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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 *Ellinides piitries [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 art¹. Yet we find Karandonis prepared to consider Myrtiotissa's «whole poetic being» as deriving from Palamas², whilst Polydouri's main biographer, Lili Zographou, characterizes her work as a technically inferior version of the poetry of Karyotakis³. As though to ease their consciences, such critics, taking their cue from Palamas in his preface to Myrtiotissa's *Kitrines flýyes [Pale flames]⁴* 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 Noailles⁵. I wish to make a tentative exploration of this critical «cliché», confining myself for reasons of space to Myrtiotissa⁶, Polydouri⁷ 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 Myrtiotissa, 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» exemplifies this in nature images, «Plus je vis, o mon dieu» 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»,10 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 - «s'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 «Prêtre à Pallas Athénéé»11 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 Forques Eternelles» addressed to Jean Morças. 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 «Prêtre du matin»12, «Mâtin lyriques»13, «Prêtre à Pallas Athénéée» 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-
look more closely at the terms of the poet's adherence to nature. The motif of kinship with trees ([Τι να σας πάρω] [What shall I tell you?]21, [Στὸ δέντρο μου] [in my tree]22) is extended into assimilation into nature in [Στὴν έκσπολι] [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 interfacing pictured in [Ο δέντρα]) totally free. A parallel is the desire of Daniel, in Sartre's tetralogy Les Chemins de la Liberté23, 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, Myriotissi 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 [Ναν' ι ζώνη σαν ερεμούσ] [May life for you be a calm lake]24, where the inability of the individual to control her environment is portrayed, and is developed in her second [Στὶ δάσος] [in the woods]25 where she identifies her inevitable difference from the special world which nature constitutes. In perhaps the most important of her poems, [Ζὸ δὲ μαία παράκατη άμβροσία] [I live in a strange atmosphere]26, 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 [Με σε ap' to τζάμι] [Inside the window])27 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 Myriotissi in terms of [Σ' αγαπάω]. Den ború / tìpat' óilo na pó / pio vathí, pio aπo / 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. [Ερωτσίς tìpa] [Love, as it were]28. But as early as [Παραμιθή] [Fairy-tales], from her first collection Tragidia [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; [Τὰ ευδομα] [Your steps], [Θάλο na káróss] [I want you to know] and [Αγάπες] [Loves]29 all present the significance of love as its power to stimulate the memory, rather than its value in the immediate present. The end of [Αγάπες] [Loves] even hints at the Kafkaesque 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 Τὰ δόρα τὸς αγάπης [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; in the case of love she sees the inadequacy as lying in the man. The separation of vision in [Τίς λέει] [He tells her]29, where the male presents passion as an end in itself but the woman looks for something [άγικε τον ίδιων, πάθητοι] [sweeter than pleasure, more profound than passions], is simply a facet of the general frustration and ennui felt by the woman helplessly watching the world go outside her window in [Με σε ap' το τζάμι] [Outside 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 Krayvē [Screams], «Komìtōtαvīqi sīnēsia» [Comical-tragical suicide] and «Ίμενα fillo ohrōs» [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 «Ίμενα fillo ohrōs» [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:

Κατανόητητα έχει ο εαυτός μου, 
το μετάν έμ φξέσαν και η καιρική μου,
κατο άνισα τα πέραστα του έσημου,
δίχασ να ξεκορύγω σε τι γονάτα μου...30

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 Myriotissi 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 in a poem from the opening section of I trilliws pu swimun [The trills that disappear], «Ime to ιλίδι» [I am the flower]. Like the work of the other two poets, her poems center
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 luluíd» [‘I am the flower’]. Noailles and Myriotissia 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 Myriotissia, 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 «Strófés» [‘Verses’]19, 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 poignantly expressed in the last poem of l’trilies pu svimun [The trills that disappear], «Glénd» [‘Fun’]. Whereas Mirtiotissia in Komiktrarykín sinéhíaz [Comical-tragic succession] sees her social role-playing ironically, Polydouri in «Glénd» [‘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 willful self-suppression which is unconsciously revealed in this poem is an acceptance of self-annihilation beyond anything conceived by our other two poets.

3 See Lili Zographou’s introductory essay in Mariás Polydouri Ápanda [Complete works] (Athens, 1961), passim.
4 Preface to the first edition (1925), quoted by Karandonis, Myriotissiá Apánda [Complete works], 31.
5 Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786-1859), Principal works are Poésies (1830), Les Fleurs (1833), Pauvres Fleurs (1839), Bouquets et Prières (1843), Anna de Noailles (1876-1933).
6 Principal works are Le Coeur Innombrable (1901), L’Ombre des Jours (1902), Les Enlouisements (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. Hordoyanni, I Maria Polydouri meti ton Kuryotakis [Maria Polydouri after Kuryotakis] (Athens, 1975).
7 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.
8 Myriotissia (Theoni Drakopulu) (1885-1973). Principal works are: Kittínes flóres [Pale flowers] (1925), Ta dórta its agaípis [The gifts of love] (1932), Krarvés [Screeans] (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: Piímati [Poems] (Athens, 1928).
Maria Polydouri (1902-30). Principal works are *I trilíes pu svinum* [The trills that disappear] (1828), *Iio sto hios* [Sound in coos] (1929). All references to, and quotations from Myrtiotissa and Polydouri are given according to the editions listed in footnotes 2 and 3 above.

Noailles, *Les Eblouissements*, 120.

Les Forces Eternelles, 230.

*L'Ombre des Jours*. Translated by Myrtiotissa as *I próti lipi* [The first grief].

Les Eblouissements, 365.

Ibid., 98.

Ibid., 119.

*Le Coeur Innombrable*. Translated by Myrtiotissa as *Ksekurasma* [Rest].


*To keri mu* [My candle], *Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Myrtiotissa Ápanda* [Complete works], 77.

«Το φθινόκι φτιάκι μου» [«My poor little house»], *Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 78-80.

*Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 75.

*Ta dórta tis agápís* [The gifts of love], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 116.

*Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 73.

Ibid., 74.

Ibid., 76.

*Ta dórta tis agápís* [The gifts of love], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 118.

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*.

*Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Myrtiotissa Ápanda* [Complete works], 93.

*Ta dórta tis agápís* [The gifts of love], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 120.

*Kravýes* [Screeches], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 158.

*Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 97.

*Ta dórta tis agápís* [The gifts of love], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 113.

All three poems are from *Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 81, 82, 104.

See, for example, «Στὸ δάσος» [«In the woods»], lines 23-26 *Ta dórta tis agápís* [The gifts of love], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 120.

See, for example, «Δε νατάκες, αγάπη μου» [«You could not stand it, my loves»], lines 1-8, *Ta dórta tis agápís* [The gifts of love], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 115.

*Kitrines flóyes* [Pale flames], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 94.

«Εκέ ένα fillo ohro» [«I am a pale petal»], lines 17-20, *Kravýes* [Screeches], *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...].

Charles Baudelaire, *Mon Coeur Mis à Nu*, section IV, n° 112.

*I trilíes pu svinum* [The trills that disappear], Polydouri *Ápanda* [Complete works], 4.

*I trilíes pu svinum* [The trills that disappear], *Ápanda* [Complete works], 165-67.

Ibid., 138.