

Love me when you're no longer among the living.  
Because I have no news of you.  
And what are we to do if  
the irrational gives no sign of life.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps by a simple presentation of these poets I have made my point. It is clear how first, second, and third-order poetry is fully blown in each of these examples. In Dimoula's masterful voice the third-order acquires, apart from politics, a deepening metaphysical implication, which characterizes in large part her latest book. My choice of the Mastoraki poem from her earlier collection points to the swift political self-irony. Her current work moves in more complex mythic swamps in an effort to show her political malaise. With Anghelaki-Rooke the matter is compounded, for she has moved out of her bold erotic inclination and towards a brute-truth phase that is full of pain and self-irony. She has made an important leap forward to a self-confidence and a political stance that is effortless, born of suffering and revelation. Perhaps these women are the only political poets Greece has at the moment. For it is women's politics that makes any real sense nowadays.

I should like to conclude this talk with the following: Because so much of current Greek culture is under the dominant influence of the "new social science," history is likely to ask some harsh questions of its high priests. Why take up the failed cry of Walt Whitman concerning a cultural revolution seen through his populist "Democratic Vistas" — a revolution that never happened according to Susan Sontag (in her words, it "disappointed many but surprised none. . ."), one that requires a leveling out, a lack of distinction between what is important and what is trivial. As Sontag observes in her *On Photography*: "If (in Whitman's words) 'each precise object or condition or combination or process exhibits a beauty,' it becomes arbitrary to treat some moments in life as important and most as trivial."

To be sure the Greek intelligentsia failed before to expand its elitist frontiers; but *that* is precisely the reason why the Social Scientists, once their turn at power came, should take close care not to fail the very thing they want to save.

<sup>14</sup>*Joyful Never* (Athens, 1987), p. 1ff.

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## Radicalizing Modernism: The Conception of an Ethnic Avant-Garde in N. Valaoritis's *My Afterlife Guaranteed*

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PANAYOTIS BOSNAKIS

*To the cult of N. Kalas  
heretic poet and polemicist critic*

"The month of caves opened to receive my tongue"  
N. Valaoritis "Punk Language Language Punk"

MODERNISM IN GREECE WAS INTRODUCED BY TWO HIGHLY CONFLICTING, yet at a higher theoretical level not contradictory, theories regarding the conception of a *littérature nationale*: a nationalist writing which valorized continuity and tradition, and an anti-nationalist writing which attempted to transgress the boundaries of national literature. The result of this dichotomy represents the confluence of two differing ways of writing, namely the nationalist Modernism and the transnationalist (or cosmopolitan) Avant-Garde.<sup>1</sup>

Nanos Valaoritis's (1921-) aim in poetic writing from its very beginning was twofold: first, to expand the space(s) of Modernist writing already introduced to Greece by the Surrealists, primarily A. Embeirikos, N. Engonopoulos, and N. Kalas, and second, to revise the "Modernist poetics of Greekness," or nationalist Modernism. His intention to radicalize Greek Modernism finds him confronted with the laborious task of redefining the Avant-Garde. Although Valaoritis is a diasporan poet and his work does not belong exclusively to Greek literature, in this paper, I want to examine how his poetry expands Greek Modernism in particular, and how it foregrounds an ethnic Avant-Garde

\* An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Conference "The Greek American Experience: Past, Present, Future," at Hellenic College, Boston, October 19-21, 1990.

<sup>1</sup> See also Mary Layoun's introduction in *Modernism in Greece? Essays on the Critical and Literary Margins of a Movement*, Editor Mary Layoun, (New York, 1990).



within the thematic limitations and the formal restrictions of an ethnic literature. My hypothesis is that Valaoritis, by subverting issues of tradition, and more specifically mythological and historical issues, puts into question basic assumptions of nationalist Modernism, such as continuity and validity of tradition. Of course, there are many other issues raised by his poetry left out of my examination, but, in this paper, I want to concentrate on a single issue: how Valaoritis undermines tradition to radicalize Modernism.

I want to focus on some poems from his latest book *My Afterlife Guaranteed*,<sup>2</sup> a book containing selected prose poetry written from 1947 up to the present. I will limit myself only to those poems that are thematically derived from Greek mythology and history. These are the following: "Procrustes," "Hermes and Hermione," "Penthesileia," "Helen of Troy," "A Classical Education," and "A New Poetic Movement." The poems "Procrustes," "Hermes and Hermione," and "Penthesileia" which were originally written in Greek between 1946 and 1948 and were collected in "*Ο Πύργος του Χαλεπιού*" ("The Tower of Aleppo")<sup>3</sup> while "A Classical Education," "A New Poetic Movement," and "Helen of Troy" were originally written in English and are more recent poems.

In "Procrustes," Valaoritis attempts to deconstruct the "letter" of the myth as transmitted by mythology and to re-write it anew. He states: "what took place, what was said between these two when they met, tradition will not say. So let us try to restore what ensued."

A. Embeirikos also adopts a similar disgressive technique of re-writing tradition by furthering discursive spaces of the realm of an imaginary reality. In "Oedipus Rex," Embeirikos writes:

"Όσα θά πῶ ἐδῶ, πρέπει νά ξεύρετε, ὅτι λέγονται ἀπό ἐμέ ὑπευθύνως, διὰ τήν ἀποκατάστασιν τῆς ἀληθείας, διότι, ὀρισμένα στοιχεῖα, ἔχοντα σχέσιν μέ τās τελευταίας στιγμὰς τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ βασιλέως τῶν Θηβῶν, ὅπως ἀναγράφονται ἀπό τοὺς ἱστορικοὺς καί τοὺς τραγικοὺς, εἶναι τελείως ἀνακριβῆ,

Whatever I say here you must know that it will be said by myself responsibly for the sake of truth, because certain features relating to the last moments of the life of Theban King, as recorded by historiographers and tragedians, are altogether untrue.<sup>4</sup>

However, while both poems seem similar in their re-writing of

<sup>2</sup>Nanos Valaoritis, *My Afterlife Guaranteed* (San Francisco, 1990).

<sup>3</sup>Nanos Valaoritis, *Ποιήματα Α'* (Poemata A'), (Athens, 1984).

<sup>4</sup>Andreas Empeirikos, *Γραπτά ἡ Προσωπικὴ Μυθολογία* ("Writings or Personal Mythology") (Athens, 1974), p. 118.

tradition, they represent an important difference: Embeirikos's version of the myth has a liberating effect upon the readers. Embeirikos wants to liberate, to cure his "and contemporaries" who still believe in the established myth by the means of a healing hyper-reality, which is dictated by the psychological attitude and desire of the hero Chabrias, who narrates the story. What is thus more important in Embeirikos's text is the psychic narratives of the protagonists determined by their dual relation to external action and internal reaction when confronted with the social, political and cultural aspects of tradition and wish to transcend it, or furthermore, when confronted with the past which must be transformed into a liberating future,

Θὰ ἔλθῃ ἡμέρα, πού ἡ αἰμομιξία θά θεωρεῖται ἐξ ἴσου φυσική μέ τοὺς ἄλλους ἔρωτας, καί τότε, μὴ φοβούμενος πιά κανεῖς τὸν πατέρα του, δὲν θά ἔχῃ ἀνάγκη νά τὸν σκοτώῃ. Οἱ ἄνθρωποι κί ὁ ἔρωτας θά εἶναι ἐπιτέλους ἐλευθεροί, ὅπως ἐμεῖς οἱ ἄπλοι καί ὕγιεις ἄνθρωποι τῶν δασῶν . . .

There will come a day, when incest will be regarded as equally natural as to other kinds of love, and then, no longer fearing his father, one will not need to kill him. Men, women, and love will be finally free, just as we the real and healthy people of the forests . . .<sup>5</sup>

Chabrias kills the three Eumenides, who castrate Oedipus, restoring simultaneously the truth and order of the established myth. Thus he breaks the silence and becomes the liberator of the unsaid sin (taboo) of tradition, that is Oedipus' castration, setting up for his contemporaries a society of free speech and liberty. Of course, this must be understood only in its contemporary Greek context. Embeirikos's language, of desire points to an out-flowing abundance and proliferation of signification upon the content. In a manner that is quite original, Embeirikos is interested in the "form of the language"; this is at best indicated in the potentialities of his visionary and phonetic language, and in his abstract imagery paradoxically pierced by a Surrealist transparency.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>A. Embeirikos's *oeuvre* has not yet been studied from the perspective of its language. The issue of language, however, is central to his poetics and needs to be thoroughly examined. Of course, it is naive to explain his katharevousa as a "Surrealist game" (Σουπρεαλιστικό παιχνίδι), or either it is absorb to put the question in the form of katharevousa/demotiki. Recently, two articles appeared making interesting observations about Embeirikos's language: Nanos Valaoritis's "Ρήγας Φερραῖος μίας Νέας 'Εποχῆς'" ("Regas Pherraios of a New Era"), in *Hartes*, no. 17/18 (Special issue on Empeirikos,) Nov. 1985, and reprinted in his *Andreas Empeirikos* (Athens, 1990). See also Artemis Leontis "Surrealist Poetics of Identity and Andreas Embeirikos's Defense of Man" in *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook*, vol. 6, 1990.



Valaoritis stands on the other side: in his text, he questions the truth and the validity of the established myth. By virtue of *logos* and the continuous argumentation, the post-narrator re-writes the story to evacuate himself from the burden of tradition. The accumulated interpretations, which always point to the Other of *logos*, the unsaid and the silence, eventually create not only the uncanny feeling of a returning-home dead tradition, but also an *archi*-, an unhomely origin dispersed into a lost past as well. This *archi*-writing, which marks the "trace" of tradition, as a catalyst of the uncanny,<sup>7</sup> exorcises Procrustes, the Other of our fears and regressions, through its labyrinthine and ambivalent, almost enigmatic, explanations that are ironically exposed here in an exemplary order and argumentative transparency. The text, obviously, bears the traces of psychoanalysis. Literally, the dream-work function is highlighted by its respective signifiers, the "bed" and the "sheep": "As for the bed . . . if there even was a bed, don't we all sleep on it every night?"

Procrustes symbolizes our inner fears and the threat of death. Theseus represents the defensive mechanism of ego to this threat, and the bed (a common, natural bed, sterile of all its poetic metaphoricity) symbolizes the territory where dreams are materialized. Moreover, Theseus is the hero who enters the story to invigorate *spokenness of writing*, this vital instinct, and to subvert the order of the established truth.

However, Valaoritis goes much beyond this. What is more important is that this re-writing takes place in the wasteland of a new writing whose primary aim is to *forget* the past. The issue of writing, and more specifically, of *spoken writing*, is predominant in the poem. Writing is conceived as the erasure of the past and the perpetuation of life. Every new interpretation that is given postpones death, until we learn that Procrustes is defeated by his uncanny other's weapons that he had made himself, "that he (Procrustes) had made with his own hands the weapons that his adversary would use to destroy him is undeniable an tragic." Procrustes stays with the Other, because "Procrustes' greatest weapon was the other person," the Other that is *silent and talks*. Here we are faced exactly with the invention of the *nouveauté* the wise men come to talk and to stay silent. Thus the text stays mute before death, and its author, who simply stays with the poem, disappears into this *terrible silence*. Language is temporal with no definitive end and dispersed into minimal moments dwelling in the vacuum between talk and

<sup>7</sup>For the "Uncanny" notion see Sigmund Freud "The Uncanny" in his *Standard Edition of the Complete Works*, vol. 17, (London, 1974. For the notions of "trace" and "archi-writing" see Jacques Derrida "Différance," in his *Margins of Philosophy*, translated, with additional notes by Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982 [1972]).

muteness, life and death. The aesthetic lives on this unsentimental poverty of unmuted pronunciation of the Other. This libidinal and oral writing, made of mouth and tongue, and driven by the Oedipal desire to kill the masters, achieves its definite "kenotic" stage by its uncanny indeterminacy of writing.

Procrustes, the Great Idiot, the magician, who invents the machinery of undermining logic, the "excellent craftsman," introduces the language of newness, that is, a language that *forgets* history and which is only read as a spontaneous present-ness with the acute accent of reading.<sup>8</sup> In a sophistic way, the text continues, dry and sterile, to demonstrate that language is always temporal and that this temporality is paradoxically eternal, "and this could have gone on for days, for months, for years, with no way out." According to Baudelaire, "La modernité, c'est la transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié, de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable."<sup>9</sup>

In my view, there is only one infinite interpretation of the myth of this uncanny poem; and it is this *infinity* that justifies poetry. Poetry, in a Procrustean sense, is here and there, in the Other, the night-watch dialectic *disputatio* of the wise that ends the sleepless silence of centuries. This is precisely the task of wise poetry: to end up with mouth and tongue, with the bare body, the naked and poor silence. The poem reads; "And so it was that within this purely dialectic contest they went on arguing through the night until for the other to weaken and fall asleep on the fatal bed that would be his end."<sup>10</sup>

In the next poem "Hermes and Hermione," Greek antiquity (symbolically reminiscent of Pericles) is mixed ironically with its later modern tradition (Miaoulis). Historical memory, an important constituent of nationalist Modernism, is retrospectively lost in a spontaneous present. This instantaneity is well indicated by the ubiquitous present tense of the vivid imagery dissolved into ephemeral acts: the party with the songs and the smoke and the oneiric atmosphere that is intertwined with the awakening description of Hydra in the night background. The people who share this experience seem to be lost in a present-ness with

<sup>8</sup>For a discussion concerned with a poetics of modernity see the seminal articles by Paul Celan "The Meridian" and "Conversation in the Mountains" translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, in *Paul Celan, Collected Prose* (London, 1986).

<sup>9</sup>"Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, whose other half is the eternal and immutable" (my translation). See Charles Baudelaire, "La peinture de la vie moderne," in his *Oeuvres Complètes, Préface, Présentation et notes de Marcel A. Ruff* (Paris, 1968), p. 553.

<sup>10</sup>It is noteworthy to state that "Procrustes" was violently rejected by G. Seferis as lacking "charm." Nevertheless, the dry language and the lack of nostalgia constitute the novelty of the text. We certainly view here the different way that Seferis and Valaoritis conceived of Modernism.



a little or no memory of tradition.

Miaoulis struggles against the sea, "Tomorrow the weather will change. A north wind or nor' easter, whispered Miaoulis Tomorrow we'll round the cape. And then hoist sail for the open seas." The sea is not as good and beneficial but "the water takes its revenge over steel, because in the end water always wins over steel and man, and eats away continuously at the land, licking and biting it, undermining it, until the time comes for it to crash forever to the bottom of the sea, this virgin Greece of ours."

The sea was one of the "myths" of nationalist Modernism in the 1930s. The Aegean became the privileged dreamland, hosting the passion and imagination of the expatriate writers from Asia Minor, the "point of view" of the new elegaic lyric, another search for identity after the national defeat of 1922. Nevertheless, the sea here no longer represents the pride and identity of Greece. Now it becomes the territory where the virgin Greece (another irony) is going to crash and sink into the water until its complete catastrophe. Antiquity is heard only through the telephone, namely a technological and alienating sign that signifies the lack of active and human communication and *logos*: "The battle over the telephone had subsided around midnight." Here Valaoritis employs the telephone, a surrealist, symbol, to distance himself from tradition. In addition, the glorious figures of the past have lost their privileged sites and their distinctive purity and integrity of *logos* as entering the modern scene, and have become the "parasites" of a new urban asymmetry, singing and dancing to popular *hasapika* and *rembetika* songs: "Pericles started playing nostalgic *hasapika* *rembetika* songs from Piraeus on his bouzouki. Then came the time for a smoke." Certainly Valaoritis here reminds us other voices of "Greekness" too, such as N. Gatsos and Y. Tsarouchis, who mix the antique with the popular. However, Valaoritis' position is slightly different: Valaoritis lacks nostalgia, instead he is ironic to this return to the past. I think that what measures more in his thesis is not an intention to identify with this past but rather to demonstrate the alienating feeling we exert from its fictive recuperation.

In the next poem "Pentesileia," Pentesileia represents a dead daughter. She symbolizes our fear before death and the strange feelings that death generates to everyone. Death is well hidden in everyone's unconscious. People imagine it with "the liveliest colors." It seems that all of us keep memories from this strange land, "We all have somewhere inside us, hidden or unexpressed, some memories from this strange land." Pentesileia symbolizes this "sorrow," this "stationary dream," the ship that "disappears into the blue." The story unfolds around the psychic dispositions of the protagonists and particularly of the narrator.

The poem reads as follows: "The fever had pierced the metal and had penetrated the softer innermost layers of moisture and sorrow, where the seat of all pains resides, where all the poisons collect and empty drop by drop from people's hearts." Pentesileias' life, moreover, represents something of everyone's life. The past is again conceived of as present, "A small part of all our life, your life passes like a ship that leaves port and disappears into the blue." Furthermore, on a rather symbolic level, the text represents the lost beauty of "death," something seemingly archaic but always modern, "just as the paths of life curl up and disappear in the thickest forests, in stationary dreams, so does this almost symbolic sorrow sometimes stay a little on your lips, in your eyes, and on your lovely hair, O Pentesileia."

The next poems, originally written in English, are much later poems, as we can infer from their theoretical and ideological concerns.<sup>11</sup> "Helen of Troy" stands closer to satire and criticizes both the emptiness of tradition and the surface of our contemporary consumer society,<sup>12</sup> as "Marilyn Monroe claimed her [Helen] and came close to impersonating the fickle Goddess." The traditional myth of Helen is metamorphosed into something that stresses our emptiness to believe in myths. Helen of Troy (as she is referred in the text!) was an idol, a matinee idol, a joke to entertain the hearers. Even the heroes of Homer were: "plain an simple homespun country folk ploughing the rivers of their underworlds with their delirious imagination." Moreover, Helen "hanged herself from a tree in Rhodes," and "her brothers recovered the statue when Theseus stole it." Here Valaoritis plays with Seferis's well-known statement in his "Helen," "πῶς τόσος πόνος τόση ζωὴ πήγαν στην άβυσσο για ένα πουκάμισο αδειανό για μιάν Ελένη" ("that so much suffering, so much life, went into the abyss all for an empty tunic, all for a Hellen") by re-writing Seferis (who re-writes Euripides) disclosing the surface of the potential cultural implications of this reading. Valaoritis, a bilingual poet with a strong sense of cultural identity, alludes to how Americans or other Western European readers and tourist travellers receive Seferis (and the Hellenic myths in a broader orientalist sense). This is how I personally understand the "appealing" nature of English here with a sense of bitter irony. "Euripides," according to Valaoritis, "took it [Hellen's statue] to Rome with him

<sup>11</sup> According to Edouard Roditi, in the last twenty years or so Valaoritis has developed in a truly bilingual writer. See Edouard Roditi, "An Intro to Nanos Valaoritis" in *Sundog*, vol. 9/10, 1990.

<sup>12</sup> The poem is a satire aimed to criticize but not to parody. In a discussion I had with Mr. Valaoritis, he strongly refused any kind of parody in his poetry. Parody is only to be found in his longer prose texts, according to his testimony.



but it was too soon for the British Empire to be born." Here we are confronted with the issue of cultural hegemony of the West over Greece, the modern "Greece." The stolen statue of Helen, like the Elgin marbles, travels through Hellas and Rome to the British Empire. Valaoritis continues more bitterly, "Lord Chesterfield did that for him later. He invented the cigarette. Do we have to, by all means, define it in a sentence? Discuss Coleridge's use of repetition in the mire o the Ancient Mariner." And is all this oriental wisdom, "Imitative magic? Yes by all means." And Homer? The great legacy of Homer, the Odyssey of the Greek until its superb fatigue rigorously expressed by Apollinaire in his "À la fin tu es las de ce monde ancien [ . . . ] Tu en as assez de vivre dans l'antiquité" grecque et romaine,"<sup>13</sup> if nothing else, here implies the shattering of the Epic image within the consumer society turning myths into mere tales, and represents the Other to the media and mass production images. Certainly, this "tale-narrative" of history discloses a post-modern viewpoint, an abandonment of history in the name of the private home of imagination,<sup>14</sup> "Anything cut in two would still be an Epic even if it were only a worn!" Even Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is lost forever, "Paradise may be lost again."

In the next poem "A Classical Education," Valaoritis speaking in a paradigmatic semi-fictional "I" represents his breeding through Classical discipline "My nurse [ . . . ] although illiterate, was a classical scholar." Especially, Homer, the "father" and the "greatest myth" of the nationalist Modernists, was the "milk." History and Literature, the two most prominent disciplines of a minor culture (and Greece's for special reasons too) were acquired by the poet with "his mother's milk." His mother's name was *Hellas* and his father's *Eros*. His family tree included many classical names, such as Demosthenes, Xenophon, and Aristotle. A common strategic trope among the nationalist Modernists is the familiarization of the classical tradition and its assimilation with a modern context. In this way, however, it is not the alienation

<sup>13</sup>"In the end you are tired of that world of antiquity [ . . . ] You have had enough of living in Greek and Roman antiquity" in Apollinaire's poem "Zone," see Guillaume Apollinaire, *Selected Poems*, translated with an introduction by Oliver Bernard, 1986.

<sup>14</sup>See also Derek Walcott's *Omeros*. *Omeros*, a poem completed in seven books, derives its title from the Greek name for Homer. In this interesting narrative-poem, a Greek girl in exile in America begins a long journey to her homeland through many surprising places, histories, and associations for the poem's characters. The poem works on two levels: on the visible level, we follow the tribal losses of the American Indian and the tragedy of African enslavement, and on the interior level, we sense the suffering of the Greek girl in exile. These two levels of experience are enacted in an unspecified geographical location, in the blue Ocean, which knows no history, and it can be either the Aegean or the Antillean archipelagoes.

of the subject in the modern times that is employed, but rather a reterritorialized code of re-familiarization and re-appropriation of tradition into a modern context. Real estrangement and de-familiarization of tradition at least requires an ironic transformation and the narrator's distancing from tradition. Valaoritis takes a revisionary stance to such appropriations. This aesthetic revisionary *Einstellung* is more rigorously stated, "When a poet encounters another poet he must take off his hat and bow politely, with an ironical smile toward his colleague." In a haughty way, he continues his heretic apology towards nationalist Modernists, "He must do the same when he encounters *sensibility*" (my emphasis).

Even rhetoric, the purity of discourse and of *logos*, the pride of the ancient Greek democracy, is now lost forever . . . Only waiters in the cafes and prostitutes are eloquent and know the tropes, "I only heard about rhetoric much later, for the waiters in the cafes who knew all the tropes in the trade. I will never forget their discourse on the tragedy of Government. I also found the prostitutes very eloquent [ . . . ] the prostitutes reminded me of the ancient Greeks."

Tradition again proves unfaithful, "Patroclus I was told had died in a chariot crash from tetanus. Was Homer so totally ignorant of the causes of his hero's death, or was he only pretending? He is now remembered for exactly that." Homer was ridiculed in schools by schoolboys and offered him nothing useful for education. Nevertheless, more metaphorically, the renunciation of Homer here implicates a critique to the poetics of Greekness,<sup>15</sup> "He taught me nothing. Plato was right. Poets are too immoral to be of any use for education."

What Valaoritis tells us is that the classical tradition had no impact on his work. In a rather "futuristic" lofty and Modernist scoffing style, Valaoritis ambiguously states: "My classical education was finally completed by World War II." Moreover, violence is reconciled with respect, raising the rhetorical dilemma whether he must be sympathetic to Hitler because Hitler was another "classical hero," pretty much like Achilles, or he must feel an antipathy for Plato because his views on poetry are close to Hitler's: he hated degenerate art. And evil books of literature."

However it is taken, its effect upon the reader is to distance him from the text and to generate a feeling of solitude and alienation (or solidarity?) with writing itself. To this expressive manliness, the poet's reaction is to turn to "effeminate and decadent verses" which were fiercely rejected by his first editor who unabashedly concluded, "What

<sup>15</sup>It is also interesting to see how another heretic poet, C. P. Cavafy, approached Homer, especially the *Iliad* (an epic representing the pagan Bible for the Greeks) in order to demonstrate the loss of national tradition. I study this issue in a forthcoming paper on Cavafy.



we need is a real man, an epic poet. Another Homer."

It is also worthwhile to mention that Valaoritis's writing is somatic. More explicitly, writing is described in bodily terms, "To write is occupation, says Terence, or was it Ovid? Not to write is restful if moderately indulged in." Furthermore, he visualizes himself through writing, as a "golden boy," an image reminiscent of the Hellenistic idols representing *Eros*, "One of them, an attractive redhead used to call me her golden boy." More interesting, writing represents a resistance to death, to our precursors, "I was in love with the only person I hadn't met. His name was Death. I wanted to make love with Death. Perhaps my dead father?" The view and sense of Death made him a writer, not of a literary death "the dying warriors of undying beauty" — but of a somatic death in its most brutal sense, "Death obliged and paid me a visit in the guise of the German army. I had to wade over corpses to attend University." Valaoritis then explains how he went towards Gothic Romanticism and onwards to Surrealism. He admits that he is a lover of nothingness and emptiness, both of which are ironically to be found in "classical education."

From a political point of view, Valaoritis attacks the silent majority, which unquestioningly accepts tradition and resents the Other, the madness and errors, "I didn't consider them as errors but as components of speech." His desires, the flows of sentences, directed against the Family, Church, School, and Nation, represent deterritorialized flows of desire that try to escape the Oedipal-code edifice of a schizophrenic society. It seems that the internalization of national tradition in the poet's ego signifies an interior colonization from which Valaoritis struggles to escape. Classical education in terms of a national literature is a colonial discipline, which creates a collective suffering, a State-paranoia. It is in the view of this internalized paranoia that the escaping poets are considered "Bunch of queers the whole lot of you poetasters, sluts, babblers."

In "A New Poetic Movement," Valaoritis demonstrates more clearly his Avant-Gardist breakthrough with conservative Modernism. The "Intertextuals," a group of provocatively impersonal and strikingly identical poets, function as if *they* represent another *them*. Originality is only an archaic utopia, a contamination of *écriture*, "I must however grant them a great innovation: the desire, manifested for the first time in this century, not to be original." Originality lies only in the Greek Epic, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, in a utopia, in a Greek "myth," which "everyone" strives to imitate, allude and appropriate to his own (his/her own?) text. In so doing they banned the use of *I*, and referred to themselves as *they*. They did not use "the royal *we* either, for it had been abused by the poets of the thirties who surmised. They were also

speaking for someone else" and yet paradoxically forming instead a collective self of unprecedented cohesion leading to the perpetual copying word for word imitation of the two great epics, all of whom look identical, wear the same dresses, and have the same voices and sex.<sup>16</sup>

From the preceding analysis, we may infer that Valaoritis's writing breaks away from tradition on a large scale which progresses from irony and subversion to commodification in consumer society.<sup>17</sup> Classical tradition has been only a commodity for the contemporary poet, and the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* merely represent objects of imitation. Ethnic Avant-Garde is directed against the national literature representing an anti-nationalism.

### *Post-Oeuvre, A Spinal Writing?*

Valaoritis's writing is hypnotic. Sentences, these "imaginary sentences without words," fuse one into another (always keep following closely this unfulfilled Other) unrestrainably in a disorder which suspends us somewhere between *hypnos* and awakening. At the level of writing, this minimal voice which vibrates the interior tympana of *logos*, filtrated by the collective and plural censorship of the canon of the ethnic community and the national literature, is at best expressed by an elliptic writing, which is consciously ironic. The reading of such a latent speech-grammar is real arabesque, so well epitomized by the poet's unconscious, little bits, crumbs, adamants, cast here and there, that compose, in their deeper level, the prodigal score of a Dorian anapaestic lectern of a memory that is being incessantly lost. Valaoritis's writing is hysterical and temporalized. It must be always read *a posteriori*, heretically, like a polemic testament flooded by *semeiosis* and references to Greece's historical predicament. I wholeheartedly suggest that these poems, and his entire *oeuvre* as well be read as a heretic and polemic "veille" to a people that vainly struggle over centuries not to be extinguished. From this perspective, history proves a continuous present-ness. I still read the poets from their half-said words, whispers, and dreams. Behind the written language there is always another more risky, concealed, sensitive, intelligent and liberated one indicated by gestures, noddings, and expressions; in short, all those virtues of language that readers can imply from poets when reading their

<sup>16</sup>Edouard Roditi gives another interpretation to the poem placing it in the context of American literature. According to him, "In 'A New Poetic Movement,' Valaoritis exerts his irony against the whole increasingly outmoded notion of a literary or artistic avant-garde which, above all in the United States, has managed in recent years to impose itself as both an absurdly vain 'cult of personality,' and a new kind of academism." Roditi, *ibid*, p. 48.

<sup>17</sup>Valaoritis seems to be influenced in this by American Language poets, and especially Ron Silliman.



poems. The proper body of Valaoritis's *oeuvre* dwells in this interior language of the oesophagus, marked by occupation, sterility, loss, endurance. Does writing itself really represent the nourishment that maintains the body and which is first received by mouth? And does the "breeding milk" really represent a sterile tradition? Does the poet indeed point to such a brutal and literal confession, sterile and dry from any appetite for metaphorgames?

These prose poems, scarce amethysts in the archipelagos of a conscious and deliberate *intertextualité*, if they do not pierce our humble eyes with the light of the painful Odyssey of the exiled poet, as long as the sad journey of the returning-home is unfolded before the theatre of a bare writing, then confront us once more with the brutal Kafkean dilemma of "our inability of not to write." Valaoritis's word-machines are connected to disjunctured sentences, ironically well-balanced, with a poor rhythm, orphan-conjectures, automatic images, free associations, relics of meaning, *anakoloutha*, and a self-ironical *litotes*.

After a long journey in the style and the *ethos* of the Greek language and experience, Valaoritis now seems that he has decided to bare his language from its tropes, and to speak with his gestures and bones. Laurence Durrell viewed in this the maturity of a "Platonic wisdom" and his entering "into the Pythagorean stage as a good humoured ancient Greek philosopher."<sup>18</sup> If Embeirikos only now, posthumously and belatedly, by some critics (mainly his good old friends and a handful of young others,) is justifiably placed near the peaks of Greek poetry, for Valaoritis even this place cannot be his legitimate home, simply because he is the poet who eternally dwells in the transits. Valaoritis is the poet of the transits, of an indefinite platitude and longitude, a cancer-poet, who suddenly decided to leave his burrow and to walk outside on the bare rocks to the fresh air of a gloomy twilight. I now imagine him as the ultimate inhabitant, eaten by the desert and trodden by the rocks, in the "homeland of Nobody," because as he states in another poem "Towards the City, "Τὸ ταξίδι ἦταν μακρινὸ καὶ πολὺ κουραστικὸ ἀλλὰ οἱ περισσότεροι τὸ βρῖσκανε ἀκόμη πολὺ ἐλεεινὸ, τρισάθλιο ἀπερίγραπτο,"

("the Voyage was so long and so exhausting [ . . . ] that most found it even more miserable, pitiful and indescribable."<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>This information came to me from a letter of Laurence Durrell to the editor of City Lights Nancy J. Peters, dated in March 2nd, 1990. In the same letter, Durrell remembers Eliot speaking very appreciatively of Valaoritis's poetry.

<sup>19</sup>Nanos Valaoritis, "Μερικὲς γυναῖκες" ("Some Women") (Athens, 1983). Valaoritis commenting on this text stated it represents the opposite of Cavafy's "Ithaki." Its meaning is the constant desire to re-take Constantinople, the "City," by going towards it, "Εἰς τὴν Πόλιν."

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## On the Border of Culture and Feminism

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M. PAPACOSTAKI

MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT IN THE U.S.A. more than ten years ago was one of the most influential events of my life. Suddenly I was given a new frame in which most of the puzzle pieces of my life fit together. Though I am thankful to the American women's movement for providing me with such powerful theoretical tool, something else happened almost simultaneously that made me very uneasy. My native country, Greece, was criticized as being exceptionally sexist. There is no doubt of course that Greek society is sexist, but when American women express disgust about the sexism of Greek society in the name of solidarity I hear it as a criticism of the backwardness of my country or as a personal criticism of me and other Greek women for having put up with such a horrible situation. The result is that I lose trust in these women because I am in effect asked to betray a country that I love and which they do not know.

This paper has two parts. The first is at least initially more experientially based. In it I attempt to give practical guidance as to how cross-cultural feminist criticism might become an occasion for increased understanding and cooperation, rather than an occasion for disharmony and cultural imperialism. This section ends with an example taken from anthropological literature on Greece to show that the same considerations and criteria I develop to aid interpersonal interactions can and should also be applied to improve scholarship. In the latter, more theoretical part of the paper I attempt to reconceptualize the relation between minority and majority discourse in what I believe is a more empowering way for the relatively disempowered than is usual. This section moves from general considerations to examples drawn specifically from the Greek case.

In what follows in this first section, I attempt to provide some guidelines for cross-cultural but non-oppressive and non-offensive