

Drowning in White Ink: The Feminine in the Poetry of Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke and Eleni Vakalo

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One wonders if Harold Bloom, in coining the famous phrase “anxiety of influence” – the literary artist’s version of the Oedipus complex – could have imagined how far-reaching the effects of this syndrome would reveal themselves to be in the case of women in the literary field. Not only do women readers, as critic Jan Montefiore points out, deal with a canonical body of works which “is nearly all written by and for men, displays masculine preoccupations, and usually either ignores women or presents them as stereotypes...of the familiar angel/whore dichotomy” (26), but also, in the case of the women artists:

Literary traditions are, of course, often actively unhelpful to women poets working at once in and counter to them. It is a feminist commonplace now to say that the images and conventions of traditional English poetry are frequently demeaning to women.... And yet such demeaning or ambiguous representatives did and do overlap with the ways in which women understand themselves, and consequently affect women’s poetry.
(14)

This paradox affects modern Greek letters even more, due to the enormous weight of its tradition and history on the one hand, and the still-rigid patriarchal attitudes of its society on the other. In applying criteria forged in feminist studies, particularly the theory of *écriture féminine*, on the work of two highly-acclaimed women poets, Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke and Eleni Vakalo, the tension between the social and the gender identity not only becomes apparent, but suggests, furthermore, a common link between two highly differing women artists, in the way this impasse is resolved: a sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical, but ever-present image of death.

Of course, one must also ask here if the deliberate application of French feminist theory constitutes an imposition. To say that the two poets chosen display particular sensitivities as regards the theme of feminine experience is

taking the hypothesis for its answer; but if one always finds what one was originally looking for, the question is whether the omission of theory is any less unwarranted. First of all, women theoreticians point out that any questions of identity, especially in literature, are already problematized by their being dealt with through *logos*, a discourse and signification system already codified with patriarchal ideas – what has been termed the *phallogocentrism* of “the symbolic”: Hélène Cixous succinctly states that “writing has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political, typically masculine – economy; that this is a locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with the mystifying charms of fiction” (337). Secondly, as Julia Kristeva notes in “Women’s Time”, the criteria late 20th century Europeans use to examine our past have shifted from a nationalist, “linear” view of history towards a “*symbolic denominator*” (188), in which emphasis is given on reproduction rather than production; a micro-economic view of culture that is at the same time universal (because defined by human traits, not borders); a “monumental” and “cyclical” time (189). It is a temporal view that inevitably pivots around women, since “female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains *repetition* and *eternity* from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilizations” (191). In Cixous’s words, “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (339-40). In such a connection, the relevance of *écriture féminine* becomes apparent: Cixous’s term suggests a mode of writing that is cyclical, emotive, mother-oriented, centered on the whole body, protean and profuse, rebellious against the rigid definitions of phallogocentrism. All stereotypical traits, yes; but the point here is not simply to see how much woman there is in the poet, but to highlight, through the traces of such an *écriture* – defined by Christiane Makward as “open, nonlinear, unfinished, fluid, exploded, fragmented, polysemic, attempting to speak the body i.e., the unconscious, involving silence, incorporating the simultaneity of life as opposed to or clearly different from pre-conceived, oriented, masterly or ‘didactic’ languages” (96) – how the woman interacts with the poetic vocation, in all its inherited or inherent complexities and their resulting anxieties. Thirdly, in relation to the above question of whether *écriture féminine*, “which”, in the words of Rita Felski, “has been influential in ‘personalizing’ the literary text by emphasizing its autobiographical dimension” (93) can serve as a broader cultural gnomon, Grigoris Paschalides points out that the kind of autobiographic writing that is centered on the individual, instead of the generic experience is, in its “historical dynamic” and insofar as a person’s identity reflects the social sub-fields in which it exists, “directly related to the historical process of the constitution and evolution of the various social fields” (160). Thus a feminist analysis does not come here to divide the individual from its tradition, but, hopefully, to signal a more delicate relation.

The Word Made Flesh

“Write your self. Your body must be heard.”
 –Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”

In terms of *écriture féminine*, the case of Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke comes first to mind, since she, of the pair, appears closest to the pivotal role of the body in this species of writing. The *écriture* of the body, for Cixous, is the Muse *par excellence*: “In women’s speech, as in their writing, that element which never stops resonating, which...retains the power of moving us—that element is the song” (339). Anghelaki-Rooke assumes the role of the singer of the body literally: “In the night/I hear my heart/and its beating is/the harmony of an enamored musician/that fell in love with chaos” (II:13).¹ Like the bodily song of “The Cicada”, her poetry is an act of self-affirmation, for, even though she sings “badly”, i.e. outside the phallogocentric canonical conventions, it is the only identity she can enunciate (II:81). Preoccupation with the sexual, sensual body as a tool of both *jouissance* and heuristics is the paramount theme of Anghelaki-Rooke’s poems: as she says in her “Diary of Vytos—First Day”, “My body became the beginning of a journey” (I:15)—a line which begins and ends this poem, as the *alpha* and the *omega* of her personal odyssey, and whose meaning reaches its explosive peak in dithyrambs like “When the Body”:

...when the body exults announcing
 “I exist in the chaos absolutely”
 and under potent lightbulbs
 splits in two
 to burrow in its half
 in the other half of the other
 when its speech becomes
 a vertical line
 that connects it to the heavens
 when the body
 has been poisoned by the juices...
 ...when its measured surface
 has been measured countless times
 with the eye, the mouth
 the scrutinizing flashlight of time...
 ...the voices return
 to the roots of the kidneys
 and a bird, hidden
 unwounded in all that drool and kisses
 flies, runs up and away
 from the desolate land
 littered with teeth and hair
 that in its wake the body left
 when the body... (II:115)

A number of *écriture féminine* traits mark the covert meaning of this description of an erotic encounter, which again begins and ends cyclically with the refrain “when the body”: the body is absolute existential knowledge, the equivalent of a *cogito ergo sum* with its exultation of self-realization; it is endless, self-reproducing, ultimately free as a bird. With this *jouissance* of “body language”, however, comes the realization of its inevitable—as it is linked to both communion and its pleasure—abuse: it is the attempt to measure precisely, to hedge in logocentric definitions, the mere surface of that which divides, transforms, sheds, has fecund depths and organs, and metaphysical dimensions. These lines echo eloquently the critique of French feminists like Cixous and Luce Irigaray against the surface/optical judgments of the theoreticians of patriarchy (most notably Freud and Lacan), with their definition of the female body as “lack” because “her sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A ‘hole’ in its scopophilic lens” (Irigaray 352). It is a poetic judgment passed on the traditional interpretation of the erotic act; at the same time the last line of the poem, with its ambiguous ellipsis, suggests the futility of criticism as the act—and hence the poisoning—is bound to repeat itself by grace of its pleasure. One could even see this poem as a commentary on the women’s *ars poetica* itself: the pleasure of using, and being in, the literary canon coupled with the bitterness of the judgment of this act by the biased traditional standards, or even the bitterness of Jane Gallop’s remark that “‘Love’ is entangled with the question of woman’s complicity; it may be the bribe which has persuaded her to agree to her own exclusion” (429).

This brings us further into the use of the body as a heuristic tool that counters the gaze-oriented masculine epistemology. A de-centering from the gaze is another trait of *écriture féminine*, as feminist criticism underlines the bias of scopocentric criteria used both in defining human beings (as mentioned above with Freud and Lacan) and in the standard operations of patriarchal institutions. Following Cixous and Irigaray, Laura Mulvey explains how “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (425). In Anghelaki-Rooke’s poetry, this division is characteristically examined in poems like “The Photographer”, which pits the female object of the gaze, the butterfly, against the lens of the male photographer, who in vain tries to catch the *evan-essence* of her beauty:

...The photographer stays in the dark
 for he knows only in the black
 to organize himself.
 He keeps hoping that one day he’ll depict the difference
 between separation and death
 but his art has many imperfections still...
 ...the negative always at the same place
 takes light in, at the eyes....

He'll concentrate on those
 ignoring the rest of the orchard
 even though it entire gives off the perfume
 that life has before it's hacked apart
 into concluded facts.

[...]

He was unworthy of this difference
 to gain a depiction, the photographer.
 And from the baptismal font of his art
 emerged a blot of life
 a monkeyish mug of death
 a reprint of the negative
 a renewal of the unhealing absence
 the abandonment, the silence.
 That was the only positive.
 The photographer had managed
 to depict the silence.
 The only positive. (III:145-48)

The failure of the photographer—the male artist—to capture the meaning of the butterfly, “the difference between the beauty/when it abandons you only/ but goes elsewhere to perch” (147), signals in no uncertain terms both the possessiveness that the economy of the phallogocentric gaze entails, leaving no space for the woman to own/define herself, and also the failure of such an attempt at capturing the truth: hacking the truth into pieces, in fact selecting only the eyes “without their boss, the body” (146), makes for an unworthy photographer, who can only depict his own impasse, the silence *his* lack causes. The perfumed garden of the holistic female self escapes him.

Yet even in this polemic—and Anghelaki-Rooke's irony is at top form in this subtle jeremiad—a sense of resignation carries off the final impression. Along with the commonplace of the woman as butterfly, the poem emerges from the thoughts of the man, ignoring the possible viewpoint of the butterfly: in other words, to the extent that Anghelaki-Rooke participates in the (patriarchal) poetic tradition, she inescapably partakes of elements in the canon such as the stereotypical metaphors of the feminine being frail and colorful that are the stock and trade of poetic diction, and the voyeuristic subjectivity of the “always-male” artist. Of course, as *écriture féminine* embraces those metaphors in an effort to subvert them into empowering images, the stereotypes here too function as a critique of the male gaze: the small butterfly is yet too large to fit the photographer's lens. Moreover, as feminist theory notes, phallogocentric standards often misapply the term “silence” to the natural condition of the pre-Oedipal sensory bond with the maternal body. There one does not suffer “the unhealing absence/the abandonment” (147) that *logos* tries to heal later in the Oedipal son (one wonders here if the irony of the *self-blinded* photographer wasn't intentional in

Anghelaki-Rooke's poem): it is the silence of the comforting presence, and the free space where a new, really feminine *écriture* can possibly be born. However, the poem does not end with the butterfly wrestling the camera from the photographer, and this silence merely lodges the protest of the dissenter; but this is, at best, the silence of the lambs. It does not change the position of the fractured feminine object, and rather allows for its preconditioned view to establish itself as a natural truth, as: "the indeterminate instant/when mere abandonment/transforms into conclusive death" (145). If a woman is no other than the ephemeral butterfly in the garden of short-lived blossoms, then absence and death, the defaulting silence instead of self-generated signification, becomes her only destination. Therefore, to be a poet is to participate, even at the moment the woman-speaker decries it, in the *a priori*-set masculine symbolic order, in the signifying crime – the alternative is not to be at all.

The same dilemma seems to hold true in Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry also for those men who would adopt a feminine – that is, critical – position *vis-à-vis* the phallogocentric institutions. The poet attacks repeatedly the sanctimonious order of religion, myth and history – all defining elements in Greek heritage – that oppress feminine bodily expression, the motherly connection. She identifies women with the conquered Aztecs, seduced by Cortez into extinction (II:114); she misquotes the Orthodox funereal service benedictions to express the motherless, Electra complex of her vocation (I:158; I:180); she denounces the "senile saints" (I:137) for a tactile desire for the literal, pre-Oedipal body of Christ that sanctifies the feminine better than any chunk of bread in a goblet, or such symbolic immaculate conceptions (I:183). She becomes "The Other Penelope" that demystifies Odysseus from hero to a boyish man, using, in a single poem, images of Homer, Aeschylus, the Karagiozis shadow-puppet theater and Yiannis Tsarouchis' homoerotic male portraits (III:149). And she makes clear that a man, also, can go through such experiences. What stands out, for example, in Anghelaki-Rooke's portrait of the philosopher in "Diogenes", is the clear equation of the cynic's ascetic stance with his maintenance, still, of the pre-Oedipal connection to the womb:

Day in day out I'm dying like a dog inside the barrel
 I have no imitators for the dark.
 The relic of my mother has become hard
 I still inhabit it
 since I was never born
 I just exist
 and hurt each time
 I touch the stonewalls of the world.
I never started weaving
 lies around the nakedness
 of my death.
 An embryo aged

[...]
 This day that, set in the firmament,
 moves
 and changes color, sun
 it kills me and I study it
 it humiliates me and I accept it
 I apprentice in an inch of distance
 in a single ring of age.
and I roll, I roll...
 I remember the genesis
 like last year's festival
 a bug's circling
 is the sun's course round me
 always round me
 and I the martyred center
 [...]
 The world is beautifully mirrored
 in the round eye of the cow
 when the field borders completely
 with her four feet
 but I have lost
 the magic of the surface
 and the depth that drags downwards
 goes with the seed
 posthumously. (I:159-61)

Here is, again, the symbol of the cycle, woman's eternal, recurring time that fuels the cynic's wisdom of relativity, versus the bovine mirroring gaze, content in reflecting its own limitations on the world; and moreover, the channeling of all those "feminine" qualities deemed negative, like reticence, passivity, marginality into a positive epistemology, a *philosophie féminine*. Yet again we see the dilemma of this pleasure of knowledge achieved only through pain and sacrifice, the punishment of resisting the symbolic order. Not only must the seed die to know rebirth, but its present life is already abortive, an "aged embryo" unclassifiable according to the age/time criteria of patriarchy which presuppose the separation from the mother as maturity. Indeed, the equation of birth and death, of womb and tomb, archetypally feminine though it may be, is a gesture of futility, a *post-mortem* deferral of protests. This is also in the "Diary of Vytos" which defines as bodily beginning the end of the pre-Oedipal happy summer, when "the calls of the mothers" are a thing of the past (I:15). Diogenes thus becomes the patron-saint of women poets, who engage in the naming game, knowing well that they shall find neither "imitators," nor reward—nor even, ultimately, any possibility of naming at all.

Anghelaki-Rooke even rewrites the myth of Oedipus himself, engaging fur-

ther in what, in terms of *écriture féminine* is a subversive revision of patriarchal archetypal images, at the same time these images are acknowledged. As Nicoletta Pireddu notes, the “metaphor of the palimpsest”, the scratching of the symbolic surface of the myths of Western culture in order to uncover their hidden meanings,

epitomizes the functioning of the “law of genre”, in both the literary and the sexual context: genres constitute inevitable boundaries, since even in the attempt to undermine them, their existence must be acknowledged. If it is always inside the walls of genericity that subversion takes place, the “disruptive anomalies” of female writing manifest themselves through a critical repetition – a re-citation – of the original male discourse. (59-60)

One further understands that, for a culture as richly inundated and conscious of its myths as the Greek one, such a palimpsestic deconstruction entails serious audacity. This is where *écriture féminine*, with its taboo-breaking engagement with the sexual/sensual body, becomes useful:

I lick a stone. The pores of my tongue settle within the pores of the stone. [...] This stone I call Oedipus. For it, like Oedipus, is also irregular with deep furrows for eyes. It also rolls on swollen feet. And when standing still, it hides under it a destiny, a serpent, my forgotten self.
This stone I call Oedipus.
For while in itself it has no meaning, it has the shape and the weight of choice. I call it and I lick it.
Up to the end of my story.
Until I understand what choice means.
Until I understand what end means. (II:78)

The total sensory experience of the stone, the surprising irreverence of it claims the space for its arbitrary redefinition, pointing thus to the arbitrariness of symbolic denominations which go unnoticed. The poet reverses the roles of the naming game, becoming the feminine giver of meanings to men. The feminine symbol of the chthonic prophetic snake leads to the identification of the poet with the Theban king, but also with Teiresias, the blind seer of the Sophoclean trilogy, and the Sphinx: images that suggest the existence of a deeper, more ancient feminine knowledge than the one posited by patriarchy and its hero-killing model as the one and only – hence the possibility of “choice” instead of destiny. At the same time, the equation of femininity with affliction, the assumption – as with “Diogenes” – of a male persona for the female artist, justifies the inconclusiveness of the last lines: blinded by preset definitions, how can the poet under-stand her story without becoming what she opposes? It is notable that, in the erotic poems where the female speaker assumes, or fantasizes, becoming the male/penetrating partner (“Violation”, II:82-83; and “My Plastic Thing”), the sexual aggressor (“Spider’s Dream”, II:117), in order to tap

the secret place
whence bubble up
fresh every morning
the excuses
of your perfect fleshpot
before they erupt in beauty. (II:83)

she ends up betrayed, finding only violence, incomprehension, alienation: “no knowledge. Only stupid power.[...] What do I mean by power...violence. Violence and the annihilation of the other are one and the same. Annihilation” (“My Plastic Thing”). This seems the inevitable destiny, since the alternative is the arrival of the Male to defeat her—with her complicit betrayal of her body’s powers—at the game of mastery and pleasure he’s been playing far longer than she (II:117). The erotic coinage of *écriture féminine*, as Anghelaki-Rooke suggests, is already tainted at the roots of meaning.

What remains, then, for the fleshpo(e)t to do? In every manifestation of *écriture féminine* examined, the same impasse with masculine *logos* and its *a priori* demarcation of the feminine body as problematic is verified. Again true to form, Anghelaki-Rooke concludes then with literalizing this literary betrayal in terms of the body itself, as she muses, “Our lovers were bad poets/we knew it even then”, but the surcharge of erotic/symbolic dazzle surrounding the masculine made its inadequacy negligible: “our couplain-tive hearts/mistook the body for Homer/and the poem/for love’s breath” (III:159). But the opposite rules the feminine. The inadequacy of the *écriture féminine* as a mode of adequately aesthetic expression outside the symbolic tradition becomes in Anghelaki-Rooke the metaphor of “The Scar”, the female destiny of pain in and as desire:

Instead of a star a scar shone high over my birth....
I don’t remember how it came and I bloomed on a wound....
Who knows in one night what transactions took place,
what I gave, what I got, what I gave up,
what I promised so that life would keep me as its maidservant...
It was blackmail, deal, threat,
should I be grateful for the hacked-up gift
of existence or vengeful?
[...]
I survived and I started playing.
Trustingly I’d steady myself on the contraption
and climb the stairs.
In the attic I set up the kingdom of my dreams
from fashion-book cutups...
[...]
From downstairs the heat of this world would rise,
the kitchen full of smells, familiar noises....

The kitchen and my paper fantasy,
thus early, then, are the polarities engraved? (III:14-15)

The highly emotive, autobiographical tone of the poem suggests the centrality of the theme, even if the metaphors for it weren't extremely clear: given the blighted (by the fashion-magazine patriarchal stereotypes) condition of the qualifier "woman" in the poet, the combination of both identities is either the fantasy of that feminist *topos*, "The Madwoman in the Attic", or downright impossible, as one had to be bartered away to achieve the consolation of the other. To reach the poetic vocation the girl is made to pass through the Oedipal conflict, crawl out of the mother's nurturing kitchen, and emerge as a caricature – at best – of the un-wounded (not-castrated) male artist. The theme is again seen in one of the artist's latest poems, "The Punishment Or, The Century that Ends". Along with the recurring theme of ending and the pain of pleasure ("Ye boat-Eros/you shred me, you hurt me" (III:95), the female speaker is humiliated, for:

"An error, a grave error
that you raised your head
and the eyes you pinpointed
on the lofty pinnacle of beauty,
forgetting your wretched body..."

As a punishment, your vision
will stay hungry...." (III:95)

The male voice forbids participation in the gaze economy, and its aesthetic pleasure, to those who were born with a "wretched" – read female – body. At the same time, the poet cannot but use this same self-limiting yardstick to express herself, "I murmured and returned to the room/leaning on the cane of writing" (III:96), as any alternative can only be her death as an artist. This impossible existence, which, as we have seen, has echoed through the corpus of Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry, is finally envisioned in the eloquently-titled "The Body is the Victory and the Defeat of Dreams":

The body is the Victory of dreams
when uninhibited like water
rises from sleep
with its still-sleeping imprints...
its dark olive-groves
enamored
cool in the palm of the hand.

The body is the Defeat of dreams
as it lies long and empty

But I knew Greece
 And its landscape
 At the hour of my suicide
 It dawned
 As if I were emerging free
 From the waters
 And the forests shone... (18)

The forest
 Always took
 The shape
 Of the shadow that he had
 As he passed
 Among
 The trees
 Of the forest... (23)

Plants have a different upbringing than that of humans...
 Plants are continuously revolutionary
 Just think how plants increase at the hour of the moon. (29)

An other hour of the moon.

When women increase
 Sitting together
 On hilltops...
 With the bodies
 Appearing tangled in the moon
 Equally smoothed over
 for clinging plants some times
 in moist places especially where vegetation is permanent
 one on top of the other
 support the ascendance of branches that shoot high up...
 certainly plants support each other. (30-31)

Inhabited that I am not an empty land
 At the crossroads of insects...
 The passageways are dark, the channels that certainly exist
 Their supervision for the task, for the salvage of the waters
 Through underwater pores, difficult passages hitting on the bushes
 I recall. On my savage body I enforce, I plead
 Pierced by the wind of birds when they went by, eroded,
 full of passages
 Of my communication with the water.

[...]
 And the sea came to my side then
 It met me
 There was a ready riverbed on my body deep quietude now (88)

Female identity here can be seen as the dark and shifting forest with its lurking flora and fauna. Vakalo especially devotes large space to plants, noting their quaint perspective, suggesting the possibility of a different sensibility to the established, phallogocentrism of Western culture:

I speak on this subject because I want to be
 Against:
 Humor
 Grace
 Personal consistency
 Spirit
 As they are meant by European civilization
 This is our main difference with the plants. (35)

Woman is also the cavernous sea—the *mer/mère* of Cixous’s archetypal metaphor for the mother-self—and even the folkloric Greek countryside, where quaint pariahs roam (as in the “Mistress Rodalina” stories). This dizzying, boundless stretching of the notion of “body” over features defining the Greek landscape works subversively against any fixed, limiting categories of “woman” bequeathed by the phallogocentrism of those that claim sole ownership of the term “humans”, designating woman as “the other of the thing”; the “he” who expects the forest to bear the shape of his darkening reflection. In fact, Vakalo manages to turn “otherness” into a positive, empowering term, re-signifying “lack of category” into a category of one’s own: “This poem/Is not to be read/By those who don’t love me.../If they don’t believe I was/Like/Them” (14). The shifting identity also affirms two basic *écriture féminine* ideas: the fact that “it is impossible to define feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system” (Cixous 340). Secondly, it highlights the link of woman to nature, especially the “association between femaleness and liquidity which can seem shapeless, the fluidity of women’s identity” (Montefiore 150), and, what is more, feminine writing to natural (in any sense) writing. As Nora Anagnostaki notes, “I think that Vakalo means ‘rebarbarisation’ as a return of the human being to its natural roots as a venue of deliverance from the social lie and not, of course, as a regression to the primitive stage of the human species” (13). In its interconnections and transformations through nature, furthermore, the individual female body and consciousness achieves a collective identity: like plants, women increase better in solidarity, under the benevolent auspices of

the moon – Artemis, the goddess of untamed womanhood. If writing for the French feminists is an essential act of identity, then Vakalo also enhances it with the dimension of the common benefit, a “revolutionary” cause that means to preserve, through acts of poetic quest and individual trouble, the subterranean currents that nurture the overall female consciousness: “The way to be in danger is our way as poets” (87).

Thus the poet identifies poetics femininely, first of all with the mother’s nurturing role, identifying the lactating breast of the canon. She graces her own mother’s mastectomy with the empowering image of the Amazon, consciously remembering her:

More, I think, because in laying open her wound without her having any
shame and me likewise, I didn’t get scared and on the contrary the trans-
formation gave me an original sensation
that of paradox beauty (152)

and not with the “sheep”, the capitulated women, whom the poet condemns because they gossip against their proud, “beast”-like, sexual counterparts (173). She devotes her *Genealogies* and many other individual poems to her memories of the mother’s house, the world of the traditional past with a strong matriarchal presence that is another feature – paradoxical but true – of historical Greek society: due to the frequent wars, women, although defined by patriarchy, emerged as powerful social agents, keeping entire households and often social structures single-handedly. In Vakalo’s “fairy tale for the wolves”, written in the singsong rhyme of such traditional childhood narratives, for example, the grandmother, “though she had kids too”, takes pity on the soldiers, “Raggedy, bread-beggars/ In the aftermath of war” and:

She said, move aside, ye men
That would kill for the other things
When the bread is lacking
And she comes down the road
That leads toward the city
Carriages would go by...
To bring over wheat
For the city to eat....

And when the frightened carriage-driver can’t hold the runaway horses – dark urges that masculine nature can’t keep under control:

Grandma grabs the reigns
And she drags it up to us
They ate, they were sated
Both soldiers and kids

And all know that next to her,
The driver ate too. (141)

In reversing the traditional roles of the male hero and damsel-in-distress, Vakalo makes a moral fable that is actually true at the same time it presents a positive image of the Greek mother, showing how the best of the Greek tradition was maintained through the active intervention of women in “men’s affairs”. She is the same grandma who “was a little girl granny” and fell in love while wearing a hat with live branches and nesting birds (110)—an archetype of the Triple Goddess, maid lover and crone, that nurtures and blesses the fantasy of her descendants. Thus in Vakalo’s poetry, this mother-identified *écriture féminine* is the locus that links best her Greek to her female identity, working not only rebelliously but reaffirmingly too.

Secondly, as with otherness, she turns her unspecifiable self into an advantage by choosing for her other poetic persona the Jester. This image evokes both the indemnity of the transforming mask, and the riddling truthsaying of the King’s Fool. Not settling in any of her many faces, but sustaining and drawing from all without presenting a fixed target, it corresponds, in the practice of *écriture féminine*, with the view of the female biopsychological self as posited by Irigaray: “Whence the mystery that woman represents in a culture claiming to count everything.... She is neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified either as one person, or as two” (352). It also makes for semantic guerrilla tactics that feminist discourse particularly favors, as Ann R. Cacoullos points out:

For hybridity cannot dispel, in fact sustains, the uncomfortable condition of being at once inside and outside...what? Gender, certainly for de Lauretis and other radical feminist theorists, and I would add, nation, culture, race, ethnicity, sexuality, all those “modes of being” which purportedly fix, secure, signify, individual subjectivity and collective identity. Abiding in this state of hybridity, theoretically and experientially is, I would argue, a necessary condition for developing radical, emancipatory autonomous discourses and practices. (46)

The Jester appears in the face of Mistress Rodalina, the “rosey rose”, the ever-changing female *picaro* whose adventures take up the last two of Vakalo’s collections: “I/The damsel of the haybarn/8 months pregnant/8 years now” (191). Rodalina, “the crazy one/ That roams here and there” (193), blithely submits to her “lofty master” on his horse (191), to the violence of war glorified by canonical poets “just like in Shakespeare” (192), to her wondering examination of the “animal-toe” of her foot, with the exact same reaction in every poem’s last line: “I’m entertained” (190-93). The irony of the statement throws into relief the masculine activities, violence and its phallogocentric praise, but also secures the speaker from criticism—for participating or for not reacting—since femininity, like madness, can’t be helped (in fact, in terms of *écriture féminine*, madness is

the excess of feminine identity under signifying or real oppression, and thus almost a tautosemy).

This connection is further intensified by the irregular, playful language and meter that Cixous (344) hails as an *écriture féminine* staple. According to Pam Morris, both Cixous's and Irigaray's strategies "for a disruptive feminine writing practice" include "a dispersal of any unitary subjective 'I' – nature-as-women and the Jester – "punning and word-play, and syntactic disjunction" (128). Vakalo's rhymes are interspersed with prose and dialogues, and the surrealist elements in her "historical" poetic landscapes. For Anagnostaki, "Vakalo takes us further back than the conventions of syntax, at the point where the phrase is about to be formed and the words jostle each other to overcome and the strongest come to surface", forming a poetry which "moves with rhythm but without melody at all" (94).

At the same time, however, these images of mercurial and subversive femininity are equally imbued with negative traits. In Vakalo the body appears not only as metaphor, but also as a metonymy suggested by its primary sensation, pain. This in turn leads one to question whether this game of transformations is rather an evasive technique for escaping the overwhelming presence of a threat:

Now I will pluck out my heart
 But not
 Like the jellyfish
 They have not blood (11)

From the erosion sunken voices.
 Some can't make it all the way
 Like shadowy membranes
 Like jellyfish half-in half-out the water
 They transform
 Interrupting the continuity they return to the sinking
 It is scary to admit it. (45)

It is at night that people betray the others
 And when the forest
 Has begun
 To choke you
 You yell
 As if
 You aren't
 In the forest.

The forest is like my nights... (12)

And those things they say

That in the forests birds sing all day
Are lies
In the forests fear reigns
And the beasts
Same as the birds
Know how to fear
Before they are born (19)

The terror that the poet's persona(e) feels is defined again in terms of animal nature, pointing to the dilemma of such an identification of the feminine with the natural: liberating in its largeness, beautiful in its many forms, nature is still subject to the greater law, ironically not that of tooth and nail, but of human intervention and mastery, Adam's God-given rule over Eden. The fear that beasts know from womb, a fear that, like one's sex, is formative to identity, comes in the poem from the two woodsmen that cut down the trees of the forest—an image of feminine castration (19). The self-evisceration and the "sinking" of the voices, which act contrary to sea-flow and interrupt it, presuppose a human, societal—hence patriarchal—superimposition. Finally, the act of betrayal that turns the forest/womanhood into an asphyxiating experience is the work of "people", which, as we saw above, is the token symbolic definition of masculinity that posits woman/nature as "other". What becomes clear, therefore, is that the fear is a product, and a controlling agent, of the patriarchal system:

The body convulses
It does not suffer
It is the only one that when it hurts
Has pleasure...
Then it waits
Due to fear more eager
It multiplies it hides
On each woman's bosom
Made more ready by fear...
To motion to the
Command

Dark opaque skin of prey that still has not been defeated inside us. (60)

Let my confession for the first time
Be written by its real name
Confession
And not a poetic attempt at all
Since thus I must
Hurt
Even more

For it...

*I was thinking nothing would be nicer than to be a dog.
The way you hit them and they submit
It's been time enough.*

And as for these I left for you
Today
To infer
It's not out of love
I wanted it this way
For in the forest one sinks
Only so that I can
Exit from somewhere...
This poem
Is my last rebellious act
Before I capitulate
To the advice of the Gen(der)tiles. (25)

As the poetic analysis reaches more personal, “confessional” levels, the view of the natural woman becomes even more questionable: the cyclical, repetitious poetry that introduces the “Description of the Body” textualizes the ambivalence of bodily animal innocence, so easily manipulated (59-60). Another seemingly-positive aspect of the natural that comes into play is pleasure, the bodily *jouissance*, and the way that, as also in Anghelaki-Rooke, becomes a tool of feminine oppression that undermines the suffering activist-poet. More than an “eagerness” born of fear, this pleasure suggests the age-old Freudian neurosis of feminine masochism, that blends the natural desire to please and to perform well with the rationalization mechanism for stress avoidance. Man’s mastery over the animals entails thus a wistful capitulation, since fear makes woman desire to “exit” her restrictive, stressful identity. Not even poetry, the mastery of *logos*, can help the speaker: a tainted tool—as we have seen, and again here verify by its being called a tool of false names and bad advice—it brings, at best, the pain of realizing one’s oppression, and a rebellion that is doomed to fail. What is of particular charm here is the use of the word “*allophyloi*” in the last line of the poem above: due to a pun in Greek, especially in the genitive case in which it is used, the biblical term means both “people of a foreign race”, and also “people of the other sex”. And given that this term is famous in Greek from Samson’s dying utterance of repentance and triumph, “Let my soul perish with those of the foreigners”, Vakalo’s allusive gesture suggests both that, in her function as a poet, she must assume the responsibility of the biblical Judge and right wrongs against people of her race/sex, even if the gesture is suicidal, but also that, unlike Samson, she will probably not perish in glory, but evade by transformations (like Rodalina’s rationalized exculpation, for example) and fi-

nally compromise in a stereotyped existence, “eyeless in Gaza”.

This masochistic complex reaches, beyond the heroine-persona, that of the mother as well. Opposite to grandma-“Hyppolite” (the Amazon queen’s name signifying mastery of horses comes as an easy allusion), there is the image, bequeathed to the Greeks via their trademark Orthodoxy, the folk tradition of mourners, and Demeter’s veiled idol, of the *mater dolorosa*:

The other grandma, the great one, who was from the island
Had five boy-children
For every year that the ships would return another child

They say she had sworn that for all of them to live she’d lose whichever
would be the last one
I know that the others became eighty years old
And this old grandmother of mine held the promised one when it died in
her arms
They said she didn’t mourn for it, but never came down to see the boats
off again

Only once, and it was when she said good-bye to her one son
And he was my father
Youngest in line before the dead one

And my grandmother I still have to say, sat on that day at the table and
she did not speak for the one she knew was dead until they finished their
meal. (111)

There are many elements of *écriture féminine* that work to make this poem unusually powerful. The woman’s bartering with Death for her sailing sons—that are naturally and exclusively identified in Greek language as human, “children”, while “girls” are merely that—is a double *topos* of inscribing the feminine in Greek folklore, which allows for a scapegoat to masculine mortality as a seductive return to the great womb, the fickle lover, the sea. The relation of the feminine to death, moreover, could derive here its legitimacy from what Kristeva in “Stabat Mater” identifies as a kind of female masochism, the metaphysical balancing of woman’s procreative power with her role in suffering, and mourning for the death of the Son:

Could it be that the love, as puzzling as it is ancient, of mourners for corpses relates to the same longing of a woman whom nothing fulfills—the longing to experience the wholly masculine pain of a man who expires at every moment on account of *jouissance* due to obsession with his own death? And yet, Marian pain is in no way connected with tragic outburst: joy and even a kind of triumph follow upon tears, as if the conviction that

death does not exist were an irrational but unshakeable maternal certainty, on which the principle of resurrection had to rest. (175)

Typically, feminine procreativity allows for the fulfillment of the masculine fantasy of male birth, for what is resurrection if not a re-birth without benefit of the womb? Once more, tradition and female identity seem to mesh conclusively in Vakalo, pointing out the inevitability of feminine pain and sacrifice. The poem, however, has one extra tangent, set in its most-striking last line. The silence of the mother as the last show of force and ultimate resignation against the “they say” of the people and the granddaughter’s own narrative reminds us, first, of the separation-death from the pre-Oedipal maternal, that silent but longed-for state: “The most beautiful body that is formed in silence/...As if a new way made it/Be born again” (49). Yet there derive competing accounts and definitions of such a separation and its necessity. The poet’s duty is to establish her truth for the greater feminine good, so that the power of the secluded ancestress can be reclaimed; at the same time, the poetry inevitably locates this power in the dog’s silent duty to its master, the sacrifice of individual pain to the greater patriarchal good. With no further commentary possible, the poem concludes in ancestral silence, the effacement of the feminine self from presence, from speech, from page. The one abandoned, the “it” consigned to die, is the female child.

The turning of the femin-ine/-ist sacrificial *écriture* against itself is also seen in the realm of the *logos* and the gaze as heuristic tools related to the poetic quest for identity. The former in its aspect of traditional masculine canon in particular is, as observed earlier, the one insurmountable issue which feeds the symbolic order with preconceived images and ultimately leads to a kind of poetic schizophrenia those women who wish to resist the canon while practicing in it. As Liz Yorke points out, literary activists of the feminine self must not only engage in uncovering female voices of the past—Vakalo’s subterranean waters—and broach thematologies deemed unfit or taboo—Vakalo’s exultation of her mother’s amputated breast in a culture that still won’t name cancer by its name, and shuns the breast—but “also involves *re-inscription*, a process in which the old narratives, stories, scripts, mythologies become transvalued, re-presented in different terms” (1).

Thus Vakalo also engages her subversive rewriting of the canonical tradition through techniques such as historical and literary allusions, postmodern pastiche, and parody. The purpose of these sharp tools, Anagnostaki suggests, is to clear away the superimposed phallogocentric meanings of these palimpsests and reveal the strengths and flaws of the stories: “through continuous scraping off of the foreign layers the archetype must be found in its pure simple essence” (17). A scene from a Roman triumph in Delos, for example, seen from the perspective of the dispossessed, of beggars, the jostling conquered Greek crowd for which marginalized women—the writhing creatures at the bottom of the seaport—have an affinity, mutes the patriarchal view of history and concludes that “There is a tragedian in the midst of silence” (48). The “Love Story” also “told by others”

(*Romeo and Juliet*?) is thwarted by the insertion of a dog, a cynical poet's voice that identifies unwarrantedly with her heroine ("I don't care about the boy"; "A tear for me that I perish") and the moon that makes the dead girl the tragic protagonist alone... Or almost: "Have I written about the dog?" ends the poem as parody, as un-canonical intervention of the author's voice into the conventionally-closed fiction scene, and as reminder of the bond of the dispossessed, the ubiquitous beaten dog (also in 167) and the abused feminine (166). The literary romance of Abelard and Héloïse, so fraught with the superimposition of phallogocentrism and religious misogyny, is sharply rebuked for its demonization of the girl (205). Similarly, she addresses a fiery "woe to ye, you hypocrite" to the monk who "in the name of whose father of yours?" calls always "him" and not "her" in disseminating blessings on speech—blessings he himself does not share in his miserly existence. Hence the poet's malediction: "Conceited men of logos, the genus I belong to obstructs my language/I gave myself to satan for no other reason/The hungry one's satiation/Is the fasting of the Well-fed" (236). Again, the pun on "genos" as both race and gender makes clear the female poet's complaint against the canon and its sustaining patriarchal tradition. "The Gypsy's Dodecalogue", the poem by the national poet Dionysios Solomos, in praise of the spirit of the Greek countryside and its folkloric soul is imitated in "The Marvelous Fishing", showing how women can also participate in the epic-making, symbol-making process of a national-masculine model. Vakalo's chosen representatives of Greekness are the fishermen, men closer to the sea-mother, its transformative powers ("they would spread their hands around as if they were flying and the fish were birds winging in a sea that carried currents"), and its moral influence (94).

But Vakalo's crowning achievement comes with the creation of the huge female *bildungsroman* of Mistress Rodalina, a protagonist whose character incorporates all the elements of the *écriture féminine* model: madwoman, pariah, irrepressible source of life, a liberator of oppressed women, a nonlinear wayfarer in a dreamscape version of Greek countryside and its metaphysical levels up and down, changing a flurry of identities—Héloïse, Don Juan, princess, Fool, Crazy Jane, empress, sprite, icon, castaway, prisoner, martyr, social idol, evil despot, Jocasta, the poet's first-person voice—yet remaining irrepressibly and inimically herself. It is the world through the eyes of feminine sensibility, and, what is more, a one-woman society. The language of the Rodalina stories, furthermore, participates in the deconstruction of the purposeful, rigid epic character by assimilating, as a pastiche, all those voice-changes indicated above, and more: during Rodalina's execution scene, side by side with a reference to Solomos' "Woman of Zakynthos" as Rodalina's mother-daughter (an allusion to the father-daughter relationship of Vakalo herself with the canon, as well as her intention of re-birthing and rewriting it), there appears Joan Baez. Vakalo even innocently asks "Do you mind that we stuck in Joan Baez here?" to make the incongruity impossible to miss, and to establish that the bard-activist who represented the revolutionary spirit of the late 20th century is, indeed, entitled to re-

vise the past canon (212).

On the other hand, perhaps revising the canon is not enough; and, indeed, it may not be ultimately feasible, given its nature and the nature of *logos*. The way Pireddu explains the process of revision, “the male text is neither totally obliterated nor faithfully reproduced: like an ancient parchment, it is partially erased to make room for another story—the female story—thus creating an interplay of transparency and opacity between the two levels” (59). Yet, as with Anghelaki-Rooke’s poetry, this deliberate confusion may ultimately be self-defeating. To pun on the old Zen question, if a “tragedian” emerges and there’s only “silence” to write her story in, does she emerge at all? The deconstructive criticism of the disruptive feminized allusions and genres must still find the audience that will understand it, and in that respect the nonlinear *écriture féminine* is at a self-admitted disadvantage in comparison to the canonical *logos*:

I ponder that to our works today fits
the species of the polypede

As

Events will happen thus
That, leaving foreign layers
Calceous shells
Dry sponge pieces
Maybe branches that were dropped
From above by tired birds in passing
Penetrate into the union of the tissues
Organisms dead at sea
Join amongst themselves
Form vertebrae from empty broken seashells....

The takeover of the space at the joints
Sounds always in the poems silently like a creak. (51)

Vakalo ironically sees her *ars poetica* as an attrition of fossilized debris, inside a mother-sea that is devoid of life, despite all its transformative processes. The elements of the art, already tainted, are the fixed meanings of the symbolic-canonic, discarded “from above” for the woman-artist’s secondary use. It is no wonder, then, that what results is silence, barely a creak signifying not the elasticity and vivacity of *écriture féminine*, but stiffness, aging—what T. S. Eliot would call the “premature decrepitude” of the overly self-conscious poet. Or, as in Anagnostaki’s reading of Vakalo’s “in poems the words are slowly interwoven/Of transformations/That in the end motionless exist/As on the corpses exists the smell” (47), the conclusion is that “The words become the dead carapace of the expressive attempt and in fact give off the smell of a corpse, precisely because they presuppose something that just before they covered it was still alive” (15). Cut off from the energizing system of signification, the female artist feels she

cannot even engage fully in the symbolic realm of literature, let alone search for her new language.

The system of patriarchal *logos*, therefore, is recognized in Vakalo in all its insidious potency; but it is especially so because the poet cannot disengage, in tool or in rule of her trade, from it, as seen metaphorically in Rodalina's unholy attraction to the sprite of literary canon, Isadore Ducas:

Mistress Rodalina for him
 Whose body has no ending
 Is horrified – is raving –
 Divided and attracted mightily
 Not at all unheard
 Since as wondrous is the demon
 As he is abominable. (204)

The poet-Rodalina is consequently destined to fill her own capitulating silence with the inherited voices of her native patriarchal culture: "I never had many other voices./For I exist inside the abyss like there exists always hidden in my poem not a word, but a sob" (91). The elegiac tone of the poem, the references to personal annihilation, and the allusion – intentional or not – to the way the world ends in Eliot (if not with the "bang" of men at war, that is) again indicate that the only solution envisaged out of this poetic dilemma is a death beyond the literal – the absolute death of consciousness, death in the literary, aesthetic sense.

The mechanics of this death are, finally, perpetuated in the twin realm of phallogocentrism, that of the phallic vision. Beyond her transformations – which, as Irigaray suggests, may even indicate a neurotic fragmentation of the amputated feminine identity (354) – Vakalo employs other stratagems to avoid and criticize the taxonomic male gaze, privileging the feminine holistic touch "trying through the touch of the entire body to finger the meaning of actuality. Her method is the method of the mole: she closes off vision to see better" (Anagnostaki 9). The poet herself feminizes her poetic *oistros* – the Greek word for the mythical gadfly of inspiration – by noting the eye-wounds it opens in her entire body, and concluding: "And it is true that you can see more, I say, with the madness and the pain" (135). Or, again, she assumes her femininity as identifiable with blindness – and the Teiresian tangents of such an overture, same as we have seen in Anghelaki-Rooke – in her 1962 collection, *The Conceptualizing of the Blind*. Still, the usefulness of the gaze, especially its aesthetic function in poetry, betrays the poet's intentions to avoid it even as she muses on her vocational addiction:

The body that you see with simple limbs defined knowing how you can name each one separately,...and other points, on the whole body, those particularly which you have never thought of...

You don't know it anymore
As you simply knew before

It is touch

Looking, enormous blind eyes that touch the body, each denuded of eyelashes, entire, is implanted in the body looking then from in there. The body does not fight, immobile, surrounded by water, it cuts off

The taste from the mouth separating
From the palm its imprint
From the vision emptying the look

It is evil, it causes us no pain (59)

The feminist critique of the gaze and how it colonizes feminine thought is here given through this surrealist vision of the eyeball imbedding itself on the unresisting body, fracturing its functions by dividing pleasure from task, supplanting its holistic sense with its own singular input. This is preceded by the protest against the instigator of this takeover: the voyeur who can categorize the body without nevertheless knowing its entirety, since his separation from the pre-Oedipal “before” — in other words, patriarchal man. One must not fail to notice, however, the faintly sexual aura of this ocular penetration, at the same time it is portrayed as definitely grotesque; for without understanding the ambivalent emotions of the body here we cannot accurately interpret the last line. The evil which does not hurt is the one not recognizable, the one that is already-inscribed as the inevitable mode of the feminine poetic body and thus taken as a matter-of-fact. Were the invasion painful, were there a space for the feminine to voice the concept of this unique pain, the operation might have been resisted. But phallogocentrism is insensible, as the state of death — the annulment of resistance and of consciousness for the necessity of resistance — is. The evil which does not hurt is death. And, for both Eleni Vakalo and Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, in whose poetry the exercise of *écriture féminine* marks, as we have seen here, a continuous circle of an effort to transcend the patriarchal barriers to expression and the simultaneous sabotage of this effort, death is, ironically, the lesser of two evils.

In presenting these two cases the intention was not to make a sweeping statement about modern Greek women's poetry; if anything, the polymorphousness of *écriture féminine* disavows it. The parallel and unresolvable vacillations from feminine to poetic identity, however, despite the differences in the ways this tension is manifest in each poet, give us cause to pause and reflect on the power of context over the individual — especially the marginal one, as women are in patriarchy, and women poets in phallogocentric canonical tradition. In one of the characteristic passages of her famous manifesto, Cixous states: “Even if phallic mystification has generally contaminated good relationships, a woman is never far from ‘mother’.... There is always within her at least a little of that good mother's milk. She writes in white ink” (339). But in the self-generated

ambivalence of poetry, where patriarchal *logos* reigns supreme – especially in the Greek traditional culture – the writing daughters, bereft of mother and rejected by a father they adore, can very well flounder in white ink until they drown.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated the translations of poetry into English are made by the authors of this paper.

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