
The debate over Yioryos Babiniotis’ right to include in his *Dictionary of the Modern Greek language* (1998) derisive uses of certain words has revealed the ever-present potency of censorship, especially in a culture deeply anxious over the proper names of things. Alert to the issue’s implications, Karen Van Dyck’s study of poetry produced during and after the Colonels’ dictatorship in Greece (1967-74) inaugurates a cultural approach to contemporary Greek literature, and addresses important questions about literature’s entanglement with authority, censorship and self-censorship.

*Kassandra and the Censors*, though not always free of specialized vocabulary, is lucidly written and informed by the author’s impressive command of relevant literature in Greek and English. The book is a welcome addition to the ‘Reading Women Writing’ series of Cornell University Press; its production bespeaks an exceptional sensitivity to the original book titles and texts, with quotations in Greek and English, in their published translations or beautifully translated by Van Dyck herself.

Discussions of censorship, either in psychoanalytical terms or by reference to Foucault’s analyses of power, have shown that the imposition or self-imposition of erasure is not necessarily delimiting. It can be enabling too. In her book, Van Dyck discusses how authors and artists during the seven year military rule dealt with censorship; more specifically, she shows how, since the dictatorship, this experience became a creative force for women poets, able to generate a feminist poetics. Drawing on diverse material — poetry, comic strips, popular songs, anecdotes, magazine articles — Van Dyck offers a comprehensive picture of the inventive and varied resistance to the regime’s contradictory demands for linguistic clarity and cultural authenticity. In a Bakhtinian framework, she criticizes at once Seferis’ initial silence and attempt to keep art separate from politics, and the politically engaged verses or direct parodies of postwar poets and writers, such as Anagnostakis and Valtinos, for their ‘monologism’; all these writers, she alleges, shared the logic of the authoritarian discourse; they opted for a stand, and ‘to take a stand means to exclude other positions in favour of one’s own’ (39). By contrast, she values poets who began publishing during the dictatorship, conventionally known as the ‘Generation of the 1970s’, for sustaining Lyotard’s notion of the ‘paralogical’. Their poetry, like Savvopoulos’ songs, absorbed the confusion of the times, thus promoted semantic instability. By setting poetry in its local, cultural context, Van Dyck demonstrates that the interrelation between discourses of censorship, urban life, consumerism, and a politicized version of the American Beat produced new themes and a new language. Poulilos’ drawing on obscenities and on the anonymity of commodity culture, as well as Steriadis’ fluid visual languages, inspired by techniques of the comic strip and film, formed a visual and narrative poetics, which questioned the censor’s demand that words correspond to fixed and clear meanings.

Van Dyck’s principal concern is to examine the engagement of women poets with these poetic strategies after the Colonels’ overthrow in 1974. She shrewdly remarks that, during the junta, the resistance turned the long connection of feminine
experience with 'undecidability', into a site of political opposition. Pointedly, in Margarita Karapanou's Kassandra and the Wolf (1976) the subversive use of woman to represent linguistic and sexual ambiguity, undermined not only the censor's but also gender distinctions. The regime's fall, the ensuing link of oppression with repression and the feminist movement's vigorous re-emergence empowered the idea of women's writing. If, as Van Dyck argues, the political texture of male poetry was impoverished, women writers strengthened their voice because they perceived a link between the censorship of the regime, of patriarchy, and of an author's self-criticism.

Through a theoretically informed analysis of Rhea Galanaki, Jenny Mastoraki, and Maria Laina's poetry, Van Dyck charts a shift from dealing with censorship to gendering censorship. She sets her attention on 'the sexually charged linguistic project of writing as a woman' (7), in spite of Mastoraki's and Laina's resistance to the category. Here, she introduces the term 'poetics of undeliverability' to point to the indefinite deferral of meaning in these women poets' visual narratives of the 1980s. In a series of insightful readings, Van Dyck amply demonstrates the primary characteristics in each of these poets' work — conflation of personal pronouns, mixing of sex roles, contradictory statements, dashes, blank spaces, unmaking of quotations, dearth of intertextual references, confusing grammar and syntax — employed to intermesh censorship with self-censorship, rehearse sexual confusion in language, and disturb authority, in its multiple dimensions.

Van Dyck mostly concentrates on three collections, which she has elegantly translated in The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding (1998). In Rhea Galanaki's The cake (1980) the 'poetics of undeliverability' are performed by a pregnant woman's indeterminacy, who postpones her child's birth and of meaning through a continuous process of transforming myth and language. In Jenny Mastoraki's Tales from the deep (1983) the process of writing transforms the prohibition of self-expression into a visual narrative of this limitation, which also delays assigning the multiple signifiers to a referent. In Maria Laina's Hers (1985) censorship operates as lack of recognition. The unrequited look of the female subject engenders the text's different visual presentation (fragmentation, alternative typography and punctuation) and a language which foregoes the usual connections, or consistency of person, tense and gender.

Van Dyck's viewing of this poetry as a feminist mode of writing that promotes sexual and textual undecidability offers a fresh reading, suggestively defines literary problems created by a censor's presence, imaginatively links different poetic collections, and points to issues in the cultural production of poetics. At the same time, the overriding feminist role ascribed to these collections poses questions about the power-imbibed relationship of the professional reader with her textual interlocutor, especially when private verbal exchanges, interviews, and questionnaires inform her method.

Van Dyck dutifully notes Mastoraki's observation that 'when these tales are being written, the dictatorship is already a past which doesn't concern me. The terrain of the tales is clearly that of the emotions' (178). Prompted by the theoretical readings of 'The purloined letter' by Edgar Allan Poe, Van Dyck correctly claims for herself the right to re-read in order to 'fill in the blank' (214), to read 'against
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the grain’ (178) of Mastoraki’s comment in order to show how her prose tales rework the experience of censorship under the dictatorship into a gendered poetics. Carefully foregrounding her role as ‘investigator’ and ‘feminist literary critic’ (141), Van Dyck sees the recontextualization of quotation in Tales as a challenge to authority. In another slant, she explains Mastoraki’s ‘homage to the Greek literary tradition’ as the poet’s means of gaining authority in a milieu that values links with tradition — especially after the praise her fourth collection, the Crown, received by the male critical establishment for her use of the Greek language and mythopoetic tradition (136-138 and 187).

The dialogue between the feminist literary critic and the female poet is thought-provoking as long as it passes the indeterminacy of the interpretation to the next reader. But how indeterminate is the assertion that ‘if Mastoraki’s reading of Tales as a homage to the Greek literary tradition suggests a direct path to Crown, mine discovers a detour, and, leaving prizing, crowns of light, and other redemptive measures aside, stops to explore the feminist implications of the violence involved in writing poetry . . . ’ (189)? Despite eloquent disavowals, doesn’t the feminist critic here emerge as an ideological critic, on her own terms, forcefully ‘taking a stand’, and risking being ‘monologic’?

Be that as it may, the exchange recasts Galanaki’s aporia: if there is a women’s literature how can it be defined? Van Dyck suggests an answer when on re-reading Mastoraki she concludes that ‘writing as a woman is often only possible after one has been read as a woman’ (216). We can perhaps share this view and still be left with open issues. If we accept that there is a women’s writing, I suppose, we should be equally willing to accept that there are multiple poetic discourses constructed within it, as well as outside it. And if we assume that a poet such as Mastoraki, who rejects the notion of ‘women’s poetry’, ‘can only possibly write as a woman after she has been read as a woman’, we still need to know as who did she write before? What if, as Lynne Pyce invites us, we reconfigure reading as an interactive and implicated process rather than a hermeneutic practice? 1

In *Gender, Politics, and Poetry in Twentieth-Century Argentina*, Jill Kuhnheim, who, unlike Van Dyck, publishes the text of her interview with the Argentinean poet Olga Orozco, posits the literary interview as a common attempt to control meaning; she, accordingly, reflects on her exchange with Orozco: ‘I, the interviewer, construct Orozco, my subject, through the questions that I choose and in my revisions of and decisions about how to present the resulting text . . . Olga Orozco, in turn, reacts to me and to what I represent in her responses to my questions: I am a younger, middle-class, North American white female, on my first visit to Argentina, representing an academic institution, and coming to my work with the perspective of a literary critic. Orozco’s position is that of the author . . . and we see her in a moment of public presentation, for she is conscious


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of the exposure, the non private nature of our exchange. I cite this example not only because of its self-reflexive nature, but also because of its author’s conclusions. Like Van Dyck, Kuhnheim understands Orozco’s rejection of gendered writing as the poet’s acquiescence to the stronger speaking position of the ‘universal’, in a culture that discriminates against women’s writing. Similarly, Sharon Keefe Ugulde explains the rejection of an ‘estética feminina’ by a number of the Spanish poets she interviewed as a defensive gesture to escape the stigmatizing segregation of women’s verses. This brings me to a second set of queries. If Greek women’s poetics is not simply a matter of individual talent as Van Dyck convincingly demonstrates, could women poets’ writing not be compared cross-culturally to that of women poets in analogous circumstances? Could Greek women’s poetry be related to that of Argentinian women publishing during and after the dictatorship of the seventies or to the flowering of poetry by Spanish women after Franco’s death in 1975? The increasing disruption of cultural codes, the mixing of diverse conceptual and linguistic spheres, the focus on the non-verbal, the use of silence, the inscription of the female erotic experience mark the work of poets such as Christina Piña, Liliana Lukin, Ines Arnoz, Diana Bellessi or Luisa Castro. If poetry ‘augments ambiguity, even anarchy, in societies seeking clarity and imposing unity,’ couldn’t we examine Greek poetry since 1967 in the larger context of what Milosz defines as ‘putting culture on trial’? If the poetics of Greek women writers are marked by the experience of the dictatorship, how ‘culturally specific’ is this mark after all? Feminist criticism asserts that woman negotiates opposites in a constant dialogue and that meaning in feminine language is always ‘between voices or between discourses, marked by a mistrust of the signified. What are then the links of Greek women’s poetics with the endeavour of other contemporary women poets to combat the conventions of the male voice, ‘breaking the sentence and the sequence’?

Van Dyck shows much critical awareness for ‘intercultural’ and ‘intertextual’ discourse, yet she sometimes is reticent on some key questions. How do ‘feminist’ poetics relate to the precedent of male authors (such as Papadimitriou, Vizyenos, and Tachtissi) who used cross-dressing and linguistic ‘undecidability’ to subvert

gender, national and religious stereotypes? One wonders, moreover, why the comparison between Laina and Cavafy merits only a brief footnote (244). Yet, their mutual preoccupation with self-mirroring and the gaze of the other, even their fragmented archaeological discourses, are implicated with poetic subjectivity and alternative sexuality as well as the imposition of self-censorship. That said, it further remains to be shown, in Laina’s case, how — even if it is ‘less clear . . . ’ (218) — the poetics of censorship are connected to the experience of censorship under the colonels, and this, in view of Van Dyck’s admission that in Galanaki’s and Mastoraki’s late work questions of gender become less urgent.

Kassandra and the censors is essential reading for the study of modern Greek poetry. Its publication, together with the recent lexicographic war of words, give rise to the thought that attempts to control meaning are present even in the absence of dictatorships.

Georgia Gotsi,
Brown University