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**THEME AND FEMININE IDENTITY: A COMPARATIVE READING OF THE  
POETRY OF NOAILLES, MYRTIOTISSA AND POLYDOURI**

The critical attention paid to Greek women poets who wrote prior to the Second World War has been, with the single exception of Athina Tarsuli's *Ellinídes pitriais* [*Greek women poets*] (1951), slight and superficial. Common sense requires a critic to accept the basic principle enunciated by Elaine Showalter, in her essay «Towards a Feminist Poetics», that women's special experience assumes and determines distinctive forms in art<sup>1</sup>. Yet we find Karandonis prepared to consider Myrriotissa's «whole poetic being» as deriving from Palamas<sup>2</sup>, whilst Polydouri's main biographer, Lili Zographou, characterizes her work as a technically inferior version of the poetry of Karyotakis<sup>3</sup>. As though to ease their consciences, such critics, taking their cue from Palamas in his preface to Myrriotissa's *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*]<sup>4</sup> make passing reference to ill-defined special «feminine» perceptions, and compare their subjects, without detailed evidence, to two French women poets, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore and Anna de Noailles<sup>5</sup>. I wish to make a tentative exploration of this critical «cliché», confining myself for reasons of space to Myrriotissa<sup>6</sup>, Polydouri<sup>7</sup> and Noailles, in order to see how far a comparative study of these women poets offers a new basis on which to assess their work.

The thematic range of Myrriotissa, Polydouri and Noailles is commonly defined as love, death and nature, their manner as lyrical and subjective. It is easy, therefore, to dismiss them as «traditional» writers who took up themes typical of European lyric poetry from earliest times and treated them in stock Romantic or Neo-Romantic manner. Such a classification precisely excludes the possibility that a given theme is potentially modified by the fact that the writer is a woman. Clearly, if we suppose that a poem written by a woman will, in fact, be either a reflection of what is particular to a woman's experience of the world, or a reflection of a woman's response to the extant, male-formulated, literary tradition of how to present the world, or a blend of both, the notion of «traditionalism» of style or theme cannot apply to our three poets. No tradition of *women's* poetry about love, death and nature was readily available in French or Greek in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Although Noailles' poetry is superficially about love, death and nature, it is in practice artificial to separate poems under such headings, because the common psychological links in their language and images, notably the eroticizing of nature and the «naturalizing» of human figures, are more significant than their superficial thematic differences. The poems are generally expressions of the desire for total submission to an outside force, be it man or nature, a force which is beyond the woman's reach or in some way impervious to her, yet without which she feels meaningless. «Lever du soleil»<sup>8</sup> exemplifies this in nature images, «Plus je vis, o mon dieu»<sup>9</sup> in human ones. The woman's reaction to her situation is highly equivocal: powerful positive emotional responses are at the same time painfully unendurable – the source of pleasure is also a source of destruction: «Je sens ce soir qu'on peut mourir de poésie». In a particularly interesting poem «Le premier chagrin»<sup>10</sup> the positive and negative aspects of the *je's* relationship with nature, summed up in the comparison of the evening to the rose and in the motif of the twilight itself in which the sun both flowers and dies, highlight the imbalance in the lovers' relationship – his calm, her pain. Her perception of this imbalance is such that despite her submissive actions – «j'écartais les rameaux épineux au passage / Pour qu'ils ne vissent pas déchirer ton visage» – she sees in their relationship a role-reversal which is the negation of her need for outside guidance and protection. The inadequacies of this relationship show how it is the «otherness» of what is outside the woman that is an inevitable source of non-communication and non-fulfillment. Just as she cannot reach the sun in «Lever du soleil», so she cannot «reach» the man in «Le premier chagrin».

So far my examples might suggest that Noailles is entirely conditioned into a sense of inferiority. It is true that the desire for external guarantors reflects itself in submission not only to natural forces and lovers but also to what might be called «literary» authority. The use of reference to figures from Classical and Neo-Classical literature in such poems as «Prière à Pallas Athénée»<sup>11</sup> is an indirect expression of the same need to guarantee the aesthetic status of her own work by integrating it into the accepted (male) tradition which we find explicit in the two poems in *Les Forces Eternelles* addressed to Jean Moréas. However, if we look at what types of classicizing reference predominate, the apparent submissiveness to authority can be seen to cover more complex emotions. Noailles's preference for female deities (e. g., in «Prière du matin»<sup>12</sup>, «Matin lyrique»<sup>13</sup>, «Prière à Pallas Athénée») and her fascination with male heroic roles are combined in her use of Athene as a symbolic synthesis of the figure of woman with «male» strength and liberty. The traditional figure of the goddess is modified to express the poet's own psychological dichotomy.

In fact, Noailles's attitude to the principle of authority in all its manifestations is merely a facet of the constant pursuit of protection and yet the rejection of constraint which are central to her work. The result of being pulled in incompatible directions is that she loses confidence in her own identity. Her sense of disorientation is strengthened by the way in which the «otherness» of the lover is at times seen as a source of negative experience akin to that provoked by the hostility or indifference of the mate-

rial world, whilst the material world is often a source of an attraction and hope for fulfillment akin to that offered by the lover. In the face of confusion, the *je* is sometimes overcome by an impotence, unable to cope with the forces of inevitability which confront her. She relapses into *ennui*, a condition in which aspiration to death is the logical extension of her sense of personal meaninglessness and the final manifestation of the craving for submission to an ultimate power. This aspiration to death is forcefully expressed in «Le repos»: «Plaisir mystique et païen, / l'amour, la beauté, le désir / ont plus fait de mal que de bien / à mon âme qui s'en revient / lasse d'aimer et de souffrir. / Allez, mon âme inassouvie, / dormir dans l'ombre le grand somme, / ayant rêvé, par triste envie, / la joie au delà de la vie, / et l'amour au-dessus des hommes...»<sup>14</sup>. In this relatively early poem Noailles analyzes the destructive effect of locating the meaning and value of life outside the self, however positive the value pursued. Going beyond this, she identifies herself as a victim of that same gap between reality and aspiration which marks Emma Bovary or the heroines of George Eliot's novels. Like them, she is condemned to failure for having demanded of life «something that is perhaps incompatible with the facts of human existence»<sup>15</sup>. But the fault, as the poem makes clear, lies not in the poet but in the shortcomings of the world around her.

Does a reading of the poetry of Myrtiotissa and Polydouri reveal a comparable pattern? Are, for example, the superficial themes about her relationship to her human and physical environment and of aspirations to transcend its restrictions? There are certainly patterns of ambiguity in Myrtiotissa's nature poems which reflect a tension between the desire to be absorbed into something outside the self and the contrary need for liberation and self-assertion. The natural force, usually forest, mountain or sun, is represented as exercising total dominion over her, e.g., «Oli ti méra skláva tu to dásos me kratái. [«All day long slave of the woods»]<sup>16</sup> / «Ki óli ti méra skláva me kratái / to miroméno musikó tu ayéri» [«And all day long slave of its aromatical, musical breeze»]<sup>17</sup>. As in Noailles, this domination is frequently expressed in vocabulary with sexual associations. The sun unfolds its beauty in the poet's embrace («Stin eksohí» [«In the countryside»])<sup>18</sup>; the summer is «langoméno ke dinató mazi» [«both lustful and intense»] and midday «lagnó» [«lustful»] in «To ftohikó spitáki mu» [«My poor little house»]; and in «Mia níhta sto dásos» [«One night in the woods»]<sup>19</sup> the entire poem is devoted to the power of nature over the poet in an erotic context. Paradoxically, however, this acceptance of an outside force is presented as motivated by a need to «escape» constriction: «de me horái t'áharo ke to klisméno spíti» [«there is no room for me in the plain and closed house»]<sup>20</sup>. Admittedly this motif is part of the rejection of the human world and the cult of isolation. Society as constituted does not permit the poet to live naturally. Indeed, when, in «O déndra» [«Oh trees»]<sup>21</sup> she expresses her pity for trees which have been shut into walls, i. e., made into planks, seeing them as a natural force unjustly deprived of freedom and frustrated by their awareness of the continuation of the free world outside them, the poem seems to take on an overtly metaphorical significance. The poet, like the trees, is shaped by outside forces and prevented from fulfilling her natural potencial. That there is nonetheless a contradiction, however, is clear if we



look more closely at the terms of the poet's adherence to nature. The motif of kinship with trees («Ti na sas pó;» [«What shall I tell you?»]<sup>22</sup>, «Stó déndro mu» [«In my tree»]<sup>23</sup>) is extended into assimilation into nature in «Stin eksohí» [«In the countryside»], where she «becomes» a vase of wild flowers. In other words the poet desires to have the kind of total identity which is both preordained (a tree can only be a tree) and yet (with the exception of the kind of human interference pictured in «O déndra») totally free. A parallel is the desire of Daniel, in Sartre's tetralogy *Les Chemins de la Liberté*<sup>24</sup>, to be a homosexual in the same way that an oak tree is an oak tree. Without approaching a philosophical formulation of the Sartrean kind, Myrtiotissa is expressing the conflicting desires to be both complete in her difference from society, as a natural force is, and to remain free to determine herself, which a natural force is not. Awareness of this contradiction emerges in «Na 'n i zoí ya séna iremi límni» [«May life for you be a calm lake»]<sup>25</sup>, where the inability of the individual to control her environment is portrayed, and is developed in her second «Stó dásos» [«In the woods»]<sup>26</sup> where she identifies her inevitable difference from the special world which nature constitutes. In perhaps the most important of her poems, «Zó se mia parákseni atmósfera» [«I live in a strange atmosphere»]<sup>27</sup>, this awareness is extended into a wider crisis of values. She sees herself as symbolically sealed in a glass jar (an extension of the window image in «Mes ap'to tzámi» [«Inside the window»])<sup>28</sup> through which she can perceive all her desires and pleasures, her whole vision of the world, including Nature, turned inside out and made ridiculous. Her inability to determine whether she herself or an outside force is responsible for the crisis is merely the culmination of the constant theme of the inability to locate the source of power and uncertainty as to where she wants it to lie, which has been running through all her nature poems.

If we turn to the «love» poetry we find the same confusion of values as in the nature poems, but a more explicit tendency to reject the determining function and values of the lover than we find in Noailles's work. To those who think of Myrtiotissa in terms of «S'agapó. Den boró / típot'álo na pó / pio vathí, pio apló / pio megálo» [«I love you, I cannot say anything else deeper, more simple, greater»], this will come as a surprise. It is true that poems of total submission to the lover exist in her work, e. g., «Erotas táha» [«Love, as it were»]<sup>29</sup>. But as early as «Paramíthi» [«Fairy-tales»], from her first collection *Tragúdia* [Songs], she presents, through the allegory of the princess who expects meaning to be given to her life by the arrival of a prince who in fact never comes, the danger of locating the meaning external to the self. Even the most submissive of her love poems rapidly reduce the importance of the lover's presence; «Ta vimatá su» [«Your steps»], «Thélo na kséris» [«I want you to know»] and «Agápes» [«Loves»]<sup>30</sup> all present the significance of love as its power to stimulate the memory, rather than its value in the immediate present. The end of «Agápes» [«Loves»] even hints at the Kava-fiesque notion that the value of the original experience is subordinate to the power of the poet to recreate it through his / her art, a sentiment re-expressed more explicitly in the last two stanzas of the title poem of the collection *Ta dóra tis agápis* [The gifts of love]. This subordination of love, and by definition the lover, to the significance of the

self is part of a general presentation of love as simply another channel for woman's aspiration to transcend the inadequacies of what life has to offer. But just as the otherness of nature eventually frustrates her desire to find meaning in communion with it, so the otherness of men is a barrier to finding meaning in love. The difference, and it is a sharp one, is that in the case of nature the failure breeds a sense of inferiority in the poet<sup>31</sup>; in the case of love she sees the inadequacy as lying in the man<sup>32</sup>. The separation of vision in «Tis léci» [«He tells her»]<sup>33</sup>, where the male presents passion as an end in itself but the woman looks for something «glikítero ap' tin idoní, vathítero ap'to páthos» [«sweeter than pleasure, more profound than passion»], is simply a facet of the general frustration and *ennui* felt by the woman helplessly watching the world go outside her window in «Mes ap' to tzámi» [«Inside the window»]. She is overwhelmed by the sense of isolation which disparity and noncommunication brings her.

The most complete expression of her predicament comes in two poems from *Kravyés* [Screams], «Komikotrayikí sinéhia» [«Comical-tragical succession»] and «Im' éna fillo ohró» [«I am a pale petal»], both of which ironize themes and images from her earlier work. In the former, the loss of love, the fear of solitude and of facing her own inner nature have left her like a worn-out machine. Her capitulation to society turns her into a puppet. She no longer has faith in the imagination: her writing is itself a mechanical and false act, because she is separated from the realities which used to inspire it. In «Im' éna fillo ohró» [«I am a pale petal»] the same feelings are compressed into a more elaborate series of metaphors; the poet as dead leaf and rotting ship's timber is both a parody of the assimilation to nature which she once sought and a continuation of the theme of subjection to outside forces, symbolized by the air and the sea. If she has found any value in life it is through the second-hand experiences brought to her by wind and wave. Yet even this benefit is doubted, since the imagination, which she once saw as the saving grace of existence, is presented as ultimately a destructive force:

Κι εσπαταλεύτηκ' έτσι ο εαυτός μου,  
τα μάτια μου αποστάσαν κι η καρδιά μου,  
γιατί έψαξα τα πέρατα του κόσμου  
δίχως να ξεμακρύνω απ' τη γωνιά μου...<sup>34</sup>

Thus the sole inner power on which she could build a sense of identity and value, her own creative ability, is in both these poems reduced to the status of yet another reflex conditioned by the inescapably destructive forces of the social and physical environment.

Thematically the poetry of Noailles and Myrtiotissa does have in common, not merely a series of traditional motifs, but the exploration through those motifs of the general psychological condition of being a woman in a given socio-cultural context. It could, however, be argued that the similarity is a case of direct literary influence. This is not the case with Polydouri. A key text for the understanding of Polydouri's work is a poem from the opening section of *I trillies pu svínun* [The trills that disappear], «Ime to lulúdi» [«I am the flower»]. Like the work of the other two poets, her poems center



upon a crisis of identity. It is a poetry of doubt and unanswered questions, of fluidity and fatality, in which the equation of knowledge (especially self-knowledge) with happiness is itself the source of despair. In «Ime to lulúdi» [«I am the flower»] the crisis expresses itself in images of tension and paradox, and in the poet's attempt to identify herself with elements of nature which have a stable essence. The main image is of the woman as flower, and the emphasis is upon her unique value. At one level the forces at work in her environment, symbolized by the «ágrío kalokéri» [«wild summer»], are something that she can understand: this applies as much to the positive (good) as to the negative (bad) forces. But a greater divisive and destructive force is already part of her, the worm in the bud, an instinctive power for evil, such that she is drawn simultaneously toward life and death. This echo of the Baudelairean «deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan»<sup>35</sup> is, as Baudelaire's is not, a secret wound. It is important that the inner force for destruction is something about which she cannot communicate, since communication itself would be equivalent to an act of self-destruction. Her uniqueness is bought at the price of suffering, isolation and silence. The use of a natural phenomenon, the flower, in this poem is not a «cliché», as we can see if we compare it with other poems from the same collection, e.g., «Zoí» [«Life»] and the sonnet sequence «Ta sonéttá tu kinigú» [«The sonnets of the hunting»]. «Zoí» [«Life»] is a *paysage d'ame*, despite its second person form, in which a series of natural phenomena (cypresses, white poplars in darkness, sunlight striking pine trees, poppies destroyed by the breeze) reflect emotional conditions: the co-existence of opposing states of mind, the dark side of sexual submission, the sensation of transience. The sonnet sequence is a more uneasily stylized use of similar motifs, implicitly equating the woman with the forest, and allegorizing her isolation, the difficulty of the lover's approach, and the inevitability of their failure to make contact. In all these poems the point of the identification of the woman with natural phenomena is precisely that these are unchanging in their essence, an identification explored for the same reason by Myrriotissa. But in Polydouri what is significant is not the contradiction between the desire for liberation (for the expression of rebellion is rare in her poems), but the desire to be freed from the whole problem of self-definition. Thus in «Den tha to pún» [«They shall not say it»]<sup>36</sup> the translation of the self and the emotions into nature images reflects a desire to have an unchanging essence precisely because the need to explain oneself or to justify one's submission to outside forces is removed once is defined as a fixed part of an inevitable natural process. The *egó* of the poem wants to see herself as a flower *because* it is in the nature of flowers to grow, blossom and die without explanation or justification.

I said that rebellion is rare in Polydouri's poetry. This needs modifying. Admittedly, in «Yatí m' agápisés» [«Because you loved me»]<sup>37</sup> she goes so far as to accept that all the positive features of her life are, emphatically, the effects of the lover's action in loving her. But in the majority of the love poems the power of the lover derives from his *absence*, and the determining factor is as much of loss as of love. Out of this grows, if

not rebellion, at least a sense of profound disquiet, which she uses to bring out further the notion of inner responsibility for one's own destruction expressed in «Ime to lulúdi» [«I am the flower»]. Noailles and Myrriotissa are polarized by positive forces. In Polydouri's case it is negative forces which are at work. It is natural then that the real principle of authority in her poems should be **death, the ultimate** form of absence and loss. It is to death that she is attracted and **submissive, yet against** death that she rebels as the annihilation of the possibility of finding meaning. More than either Noailles or Myrriotissa, she reveals the sense of being the victim of a determinism which she cannot properly understand and in which she feels that she connives. The realization is clearly expressed in the last stanza of «Strofés» [«Verses»]<sup>38</sup>, where her whole being aids the destructive process of the unspecified wound which is destroying her, a wound which itself has taken on the unassailable essence of a flower. The connivance is even more powerfully expressed in the last poem of *I trillies pu svínun* [The trills that disappear], «Gléndi» [«Fun»]. Whereas Myrriotissa in «Komikotrayikí sinéhia» [«Comical-tragical succession»] sees her social role-playing ironically, Polydouri in «Gléndi» [«Fun»] accepts self-falsification as an opportunity to attribute herself with a fixed meaning or function in life, i. e., as the repository of the values of her dead lover. The wilful self-suppression which is unconsciously revealed in this poem is an acceptance of self-annihilation beyond anything conceived by our other two poets.

<sup>1</sup> See M. Jacobus, ed, *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (London, 1979), 22-41, Isabel Allegro de Magalhães, *O Sexo dos Textos* (Lisbon, 1995), 15-53.

<sup>2</sup> See A. Karandonis's introduction to *Myrriotissas Ápanda* [Complete works] (Athens, 1965), 31.

<sup>3</sup> See Lili Zographou's introductory essay in *Mariás Polydouri Ápanda* [Complete works] (Athens, 1961), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Preface to the first edition (1925), quoted by Karandonis, *Myrriotissas Ápanda* [Complete works], 31.

<sup>5</sup> Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786-1859). Principal works are *Poésies* (1830), *Les Pleurs* (1833), *Pauvres Fleurs* (1839), *Bouquets et Prières* (1843), Anna de Noailles (1876-1933). Principal works are *Le Coeur Innombrable* (1901), *L'Ombre des Jours* (1902), *Les Eblouissements* (1907), *Les Vivants et les Morts* (1913), *Les Forces Eternelles* (1921), *Le Poème de l'Amour* (1924), *L'Honneur de Souffrir* (1927). For a typical comparison of this type in addition to those in the essays of Karandonis and Zographou cited above, see Y. Hondroyanni, *I Maria Polydouri metá ton Karyotáki* [Maria Polydouri after Karyotákis] (Athens, 1975), 9. It is interesting to note that Noailles herself is compared with Desbordes-Valmore, on the same principle. See L. Perche, *Anna de Noailles* (Paris, 1964), 79-80.

<sup>6</sup> Myrriotissa (Theoni Drakopulu) (1885-1973). Principal works are: *Kítrines flóyes* [Pale flames] (1925), *Ta dóra tis agápis* [The gifts of love] (1932), *Kravyés* [Screams] (1939). In 1928 she published a volume containing her own translations of 44 poems by Anna de Noailles, drawn from the seven collections published up to that date: *Comtesse de Noailles: Piímata* [Poems] (Athens, 1928).

- <sup>7</sup> Marfa Polydouri (1902-30). Principal works are *I trillies pu svínun* [*The trills that disappear*] (1828), *Iho sto háos* [*Sound in chaos*] (1929). All references to, and quotations from Myrriotissa and Polydouri are given according to the editions listed in footnotes 2 and 3 above.
- <sup>8</sup> Noailles, *Les Eblouissements*, 120.
- <sup>9</sup> *Les Forces Eternelles*, 230.
- <sup>10</sup> *L'Ombre des Jours*. Translated by Myrriotissa as *I próti lípi* [*The first grief*].
- <sup>11</sup> *Les Eblouissements*, 365.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.
- <sup>14</sup> *Le Coeur Innombrable*. Translated by Myrriotissa as Ksekúrasma [Rest].
- <sup>15</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, vol. I (London, 1966), 204.
- <sup>16</sup> *To kerí mu* [*My candle*], *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Myrriotissas Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 77.
- <sup>17</sup> «To ftohikó spitáki mu» [«My poor little house»], *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 78-80.
- <sup>18</sup> *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 75.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ta dóra tis agápis* [*The gifts of love*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 116.
- <sup>20</sup> *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 73.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ta dóra tis agápis* [*The gifts of love*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 118.
- <sup>24</sup> The opposition between the self-sufficient essence of a tree and the self-defining existence of a human being is also an important image in Sartre's *La Nausée*.
- <sup>25</sup> *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Myrriotissas Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 93.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ta dóra tis agápis* [*The gifts of love*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 120.
- <sup>27</sup> *Kravyés* [*Screams*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 158.
- <sup>28</sup> *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 97.
- <sup>29</sup> *Ta dóra tis agápis* [*The gifts of love*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 113.
- <sup>30</sup> All three poems are from *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 81, 82, 104.
- <sup>31</sup> See, for example, «Sto dásos» [«In the woods»], lines 23-26 *Ta dóra tis agápis* [*The gifts of love*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 120.
- <sup>32</sup> See, for example, «De vástakses, agápi mu» [«You could not stand it, my love»], lines 1-8, *Ta dóra tis agápis* [*The gifts of love*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 115.
- <sup>33</sup> *Kítrines flóyes* [*Pale flames*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 94.
- <sup>34</sup> «Im' éna fillo ohró» [«I am a pale petal»], lines 17-20, *Kravyés* [*Screams*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 159.  
[So I have tired myself out,  
my eyes got tired and my heart,  
for I searched the end of the world  
without receding from my fireplace...].
- <sup>35</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Mon Coeur Mis à Nu*, section IV, n° 112.
- <sup>36</sup> *I trillies pu svínun* [*The trills that disappear*], Polydouri *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 4.
- <sup>37</sup> *I trillies pu svínun* [*The trills that disappear*], *Ápanda* [*Complete works*], 165-67.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.