Shall we join the ladies? (Review-article)

Karen Van Dyck, *Kassandra and the Censors: Greek Poetry since 1967* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1998) and *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding: Three Collections by Contemporary Greek Women Poets* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1998)

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Very little critical attention has been paid to the ways in which the situation of women writers in Europe has been conditioned by the particular myth of the nation-state to which the country of their birth subscribes. Yet it is a significant social issue. An unexpected side-effect of the French Revolution, for example, was the imposition on the French of a compulsive need to cling to a monolithic group identity. A rigid distinction between public homogeneity and private individualism was established which excluded the possibility of a public presence within society for potential sub-groups based on gender, sexual orientation, race or religion. To be publicly 'other', as Dreyfus found out to his cost, was to be un-French. This doctrine of group identity and suppression of public difference has had very specific cultural consequences. Until recently cultural self-censorship required French writers to subscribe to the notion that they could not represent a sub-group without forfeiting all claim to be a significant part of national culture. Hence the particular energy with which labels such as woman writer, gay writer, even Catholic writer, have always been disclaimed by anyone with aspirations to be taken seriously. For almost two hundred years the French have conspired to pretend that there is only one way to be French, and that *différence* is a facet of private experience which must be firmly locked in the closet.

The historical circumstances of post-1826 Greece seem to have generated a comparable if less clear-cut case of the same phenomenon. The political and economic non-viability of nineteenth-century Greece and its instability in the early twentieth century brought about an obsession with defining and redefining a cultural 'Greekness' which, however different the reasons, was

envisioned in the same monolithic public terms as its French equivalent. Far from disappearing with the Great Idea, this obsession continued to dominate literature, filtered through forms of European Modernism and Surrealism, until the end of the Occupation. Certain forms of 'personal expression' were permitted, but never such as to challenge the fundamental assumption that a group cultural identity could and should exist. It is no accident, for example, that in Greece Cavafy's poetry was ruthlessly detached from his sexuality and read in a truncated, not to say mutilated, form until very recently. Cavafy is dangerous not because he writes openly about homosexuality but because he defines a homosexual sub-culture as a potential source of superior difference. A consequence of this relegation of difference to the private sphere was that women writers of the pre-1950 period had no choice but to be self-censoring, to tailor their self-perceptions into the currently permitted modes of expression. A woman could take up a revolutionary stance, but only if that stance were one sanctioned by male interests: the shift between Melpo Axioti's critically distrusted early novels *Difficult Nights* and *Shall we Dance, Maria?* and the more aesthetically orthodox, left-wing fiction which followed is a case in point. Though many women writers of the period did refuse to conform to the strict generic practices of their male contemporaries, the price of their independence was critical marginalization.

Women poets in particular found themselves in an exceptionally constricting position. Creatively they were hemmed in by the authority of a doubly patriarchal tradition – a classical tradition male-dominated in both writing and transmission and a canonical male reworking of that tradition in the service of a variety of conceptions of unified (androcentric) Greek identity. Accordingly they had little opportunity to develop a 'voice' which could speak for the group experience of women, if they wanted to be published and read, since for obvious social reasons the Cavafian option of circulating one's verse to a closed circle of the like-minded, or the separatist lesbian equivalent provided by the circle around Natalie Barney in turn-of-the century Paris, were simply unavailable to them. Where, as Maria Athanassopoulou (in a recent Cambridge Ph.D. thesis) has so ably shown à propos of the Greek sonnet, women poets consciously subverted the 'national' associations of a particular verse form, their work was politely buried: Karyotakis' epitaph on Lamari is witness to the fact. Otherwise, as in the cases of Zoi Karelli and Melissanthi, they worked in a cultural isolation which left them equally sidelined - you will look in vain for any reference to either woman even in an up-to-date history of literature such as Beaton's *Introduction to Modern Greek Literature* of 1994. Consequently, even in the post-Civil War era, it is in prose, and more

specifically in the prose of writers with strong links outside Greece, that we first find a determined effort to define and express a distinctive woman's viewpoint and to unmask the gender assumptions underlying the Greek cult of masculinity, the most notable examples being the work of Margarita Lyberaki and Tatiana Gritsi-Milliex, both writers familiar with the new French feminism of Simone de Beauvoir. Yet even these writers have only come to be fully recognised and appreciated since 1974. What Van Dyck seeks to show, very persuasively, is that the Junta period provided as dramatic a watershed in gender politics and in the cultural expression of gendered experience, as in all other aspects of Greek life.

To establish the necessary context for her argument Van Dyck undertakes a searching review of the conditions of literary expression from 1967 onwards. Greece has always been a textbook case of the Foucauldian hypothesis that language equals power. Consequently, in her initial chapter on the 'discourses of dictatorship' she forefronts the importance given to language by the régime of the colonels and the associated significance of the forms taken by both censorship and artistic silence. Ranging over a variety of governmental and contestatory texts (notably the *Eighteen Texts*) she establishes a rhetorical base common to both groups, to which she attaches Bakhtin's term monologic. Both are dominated by a desire for literality and clarity, which they associate with truth, whether – in the case of anti-junta writers – it be the 'disinterested' truth of Seferis or the 'engaged' truth of Anagnostakis. Rather like the opposing sides in the Dreyfus Affair, whom Roger Martin du Gard described in a memorable phrase as 'fanatics hitting each other over the head with capitalized abstractions', both junta spokesmen and the majority of their opponents adopt a discourse which assumes that moral right (indissoluble from issues of national identity) is assimilable to a simple truth, expressible in a stylistically (and therefore socioculturally) uniform discourse. They merely disagree as to the definition of that truth. Against this stance Van Dyck defines the presence of other types of resistance to censorship. Using texts of the songwriter Savvopoulos as her entrée she seeks to show how a younger generation of writers formulated what she sees as a more effective resistance poetics, in which uncertainty and incoherence are welcomed as disruptive strategies. Her argument is that this new form of cultural resistance (which she associates somewhat problematically and with a certain linguistic legerdemain with both Lyotard's term paralogical and the Greek word *paralogos*) characterises the poetry of the 'generation of the 1970s', but that, whilst it peters out as a disruptive strategy in the hands of male writers, it forms the basis for a new approach to gender issues in the hands of women.

Van Dyck's analysis of the generation of the 1970s focuses on the work of Poulios and Steriadis, in an attempt to show that such writers were deliberately exploring the paralogical as a medium for foregrounding the incoherence of the supposedly monolithic value system propounded by the authoritarian régime. This is the one point in her thesis where I have to part company from her. While she is undoubtedly justified in emphasising the ways in which their work reflects the beginnings of a breakdown between private and public spheres and deconstructs every kind of traditional value system from class to religion (with the marked and significant exception of the concept of masculinity), she is far too charitable in attributing a higher purpose to the self-indulgent cosmopolitan consumerism which characterises their work. Like the American Beat generation whom they imitated (and whom Van Dyck treats with an equally unmerited reverentiality), the writers whom Vassilikos aptly clssified as the 'pinball generation' sought to legitimise the pursuit of anarchic, self-indulgent and purely selfish pleasure by a patina of social rebellion laced with left-wing principles. In so doing they merely helped to advance the cause of that mindless American cultural colonialism which has devastated Europe in general, and Greece in particular, in the last forty years. The social disruptiveness of such poetry petered out after the fall of the dictatorship not because it no longer had anything to rebel against, as Van Dyck (neatly invoking Cavafy's barbarians) suggests, but because, as she also points out, its repetition of the would-be shocking is a self-defeating strategy. Attitudes and language that are daring on first exposure become childish, or even boring, when endlessly reiterated.

Whether or not one agrees with Van Dyck's assessment of the pinball generation's poetic practice, it is hard to disagree with her view of the role played by censorship, both official and as embedded in societal norms, in the formulation of their attitude to language. It would be even harder to disagree significantly with the masterly (if that is an appropriate term) analysis which she gives of the sexual politics of censorship and its role in reshaping women's writing in the '70s and '80s. Right from the outset of the régime the Junta's censors conflated public departure from the accepted gender norms with social insubordination and political resistance. Van Dyck draws attention to government hostility to anything which ran counter to the official image of Greek masculinity, notably long hair and overt homosexuality, which were taken as signs of the weakening of the powerful. She argues that this rigid definition of the masculine encouraged opponents of the régime to focus on what she terms 'woman's figural flexibility': the figure of woman becomes a locus for 'the breaking down of barriers, the act of transforming one thing into

another and of challenging the status quo' (145). In Van Dyck's view this particularly facilitated the development of counter-cultural images of the empowerment of the weak. The chosen heroines, notably Scheherazade and Lysistrata, use their command of language and the lure of their sexuality to give them a control which society otherwise refuses them.

I have some reservations about the detail of this argument. In the hands of male writers there is a voyeuristic element in the exploitation of female sexuality, particularly in the Kyr strip cartoons on which Van Dyck bases part of her analysis, which is at odds with the feminist reading which she gives them. Moreover, she fails to consider that the ambivalence about national affiliations which she finds associated with Kyr's Lysistrata and her friends, far from being a marker of liberation, can just as well be read as a sign that for the Seventies Greek male the very idea of an empowered woman was definitely a foreign country. In the hands of women writers, however, the feminist significance of ambiguous female figures who disrupt and subvert authority, particularly through their use of language, is indisputable. In this respect Kassandra, the mythological figure occasionally used by pre-1950 women poets to express their experience of crying in the wilderness, is a better measure of Van Dyck's argument than Lysistratata. Not that female sexuality is absent from the preoccupations of the women poets of the Seventies, but it comes more to the fore in the post-Junta period. And even then it is usually integrated into an exploration of the wider experience of the female body and of such socially constructed experiences as marriage and motherhood. The poetry of Anghelaki-Rooke and Athina Papadaki (the latter of whom gets notably scant treatment from Van Dyck) are cases in point. What certain women poets may have learnt from censorship is that the art of indirection has the same possibilities in the context of gender politics as it had had in that of resistance politics. This is what Van Dyck goes on to examine in the set of close readings which she gives, in *Kassandra and the Censors*, of the three collections which she presents and translates in *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding:* Rhea Galanaki's *The Cake* (1980), Jenny Mastoraki's *Tales of the Deep* (1983) and Maria Laina's *Hers* (1985).

Van Dyck's analyses of these three very different collections aim to show that, for a woman in the contemporary Greek world, the gaps between being, appearance, saying and meaning are unbridgeable, and that the function of poetry is to invite the reader to a comprehension of this reality through the experience of a permanently unstable verbal landscape. On the basis of interviews with Galanaki she constructs, as a framework for her analysis, a relationship between censorship and self-censorship in which the language of

politics and the language of sexual freedom are interconnected. There are problems about this reduction of the three writers to a single model. Van Dyck very honestly acknowledges Mastoraki's specific rebuttal of the political/sexual parallel. She also admits that the concept of censorship in Laina's poetry 'relates less clearly to the experience of censorship under the colonels' (218). But whereas her argument, *vis-à-vis* Mastoraki, that authorial intention and critical tradition are not sacrosanct sources of interpretation is absolutely justified, her reluctance to consider Laina's self-censorship as a classic example of lesbian silence of a type with plentiful non-Greek parallels is perhaps less comprehensible. (This is a point to which I shall return.) There are also problems with some of the assumptions which she brings to the analysis of individual techniques. Pronoun-switching and refusal of gender categories, which she forefronts as tools of confusion, are indeed signals of a rejection of binary vision in the all-important area of gender and sexuality, but they are plentifully used in European gay and lesbian writing as a technique for re-structuring vision, rather than for merely de-structuring it. Arguably, many of the 'scrambled' gender associations which she cites as contributing to the deconstruction of meaning have, on the contrary, the effect of directing the reader to a perfectly clear vision of how the social construction of gender functions. Nonetheless, using an approach explicitly grounded in a variety of American and French feminist theoretical positions, she contrives to establish persuasively disturbing parallels between the three collections.

In Galanaki's case the analysis works particularly well, not least because the author herself sees a link between political contestation and gender subversion. *The Cake* is a sequence of twenty-four prose poem, divided into six sections, following a pregnant women through a form of diurnal cycle during which traditional gender roles – man as provider and destroyer, woman as housewife, mother, creator – are de-(or in my view re-)constructed, the cake which the woman is preparing standing also for the child to which she is about to give birth as the text closes. Van Dyck reads the cycle at three levels: the thematic level of gender and power, the formal level of the pregnant woman as 'a figure of subversive mimesis' (147), and at the linguistic level of the text as an embodiment of a form of *écriture féminine* which she represents as embodying the unresolved conflicts of the two other levels. She argues that writing is thus represented as 'a self-renewing spring, a place defined by its endless deferrals [...] Birth and death are put off, and the place of procrastination is the book the reader holds' (173).

In general this is a very persuasive account. There undoubtedly exists a self-referential dimension to the text, with its reflection on the inseparability

of form and content (poem 19) and its contrast between the male destruction of textual tradition (myths) and the female creation of the text we are reading. There is also a sense of the special quality of feminine language, exemplifiable in the cycle's last metaphor of 'the spring drawn on paper and the paper a page of language that wells up'. But this example – from which Van Dyck draws her own metaphor of a self-renewing spring in the above quotation – pinpoints what disturbs me about the presentation of this feminine voice. It reproduces the very nature imagery with which, for example, nineteenth-century French critics marginalised women writers as artlessly creative: Sainte-Beuve's characterization of the supposedly feminine genre of the *roman intime* as 'a sparkling little river, full of ripples', or of Mme de Souza's style as 'the most natural, the closest to its wellspring and the most gushing in its flow' are classic examples. Is Galanaki not trying to reclaim the imagery of the natural, of textual gestation as an inherently female act, by associating it with the reclaiming of textual authority from the male tradition (twenty-four poems may suggest the hours of the day but in Greek it also inescapably suggests Homer)? I cannot but feel that that makes more sense in terms of the reflections on identity to be found in her later novels, particularly the presentation of gendered identity and the artist in *Eleni or No-man*. And should the fact that birth is delayed until after the end of the text really be interpreted as a permanent deferral of meaning when the text we read is, even on Van Dyck's reading, the cake/child which is about to be completed? Would anyone argue that the *A la recherche du temps perdu* we read expresses permanently deferred meaning just because at the end of Proust's cycle the young Marcel is about to begin, rather than complete, writing it? Isn't the whole point of this particular trope that one should be about to have one's cake and have just eaten it? If so, there must at least be a possibility that the text embodies a de-binarised expression of gender rather than a deferral of it.

Van Dyck's reading of *Tales of the Deep* draws concurrently on Freud's discussion of dreams and on a complex argument from intertextuality and literary influence. She reveals a steady development within Mastoraki's work from an explicit account in *Tolls* of the difficulties of writing under censorship, and of the ways in which myth and history help to shape the possibilities of poetry, via an exploration of similar but more personal issues in *Kin* (personal history, domestic power struggles, the social construction of the feminine), to the issue of language in *Tales*, more specifically the Greek language, and what it will allow – and not allow – the female writer to say. What the three collections share, therefore, is a belief in the necessity of changing 'that which incapacitates into that which enables' (183) through the medium of poetry. On

this reading, *Tales* explores how the fractured nature of female language, mirrored in images of the dismemberment of the female body, constitutes the appropriate vehicle for realizing (in both senses) the fragmented condition of female experience. The lost objects, the images of incomprehension, terror, violence and death, which loom out of the depths of the unconscious mind, refuse linear analysis yet establish their own form of coherence through the very metonymic contiguity of the objects and experiences evoked. What Mastoraki stresses is that the resultant 'written object', the text, should not be treated as a fixed and immutable entity, since, as the ludic treatment which her writing gives to earlier texts by 'canonical' authors such as Mavilis and Vizyinos exemplifies, the inherent instability of even written language should be central to what it communicates.

Whereas I am slightly uncomfortable with Van Dyck's insistance on the irrecoverability of meaning in Galanaki's *The Cake*, I find her demonstration of the same phenomenon in *Tales* utterly persuasive. The dislocations, ellipses and white spaces are familiar to me from various forms of French women's writing, even texts as ostensibly distant from Mastoraki's project as the prose of Marguerite Duras. What I find odd, therefore, is Van Dyck's insistance that 'reading Mastoraki's poetry as a woman turns her poetry into women's writing' (214). Just as a heterosexual reader ought to be able to understand, if not empathize with, the relationship between sexual orientation and fragmentation in Barthes' *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* or the short prose of Yorgos Ioannou, and just as you do not have to be a transvestite to respond to the gender games of Tachtsis, so a male reader ought, surely, to be able to 'read' the nature of female experience in Mastoraki's poetry?

This brings me to Laina's *Hers*. As I mentioned earlier, Van Dyck herself acknowledges that the concept of censorship in Laina's poetry does not relate as directly to the experience of censorship under the junta as it does in the case of her other poets. Instead, she claims, 'censorship in Laina's poetry is rooted in a lack of recognition which inhibits the possibility of articulation, not in some external force that alters something already articulated' (218). This she associates with the fact that the love whose impossible pursuit is central to Laina's writing is never heterosexual, and therefore never socially acceptable. Placing Laina's poetry in the context of contemporary debates about the gaze and woman as viewed object, Van Dyck explores the representation of the gaze in her earlier collections, and shows a relationship between the theme of the visual and the function of page layout and typography in dramatizing that theme which is crucial to the creative role of the reader in responding to the text. She then gives a careful close reading of some of the fifty-nine short

fragments which constitute *Hers*, making judicious use of the Lacanian theory of coherence-as-misrecognition, and showing how the reader is encouraged to 'shuffle through all the different ways identification is interrupted and to leave Maria in pieces and in flux' (238). The readings are powerfully persuasive, and the comparisons and contrasts which they raise with the different forms of fragmentation and ellipse that characterise the Galanaki and Mastoraki texts are interesting. That a broad strand of Greek women's writing in the 1980s involves an espousal of the non-linear and of various forms of linguistic and cultural subversion is very clear. My reservation here, as I mentioned earlier, is that Laina's strategies look akin to those of lesbian poetry in other languages – the French-Canadian Nicole Brossard, for example, whose cultural experience is rooted in a censorship of a very different (theocratic) kind.

I am conscious of having spent much of the later part of this article raising problems, expressing doubts, querying approaches or points of interpretation. My principal reservations are quite simply these. First, I can see that the experience of censorship under the Junta and the poetic experiment to which it gave birth may have contributed to the creative private self-censorship which Van Dyck identifies, but I am not convinced that the latter is not also a logical continuation of that permanent self-censorship of minorities which I began by describing as a common feature of both Greek and French societies. After all, the Greek obsession with public identity has only recently begun to recede, if, indeed, accession to the EU has not rekindled it. Second, it seems to me that key features in what Van Dyck identifies are shared by women's writing elsewhere in the world in contexts where the notion of censorship, or of the particular model of it used here, would seem not to apply. I am only too conscious of the fact that my objections are not articulated with half the clarity or persuasiveness of Van Dyck's thesis. But it is a tribute to the power of Van Dyck's work that it sets one's mind working so actively. There can be few works of feminist criticism in which the critical aims, the theoretical basis and the details of the methodology are expressed with such lucidity, the readings supported with so wide a range of intertextual and intratextual comparison, or the limitations and potential conflicts of evidence articulated with such honesty. Van Dyck has done us all a service in juxtaposing the three collections of poetry in her bilingual edition and concurrently articulating a powerfully argued account of their position in their political, social and cultural context. She has produced challenging close readings of the three works, substantial assessments of the broader development of the writers concerned and a fascinating exploration of a broad swathe of cultural and social history. That her work raises as many questions as it answers merely testifies to the depth

and range of the issues raised and the skill with which she addresses them. Not the least of her achievements is to have made it very plain how central women's writing now is to Greek cultural life. Henceforth even the most patriarchal critic has no excuse for lingering over his cultural port and cigars. It's time to join the ladies.