perhaps present in time future / and time future contained in time past. / If all time is eternally present / all time is unredeemable”.

Charalambides' attitude towards tragedy, "Ardana II" lies at the crossroads between, on the one hand, Charalambides' second, Cyprus-dominated period, where, as said, the use of tragedy was implicit (the poems were not overtly mythological), infused into the poem as an undercurrent "tragic feeling", and on the other hand, the more neoteric poems of Charalambides' current phase, where the foray into (tragic) myth is more or less a purpose in itself. In *Meta-History*, Charalambides still revolves around a predominantly Cypriot thematics: in "Ardana II", tragic myth is used as a means to heighten and deepen the emotional impact of the poetic narrative, namely the tragically abortive 'return' of the Greek Cypriot refugee to his native village, which is an ironically inverse version of Orestes' and Pylades triumphant return to Argos. The technique of the other three poems discussed here is different. Once again, without ever allowing his compositions to become merely cerebral exercises of erudition, the poet "δοκιμάζονται", tests himself, by lifting the proverbial *δοκίμιν* of literary tradition. However, one is no longer expected to mine the poems for modern associations and camouflaged allusions to current situations and events. Even the tragedy of Cyprus does not leave but a faint echo in the last collections of Charalambides. Tragic myth now forms part of an *exploratory* game of intertexts, as it were, designed to put myth itself to the poetic test in search of its narrative and semantic limits. Charalambides is exploring the traditional narrative materials with an eye for the crucial, clever twist, which could provide the myth with refreshed poignancy, without subjecting it beforehand to a specific, delimited semantic agenda. This is, in its most advanced form, the kind of "poetic essay", which, as mentioned, the poet first attempted to configure in *Dokimin*: a poetry "which seeks to discover what it does not know rather than safely offering what is already in its possession".<sup>73</sup>

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