

'All Margins, No Page': Unmaking Modernism, Writing the Avant-garde

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"Avant-garde" or experimental poets cannot simply discount this past; they must consciously address the social and formal imbeddings of gender. Nothing changes by changing the structures or sequences only. Narrative "realist" poets, including feminists, cannot simply discount this past; they must consciously address the social and formal imbeddings of gender. Nothing changes by changing the content only.
(Rachel Blau du Plessis, *The Pink Guitar*, p. 141)

Critical studies on women's innovative writings have recently proliferated at an unprecedented rate. Scholars, such as Rachel Blau du Plessis and Caroline Bergvall, have ardently studied women avant-garde authors. A variety of anthologies have also appeared, such as Penelope Rosemont's *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* and Maggie O'Sullivan's *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK*. To these works, we can add more pioneering essays by Marjorie Perloff on American women poets Lyn Hejinian, Rosmarie Waldrop, Susan Howe, Fanny Howe, Rachel Blau du Plessis, Harryet Mullen, and visual artist Johanna Drucker. Such a trend, however, replaces mainstream feminist perspectives in representation politics with radical studies of experimental writings and displacement. To this end, Caroline Bergvall states that:

It remains a fact that the great majority of feminist literary criticism is still suspicious of experimental writing and tackles with more eagerness ideas of representation than ideas of displacement (1993:30)

Although a great deal of scholarship has been presented on American, French, and British women avant-garde writers, their Greek counterparts were completely dismissed both by their national canon and even by international anthologies. It is not accidental that all historians of Modern Greek literature have ignored the work of Greek women avant-garde poets. Even various recent books and essays on Greek women authors consistently have excluded experimental writers. In this paper I will discuss some aspects of aesthetic radicalism in the works of three Greek women authors: Manto Aravantinou, Eva Milona, and Matsi Chatzilazarou. My aim is to demonstrate how these authors were committed strongly to subverting male-oriented modernist principles by establishing a women's avant-garde writing.

Manto Aravantinou: Writing as Space and Memory

Manto Aravantinou (1930-1998) was an exceptional avant-gardist writer. She wrote the poetic prose *Scripts A-Z* (*Γραφές A-Z*) and the autobiographical prose *Meta-Writing or Experience of Borders* (*Μετα-γραφή ή Εμπειρία Συνόρων*, 1975). She also completed a doctoral dissertation on James Joyce's knowledge and use of the Greek language (under the supervision of Richard Ellman) and extensively translated Joyce's works into Greek. Her major influences were the multilingual authors James Joyce and Samuel Beckett but she, in fact, is considered a Greek Gertrude Stein. One can also detect many influences from poststructuralist French theories and the groups of such French magazines as *Tel Quel* and *Change*.

Instead of relying on lyric, Aravantinou turned to theoretical formulations of language and experimental ideas, which eventually brought her in closer intimacy with Greek language poetry. Her writings, nevertheless, were not widely received and her audience was limited to specialist literary elites. The reasons for her

restricted reception in Greece were primarily the density of style, which caused confusion rather than excitement to the readers, and her linguistic experimentations, which challenged the predominance of subjective lyricism. It is regrettably true that her collected works were reprinted thirty years after their original publication.

Aravantinou's corpus of textual writings, ironically entitled *Scripts A-Z*, invokes the concept of writing (the title *Scripts/Γραφές* means in Greek the act of writing but it is also the title for the Bible) as a palimpsest, a biblical language subject to decipherment. Despite its biblical and metaphorical connotations, Aravantinou's writings remain powerless and acephalous in their play with authority and meaning and their denial of patriarchal grammar (*Script A*). Memory invalidates the suppressor's patriarchal reality and the body replaced by language becomes the material upon which writing is unfolded. Once the rules of the game are set, an expeditious, inexorable struggle is activated with the speaking subject performing continuous farces of delegitimizing meaning and disempowering patriarchal truth.

The competing male and female discourses lead to the Absent man, who remains unnamed until the end, neglecting the writing subject:

The Absent is replete with matter. The Absent is an appalling presence. The Absent is stripped of memory (p.18). The Absent has rejected me (p.19).

Most dramatically, the secluded woman-writer becomes the solo female actor before an audience of blind and invisible men. She is therefore compelled to present her own testimony of difference in a masked congregation by being both a witness and martyr of her apology:

I am a martyr alone of my gender. A martyr alone and self-invited. A martyr indifferent. A martyr alone. A martyr who was not invited. A martyr who was not asked. The Martyr blocks the view. The Martyr must go (p. 26).

The copulation of the two persons viewed in each circle simulates a primal sexual action. Yet, only one of them appears in each

stage. The male is surrounded by the desiring subject. Before and after intercourse, the man is surrounded by feelings of fear and anxiety which are soon deformed to a grandiloquent and pompous paranoia. He is then transformed into the traditional hero of a powerful discourse:

The man becomes distant, vain and arrogant. He steps forward the precise meters of the circle, covers all the space, asks questions, answers, demands, explains, returns, to the previous word, blames, teaches, speaks ironically. He goes away from the center of emotions, isolated in the center of the circle (p.14).

Script B, perhaps the most discussed of the *Scripts*, narrates the "route" of uncovering the urban planning of an unspecified city. The writing subject is heading towards the city-center, which is lost in the maze of parallel roads.

How many parallels? Only parallels- How many verticals? Only verticals-How many corners? Only corners. How many straights? Only straights. Corners and obliques. Corners and verticals. Only verticals. How many verticals? Many horizontals. Successive horizontals in the plan of my memory. Corners. Many corners. (p. 9)

Memory helps her to recognize directions:

Because I know by heart the plan of the city, the streets and the alleys. The names of the streets, puzzles of memory; repulsive signs of dream. Unpredictable signs of the city. (p. 12)

She moves towards internal spaces of desire and external underground highways. Conscious and unconscious reminiscences evoke a repressed recollection of death and a landscape devastated by war.

In *Script B* the woman-writer and an old hymnographer examine a city map in order to decipher an ancient hymn written in an unknown ideographic alphabet. Prepared to reproduce this hymn, which is to the hymnographer's conviction equivalent to the grammar of poetry itself, the woman must excavate the relics of the old

city of sidelong and devious lines in the ruins of which the modern system of straight parallels has been erected. The old hymnographer, the only proprietor of the memory of lost codes, believes that the woman "owns" the memory of writing, despite her claiming that she only remembers the sounds of writing:

The old man insists that I own the memory of writing, but this is extremely dangerous. I only own the memory of sounds, by no means that of writing, that of continuous signification. (p.18)

The inhabitants of the city of parallel roads have lost their means of linguistic communication. Both oral and written languages have been erased from memory; only cacophonous combinations of consonants along with a system of algebraic equations, which represents the address and identity of each resident, are left. The learning of this particular system, now the most significant part of the city's culture, becomes the exclusive aim of the people's education. Therefore, while the old hymnographer acquires the absolute knowledge of combining linguistic images and sounds, the speaking-subject of *Script B* is captured in the inevitable conflict of discovering the ultimate unity of old and new, straight and devious, reality and dream, rationality and subconscious, sound and image. By inspecting the city from multiple viewpoints, she strives to reproduce the city of parallels. Meanwhile, she tries vainly to avoid the sidelong lines of the dream that block her memory:

The exacting formation of the sidelong lines interfere in the design of my memory, they bisect its straight lines, they disturb the line of parallels. The oblong lines are a minor, untransferable dream. (p.11)

The woman's past memory of voices and writing is comfortably suppressed by the well-set design of the parallels. Dwelling in the districts of the city, where the parallels are not bisected, she feels forced to be exiled in a rationalistic and official language of "uncovered ends of lustrous parallels" (p.13). Soon she enters the feminine circular space of Laura, the great Mother and Mistress. She reconstructs the female image in the mirrors of her brothel, pronouncing the circular vowels of Laura's name:

Fragmented sounds, of third philology, of make-up and noble underwear, of a language almost unknown, hermetic and confidential, panics my hearing and memory.

Laura... Laura Aura Avra. (p. 21)

Running in her search of father (the "black man") and mother ("woman of [her] past") she inserts an indefinite space of fantastic beings, voices and games. The space of childhood memory is finally proved to be restrictive, conveying the rupture of erotic unity with the past and the present self.

The final part of *Script B* takes place in the northern parts of the city. The woman once more describes the internal substance of objects since their surface remains dominant, but constantly, elusive:

I cover the external surface of objects in general... I promised the recording agreements engraved in the interior of objects. (p. 47)

Wandering South of the city is similar to diving into transcendental meaning and dreamwork processes. Nevertheless, despite her conscious attempts at automatic writing, she fails in her reconstructions of memory:

I extort the memory of the present time. (p. 48)

When finally traced, the center is flourishing, marbled, and idealized; its presence elevates and amazes the subject:

At the centre of a dangerless, marble square I await for the taste and knowledge of objects inside me. (p. 49)

While memory is fragmented, the center collects and designates the functions of writing. Real naked ephebes, imitating marble statues, and political prisoners driven in carriages to a central execution place are found participating in a march that resembles the decorative geometrical designs of ancient urns. The glamorous parade evokes an artificial setting, because a synchronic signifying memory erases the centrality of meaning. Lost amid the relics of the past, the male is the commander of tradition, the owner of the quintessential referential role of language. He is imprisoned in his

own mythical discourse, while the woman attempts to transmit from memory this transcendental ability of language through writing, a task not only dangerous but also self-devalidating and futile.

The topography of *Script B* is extended to the map of a city. A network of lines, bisecting one another, represents a geometrical design of memory deciphered as the map of a model city. The female subject is wandering in the map of her memory in order to decipher the significance of the city's parallel roads. The background of this wandering is given in the only partly published drafts of *Script B*.

Throughout the *Scripts*, the interpretation of the original text is withheld by the father's male discourse, which has prohibited the alternative history of writing. Aravantinou's linguistic choice can also be interpreted. In the light of gender-conscious writing, the blending of purist and demotic used in the *Scripts* can be metaphorically reduced to the opposition between paternal and maternal language. Her obvious appropriation of the paternal grammar as an avowal of her textual desire becomes a device of returning to the womb of maternal language.

The *Scripts* constitute an adventure of writing where memory subsides by sensation, visual forms and sounds. Yet, the recording of visual and acoustic signs, however accurate, is stammering and artificial; the whiteness of the page fades to become transparent and elusive. In her movement, the formless subject oscillates between the linearity of vision and the roundness of sound and imagination. At the end of her course, she discovers silence and inadequacy instead of poetic unity, or the memory of a glorious and unified past. Aravantinou's aesthetically radical attitude affects her way of seeing Greek language. In her *Scripts* older versions of Greek acquire new meanings in a modern context. Modernist texts are referred to, or included in, subconscious recordings. In addition, the repressive orality of the regime is textualized and its dogmatic elements are revealed.

The Aristotelean space is the basis of the Western Copernican geographical concept according to which Man rather than God is the observer: "places in space," a system of centers of human affairs (homes, workplaces, cities) deployed within a uniformly regular "space in itself." While the pre-modern space is vertical

and bounded, modern space is "traversed," boundless and horizontal. Modern space varies from the early modern humanist space to the late modernist industrial space of dispersal and displacement and, finally, to the postmodern intra-vagination of space, where spaces overlap and correspond with the classical, visually evident space considered as a sphere with center and circumference that challenges identity and representation. The object may fall into the gap between the subject and the object. It is the means by which the subject constitutes itself by expelling what cannot be contained, the pre-Oedipal mother: the woman is in the margin, among light and darkness, saintly and daemonic. In Aravantinou the positioning of the subject changes. She is transferred at the sidelong lines beyond the directly oppositional vision between the subject and the object. The woman's perspective changes: she finds herself at the border, the edge, marginalized by the symbolic, the transient matter of the woman's body (p. 10-18). Aravantinou tries to capture the experience on a textual, or better a meta-textual, level through the process of remembering and recreating this experience with the reworkings of language. Language retells the story, refashions the experience, restores displaced pieces of memory.

Eva Milona's Early Postmodernist Tales

Eva Milona published two books of poetry, *The Journey (To Taξίδι, 1975)* and *Clear Metal (Καθαρόν Μέταλλον, 1975)*. Milona first appeared in the literary review *Pali*, together with other members of the "anti-realist" group, such as Manto Aravantinou, Nikos Stangos, Alex Schinas, Dimitris Rikakis and Panos Koutroumbousis.

Milona's most important texts are her prose poems, published in *Pali* which are allegorical narratives of dreamwork processes. The first text, "The King" (ὁ βασιλεύς), simulates the "naive" style of a fairy tale. A happy, young King, who lived in a northern land of colourful ice, had an identical friend. When the King lost his crown, his people could not distinguish him from his identical friend. Desperate as he was, he kills them all and locks himself into the palace. The story tells us that once the signifier of power is lost, the signified of power is lost, too. The signified thus identifies with its signifier, undermining the metaphysics of truth found

in traditional narratives. Pretentiously retelling a tale, it finally ends up as a story about power, authority, identification and gender. In addition, Milona often borrows from children's language tales, games, toys, and dreams.

The next story, "The Head" (τό κεφάλι), also takes place in a dreamy, mysterious atmosphere. The narrator is resting, tied up on a seat in a park of a district square. Sleepily, she watches quite a few people pass around her. As the night falls, a crowd gathers in the square, ready to take part in a pre-arranged celebration. A girl with a red balloon approaches her while a chubby man painlessly cuts her head. However, the head bursts into a prolonged, demonic laughter. The absurdist plot of the story transforms the celebratory medieval atmosphere of a witch's execution into a common middle-class environ. The spirit of magic prevails, despite the collective attempt to decapitate it. The repressed, chained woman-subject finds herself beyond the center which is taken by the statue of a man. She is found in the periphery of the cyclical square, quite at ease and herself the observant, being herself the audience of her decapitation. The head is retrieved back to its original place through the eyes of the observant. Its revenge is rather manifest by the satanic laughter. The desire, in the form of a little girl, submits the woman's intellect to the hands of the man. Now the female subject takes her revenge by still being triumphantly alive.

The King signifies the alienated identity of the subject: the opposition between body in bits and pieces (sense) and the illusory unity (vision). The first one determines the pre-Oedipal identity of the subject, the experience of disembodiment, dismemberment and split. The second one is the representation of the subject produced by cultural and libidinal investments, the imagined lived experiences. When the King loses his symbol of authority, he returns to his pre-Oedipal stage of split identity. Yet, he is not a unity any more because he remembers the lost symbol. In order to find his lost identity and become one again he destroys all those recently conceived as others.

The decapitation of the Head is a symbolic patriarchal act based on the meaning of anatomy. Since the symbolic unified anatomy is deranged, an impotent dismembered image is left to undergo a violent physical and symbolic death; along with the unity of the body,

the intellect dies, too. Yet, decapitation offers to the subject the opportunity of a regained identity. The laughter represents the recognition by the now semiotic subject of its new, much more flexible and powerful self, which can take revenge of its silent anatomical normality. By its failure to define the regular image of the subject, either as powerful and unified or as anatomically canonical and censored, the object of the symbolic finally becomes the subject of the semiotical order.

Turning to Milonas' two poetic collections, they differ in the following: the *Journey* reveals dreamlike processes of transmigration of human bodies and souls, while *Clear Metal* is about revenge and castration. Examining the prose poems of *Journey*, "Dream", "Biography" and the "The Rock", we again notice the dream to be the primary source of inspiration. Dreamwork texts were introduced to Modern Greek literature by surrealists Nikos Engonopoulos and Andreas Embirikos, mainly as writing processes of the unconscious. With women authors of the 1960s and the 1970s the dream returns again to substitute the fantastic.

In addition to dreams, various female symbols are present, such as concrete domestic home descriptions, toys, tastes, and other smaller devices that reflect a feminine nature. The "Dream" is a feminine one, where detailed description outweighs masculine plot. In all stories there is always a male figure, either faceless or with a child's figure, more often castrated, missing some part of his body. "Biography" is more descriptive about birth and love. Physical contact of the body, senses, nostalgia for something that has never existed. Throughout her work, persistence to insignificant smaller personal things are more predominant than identifiable themes that counter-attack major narratives of national modernist poetics, such as issues of national identity, cosmopolitanism, historical consciousness, and social imaginings.

In fact, instead of being a writing that leads to fulfilment, it becomes an "evacuation", an exploration of marginal and unnamed details. Both memory and dream are recalled to inevitably replace actual reality. Milonas' *Journey* is foremost a personal journey to herself. The dream underwrites reality. It is what her motto by Papadiamantis states:

I was the man who managed to capture in his hands for a moment a dream; his own dream.

The *Journey* is a reckoning of her personal affairs, an invisible transformation in time as passing through a dream. As she states in the first poem "Journey":

It is passed the hour for the journey
but we shall leave unseen
simply cutting through the air
as through a schoolyard. (p.7)

Clear Metal is, instead, about violence, revenge, and castration. What is implied by clear metal? A sparkling shining? A knife? Surely, a challenging threat that draws us to its own dangerous way. The image is not a stainless but a plain metal, only metal that threatens to cut through. From these poems I would especially distinguish "Lucy" and "Three poems about Robespierre". In all, Milonas' poetry reminds us more of poets, such as Yannis Ritsos, Tasos Livaditis, and Miltos Sachtouris in their most personal moments. However, her stories mean something more. They are postmodernist meta-narrative processes that recontextualize and rework familiar genres, images, and dreams. What remains after reading them are fragmentary displacements, subvertive narratives, and the unmaking of patriarchal modernist ideas. This acephalous, decentered writing becomes the postmodernist plot that dismantles the modernist narrative.

Matsi Chatzilazarou: The Surrealist Flowers of Language

Matsi Chatzilazarou is a surrealist poet. Similarly as Manto Aravantinou, she lived in France many years, becoming another French-minded Greek author. She wrote several poetry collections. All her works are included in *Collected Poems 1944-1985* (Ποιήματα 1944-1985). Greek surrealism was not a uniquely male trend, as it is presented in most accounts of Greek literature. Women played an important role, too. Next to Chatzilazarou is also Gisele Prassinou, a native of Constantinople living in Paris. However, the neglect of women surrealist writers is a rather widespread phenomenon. Penelope Rosemont notes in her introduction to *Surrealist Women*:

In all the arts and major genres of writing, women helped develop surrealism's radical poetic/critical outlook and thus helped make it what it was and is. To ignore their contribution is to ignore some of the best of surrealism." (1998:xxix)

The Words Have Drapes (Τὰ Λόγια ἔχουν) was first published by Gallimard in Paris, 1954, and appeared in Greek in 1989. In the poem "The Spider-Images", the woman-author is represented as "spider". It is the female principle of writing, which binds the threads of narratives together. Surrealists favored lists of unrelated (accidental?) names. Such lists are presented in Embirikos' "Beatoi" and Engonopoulos' "The City of Light". These lists seek to establish the lineage of male texts that in Chatzilazarou become exotic and marvelous without specific reference to history. History, which in male narratives extends in time, is only contextualized by the spider-author and exists in the present, hung right here.

binding its thread very fast she is coming down and then
stops she is hung up here (p. 51)

Having lost her memory, the woman-writer is left alone in a still landscape, one that is reminiscent of the objects in Max Ernst's frottages. The parts of her body rest forgotten between the repressing and alienating ornaments of the male text, as in the poem "Natura Morte" (p. 53). Her origin is the dispersed matrix of language

my origin my words (p. 55)

which produces the plural subject of writing. Every part of her body is covered and pierced by words. Language acquires a shape, an abstract form through the repetition of its words

Asphodel del del
asphodel aspho asphodel

or again:

green-yellow-red-yellow-green-yellow
red-yellow-green-yellow-red-yellow (p. 57)

which transcends its meanings and goes back to its primordial

sounds and images. By being tangible, colorful and sensual, it produces new objects of speech and creates persons only by pronouncing their names. What is left from the referentiality of language, the drapes of its rhetoric, is the only way left to women-writers to reconstruct the surrealist text. The abstraction of language, which creates new, autonomous images, is produced by objects usually used by women: threads, embroideries, house ornaments. Metaphors of pieces of textiles and different qualities of cloths are employed as autonomous materials to construct a word-collage. Similar to Ernst's text *Untitled* (1920), the parts of a woman's collection of textiles produce a new image. The games that are creative, used for a purpose, are the games of a grown-up.

Abjection is the perilous and provisional nature of the symbolic control over the depressing impulses of the semiotic drives, which strive to break down through identity, order and stability. It is the exclusion of the improper, unclean and disorderly. Yet, what must be expelled cannot be fully obliterated. Instead, it hovers at the border of the subject's identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and dissolution. The subject's recognition of the impossibility to expell these is called abjection: the unspoken, the abyss, the hole.

Chatzilazarou proceeds to this movement, this activity to fill gaps and holes. The insistence on materiality that the symbolic must reject. Her words mark the ambiguous pre-verbal "beginnings" of pleasure and pain. While patriarchal literature sublimates the abject, Chatzilazarou's writing "names" it. At times a medusa gets ashore on the coast spreading the remains of her life. Being unable to reconcile the experience of itself with its idealized, social image, Chatzilazarou's subject traces down the abject of her poetic discourse.

Conclusions

Each author presented here transcends familiar practices of both mainstream women poets' techniques as well as male modernist conventional modes of writing. Excluded as they were from women's canons, Aravantinou, Milona and Chatzilazarou present individual instances of subverting politics of gender and representation but, at the same time, they are also unable to build their own

movement. Instead of committing themselves to a certain political agenda of writing, they are exploring, or better, excavating language playing with origins, topographies, memories, dreams, metaphors and other techniques of subversive significations. In place of the fragmented female body without space or language, the texts presented propose a new, unified and reconstructed narrative, which challenges the intertextuality and individuality of modernist tradition. Women surrealists and late modernists respond to this tradition by designating a specific space: the body as a home inhabited exclusively by women. By reconstructing their bodies and selves through language, women writers construct their own alternative writings by topologically commenting on themselves and opening up the closed systems of signification. They therefore produce an alternative literary discourse, which presents the material and current existence of history, the contextualization and eccentricity of the subject, the plurality and collectivity of origin, and the transgression of language limits. By narrating the physical history of the female gender these texts re-write the myth of the avant-garde after reading it.

How are all these connected with language and the avant-garde, and especially with its paternal, rule-governed, symbolic order? The poetic text materializes the pleasures, rhythms and drives of the semiotic. In Aravantinou's case, the subject's geometrical position violates the memory and mastery of language and tradition. She is the most acute of the three at destabilizing certainties of discourse by employing language as self-consciousness, as the material as well as the plan to acquire knowledge of herself. Also, Aravantinou plays with prohibitions and freedom exploring spaces in-between, emotions and objects and identity of self and gender. Her writing explores suspending spaces of here and there, now and then, self and memory.

In Milona, what is left after decapitation and schizophrenia is a new realization of herself that opposes the male concept of Greek modernism and takes revenge over the deformed feminine image of surrealism. Finally, Chatzilazarou's abjection questions the referentiality and transcendentalism of language. All three are reacting to the legacy of male-oriented Modernism by preparing the ground for a new innovative women's writing, namely, a meta-modernist avant-gardist framework.

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