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**Yannis Ritsos and the Ghosts of Helen**

Composed of a series of dramatic monologues that move between the past and the present, the dead and the living, Yannis Ritsos' *The Fourth Dimension* (1972) demands that we think about the relations among memory, history, and language. Evoking the ghosts of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Orestes, Electra, Iphigenia, Ismene, Helen, and others, Ritsos inscribes the history of Greek tragedy within the movement of his poem and does so in order to provide a lens through which we might come to understand not only the various ways in which the ancient past survives in the present but also the ways in which the meaning of our lives is informed by, exposed to, and challenged by our fragmented memories of this past. In this way, Ritsos' poem also becomes a means of staging his own complicated relations to past poets, a means of exhibiting the ways in which his language - and, indeed, all our language - is haunted by a history to which it responds, and for which it remains answerable.

In this essay, I would like to trace the consequences of Ritsos' poetic strategies by focusing on the soliloquy of Helen. I especially am interested in the ways in which Ritsos' Helen bears the traces of several poetic Helens - among others, the Helens of Homer, Sappho, Stesichorus, Gorgias, Plato, Euripides, and Aristophanes - and therefore belongs to, even as it revises, the history of the debates over the character of Helen. For Ritsos, the "real" Helen exists at the intersection between her body and her shifting image, which is why she is never simply herself. Helen has always only been a ghost, he suggests, a shifting sign that is mobilized toward different ends by each of the writers who evoke her. In his poem, she serves as a figure for poetry and storytelling - a figure that enables him to acknowledge and revise his indebtedness to his literary precursors. As the embodiment of an entire tradition of Greek writing, the aging Helen of his poem is obsessed with what she calls the "foreignness" inside her wrinkling skin, a foreignness that she links explicitly to the "naturalness of the presence of the dead" in both her home and the home of her body. Helen is not only inhabited by all the ghosts of her past, but, following "all the verses great poets devoted to [her]," she insists that she has always been a kind of phantom. It is here that she becomes a figure not only for our own haunted selves - an allegory for the nature of identity in general - but also for a poetic effort that takes its point of departure from a meditation on the role of images in poetry, memory, history, and experience in general. In this way, Ritsos' poem asks us to think about the relation between ancient and modern Greece, but does so as a means of encouraging us to understand the various ways in which our identity is intimately bound to what we inherit - even if it is because of this inheritance that we are never simply ourselves.