

Platonic notions and gender theme in Katerina Anghelaki – Rooke’s poetry.

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In the given paper we examine how particularly the Platonic issues served a source of inspiration and reflected in the texts of modern Greek poetess Katerina Anghelaki –Rooke. Through the cross- cultural search and interdisciplinary approach we come to a complex and problematic relationship between the classical Greek philosophical notions, myth, tradition and subjective female mythmaking without rooting deeply into historical circumstances accurately examined by Karen Van Dyck in *Kassandra and the Censors* published in 1988.

We are going to follow three main philosophical axis points that construct the article: the soul, the mimesis and the cave. But first of all, a small introductory note about the writer.

Born in 1939 Katerina Anghelaki –Rooke started to be published at an early age, produced three complete chronological volumes of texts, passed through the fall of the military regime in 1967-1974, witnessed first women right to vote, to divorce and to work in the army or police along with the subsequent changes within the women society. Except from the gender question, there can be seen platonic traces that mark some texts of Rooke that would not be so peculiar if not the conjunction with multiple literary trends such as Greek surrealism, romanticism, modernism, Russian acmeism and postmodernism.¹ Karen Van Dyck places in one line Anghelaki –Rooke’s poetry with American Adriane Rich and Anne Sexton, Irish Eavan Boland, sees the hidden romantic Solomos, Porfyras, Malakakis, finds the footprints of Cavafis, Karouzos, Fostieris, and listens to the echoes of Pushkin, Heaney and small-talks with Kiki Dimoula, Rea Galanaki and other Greek women poets (Anghelaki-Rooke 2008: 9-21).

¹ We would like to add to the list one more poetic dialogue with Anna Akhmatova, an acmeist writer at the beginning of her fame. We’d rather not speak here of the influence but the atmosphere of the circulation of the ideas.

When giving birth to the poem Anghelaki- Rooke is like having made a life-length trip underground with Dante full of sorrow and puts inside the stanza with the intonation of Akhmatova:

Only God knows
From what amount of tears
Comes uncontrolled
The verve of death... (Anghelaki- Rooke 1999: 73)

The music sounds in unison with the words of Akhmatova:

If only you knew what trash gives rise
To verse, without a tinge of shame.... (Akhmatova 2000: 13)

One more poem of Rooke “The third summer or the catastrophe” is full of the anticipation of the inevitable storm to come which she depicts in the furniture getting mad just as it is written by Akhmatova in her “Three autumns” where the rain is coming as if to bring death (Anghelaki- Rooke 1998: 154-156). Nature, myth and gender play a big role in depicting the feelings and the inner world of the authors, as well as time and memory theme. The inscription of memory as a connection to the past and sorrow is common for the two writers. All these poetic interconnections can be a basis for the further critical analysis.

Turning now to the three philosophical points and the illustrative texts of different years to prove our speculations concerning some philosophical traces in them.

I/ the Soul

In *Phaedrus 1981*, probably written during one of her trips to America the poetess draws an archaic picture framed into the modern world: “high on the rocks instead of the eagles nests the steel houses of the rich”. She depicts “an America poisoned with matter” using the word «φαρμακωμένη» probably hinting on Socrates biography (Anghelaki- Rooke 1998: 112-113):

Here in an America
Poisoned by matter
The day was adorned
With ancient beauty
And an unexpected
Representative of Plato,
Classically proportioned,
Was reciting his soul
To a lame woman who had learned
Passion from the evergreens.

By the end of his life Socrates was arrested as *goes* or *pharmakeus* (trans. as “charlatan”, “magician”, “ wizard”) that had to use *pharmacon* (*medicine, drug or poison*) in the end. Jacques Derrida noted in his *Dissemination* that Socrates in the dialogues of Plato “often has the face of *pharmakeus*” (Derrida 1989: 117-119). This is the name Diotima gave to Eros” thus deconstructing the role of Socrates giving him a new role of a magician of *logos* with his philosophical contemplation of pure ideas through the desire for the eternally beautiful, who is “neither god nor man, neither immortal nor mortal, neither living nor dead”. Also, it doesn’t seem to be an accident that Rooke uses the phrase «φαρμακωμένη από την ύλη» (poisoned by the matter) in her text. Aristotle used the word «ύλη» for something that underlies change of form, *receives* actuality from form, but has no activity or actuality in itself, like Plato considered the matter to be a substrate adversarial to the things’ ideas. Socrates took cicuta to change the form, to poison his body in order to set his soul free from it and go back to the magical world of true ideas.

Mark Edmundson marks that “Socrates’ systematic philosophy <...> sublimates the accidental into the essential”². May it be the method a poetess uses while writing? Let’s see closer.

This makes us think about a hidden hint inside the poem of Anghelaki –Rooke who continues to play with the words and to knit the intricate intrigue around one of the most famous of Plato’s dialogues and “classically proportioned” Socrates’ protagonist figure inserting the love images:

And so there’s an age-old explanation

² The detailed interpretation of Derrida’s “Pharmacy” in conjunction with Platonic notions can be seen in Edmundson, Mark (1995). *Literature against philosophy. Plato to Derrida. A defence of poetry*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 82

For the uncontained sorrow of love
When, frenzied and blind,
The soul labors to grow wings.
The bones oscillate,
The air cavities are filled
By a different substance; an
Image takes shape on the fibres..

The “image” shapes while penetrating into “a different substance” that makes the wings grow in this combination of Ludos and Eros, as we would call it. In Socrates’ speech on the forth type of obsession we read: When “the soul <...> is beginning to grow wings <...> she admits a flood of particles streaming therefrom- that is why we speak of ‘flood of passion’- whereby she is warmed and fostered; then has she respite from her anguish, and is filled with joy” (Plato 1973: 497-498). Besides, Plato depicts in a form of a myth the impression the subject of beauty gives to a lover’s body by making the soul grow wings, while watching:

The roots of wings grow strong,
The feathers multiply,
And the immortal monkey of infinity
Gains new heavens with every kiss.

Here we will make a small stop. The prehistory of the statement above about the monkey of infinity goes back to Aristotle's *On Generation and Corruption*, *Metaphysics* and Cicero's *De natura deorum*, making it “immortal” through Pascal and Swift and then, after making circle, finally towards the beginning of the 20th century, through Émile Borel with the concept of "dactylographic monkeys" in her book on the theory of probability (1909) where she states that “a monkey hitting keys at random on a typewriter keyboard for an infinite amount of time will almost surely type a given text in Bibliothèque nationale de France (National Library)”. The latter the English eventually replaced by all collected works of William Shakespeare while using the phrase. By the end of the XXth century the theory resurrected in *the Simpsons* and *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, plays, short-stories, monkey Java simulator and even the true experiment in the zoo in 2003. Still, the immortality of Rooke’s monkey probably has to do a lot with an essay *The Total Library* (1939) written by Jorge Luis Borges where he adds in the footnote to the theorem that "strictly speaking, one immortal monkey would suffice” i.e. suggesting that to insist on both infinities is excessive (Borges 2001: 215).

In this context, “an age-old explanation/ for the uncontained sorrow of love/” from Anghelaki- Rooke’s viewpoint can be the random combinations of feelings, like letters typed by an immortal monkey, that for real are totally homogeneous and their possible arrangements only differ in names and order we endow to them. The dualistic picture opens to us: the ‘mechanization’ of the soul in constant “motion” with all its cavities that “are filled by a different substance” as the reaction on a physical beauty along with the probability of its occasional impact on the monkey which can suddenly type something worth. Thus, the soul being immortal because it is moving, gives the movement to something else being moved by the latter. The monkey becomes immortal because of constant self –motion, typing random letters and punctuation signs with no end and no beginning. Plato seemingly says, in this concern: “All soul is immortal, for that which is ever in motion is immortal. But that which while imparting motion is itself moved by something else can cease to be in motion, and therefore can cease to live; it is only that which moves itself that never intermits its motion,

inasmuch as it cannot abandon its own nature; moreover this self-mover is the source and first principle of motion for all other things that are moved” (Plato 1978: 498). Now we have to go back to the text.

In the end the kisses stop. What happens next?

The soul loses its feathers
And the ecstasy ends
With the first leap,
The return to the divine chariot
Is cancelled
And the work of resurrection
Remains incomplete.

Again Anghelaki- Rooke plays with philosophical notions of Plato, the notion of struggle of rational and affective, lower and higher beginnings, the idea of immortality, kinds of the souls and the body that drags the spirit downwards. The return to the divine chariot and staying among the divine souls “remains incomplete”, because of the impossibility to be One with the beloved being. So, the soul starts losing its feathers. Once the soul is parted from her beloved and “ become parched, the openings of those outlets at which the wings are sprouting dry up likewise and are closed, so that the wing’s germ is barred off. And behind its bars, together with the flood aforesaid, it throbs like a fevered pulse, and pricks at its proper outlet, and threat the whole soul round about is stung and goaded into anguish; howbeit she remembers the betty of her beloved, and rejoices again”(Plato 1978: 498). Here and further on, into the idealistic basis of the teachings of Plato enters dualism, a thesis about the antithesis of body and soul. The traces of it we find in another poem of Anghelaki –Rooke, “Fluffy things” (Anghelaki – Rooke 2008: 87):

...to free it
From the prison of the flesh
So it can be reunited
For no reason
With all the fluffy things that fly ...

The theme of body goes through the majority of the texts of Rooke. According to Orphics and Pythagoreans the body is considered to be a prison of soul, and the soul – the immortal substance (that coincides with the idea formulated by Plato in his “*Phaedo*”). In *Phaedrus* the extraterranian origin of the soul is told in a form of myth about its “wingful” nature and its fall onto the earth and its following transformations inside a body.³

The poem ends with the dawning of the day and a renewed image of “the middle-aged woman”, probably that very “lame woman” we have seen in the beginning of the poem who “had learned/ passion from the evergreens”. It can be the mirror reflection of a probable sexual affair with changing of the sex of the protagonist from male into female one and creating the female perception of the Plato’s text by putting it into conditions of modernity. The author deconstructs the image of *Phaedrus* itself, turns it from a young boy into a middle-

³ In this concern, Page duBoios speaks out an interesting thought of Plato’s positioning of a woman in *Phaedrus*. The body of a woman comes out to be an unfortunate material necessity while the real philosophy penetrates and gives birth to true ideas through the mind and “avoids the passage through the female’s body” (Page duBoios (1993). “Sewing the bodies: metaphors of the female bodies in ancient Greece” in *Ritual, power and the body: historical perspectives on the representation of Greek women*, ed. C. Nadia Seremetakis NY: Pella Company, p. 92)

aged woman and on the contrary makes Plato be a youngster. Or visa versa. It is not quite clear who is who; the author vigorously destabilizes the gender:

In the cement- walled park
Te impassioned day bleeds
And the middle- aged woman
With the image of the young lover
Freshly engraved on her breast
Digs a crypt in the earth
To bury herself.

In the end, Anghelaki –Rooke marries the philosophical notions with the gender theme and the motif of sorrow and non- shared love, i.e. with agenda themes frequently noticed in the “women’s poetry”. In this respect, E. Douka- Kabitoglou notes: “The emotional desolation of women locked in regrettable relations surfaces constantly in poetry where we find references to a buried self and poetic power, both in danger of disappearing under the multiple pressures of gender roles” (Kabitoglou 1998: 19-47).

2/ the Mimesis

The above mentioned tendency of role change has also to do with the Aristotelian notions of imitation and representation, copy and original. It is notable here that Karen Van Dyke, in parallel with Anghelaki –Rooke’s one, outlines imitation in *The Cake* of Rea Galanaki that also has to do with rather unclear change of gender roles in the fist two parts of the book, so that we cannot understand where male or female part is, besides the researcher stresses on post-surrealistic source of Galanaki’s inspiration explaining this phenomenon (Dyck 1998:153-154).

In Anghelaki – Rooke’s “Monastic” with deal with two kinds of mimesis (Anghelaki –Rooke 2008: 74):

And as the polar bear
With her body’s fat vision
Endures the cold by imitating death
In her frozen hole,
the monk’s soul
In the grey sack of his mind
Imitates the absolute
In order to endure life.

Here we deal with platonic mimesis as imitative, pale image or imperfect copy of accurately representable Being where the soul is again the prisoner of body and Reason because it is obliged to imitate in order not to notice the limits of life. Somewhere between art and reality, Rooke carries the image of mimicry through the imitative character of the soul, - a polar bear, who imitates death. The author is searching for her own truth using strategic essentialism, the concept of postcolonial and feminist theory, that articulates the ideological formation (which constructs a woman) “by measuring silences into the object of investigation” .The term was coined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and later interpreted by Luce Irigaray (Spivak 1988: 271-313). Creating the new language and presenting a new imperfect image of Yanousa-bear, she undermines the stereotype and breaks the silence. Yanousa wants to know how it is to be a man, to be in his shoes, to imitate him in order to

understand and obtain knowledge. From the male side, Plato himself speaks to us through the voice of Socrates, thus being reflection of the latter, imitating his thoughts and imagining his probable reactions. Another example is Socrates' speaking from the name of Diotima in Symposium and in this aspect Page's deBois characterization of Plato's phallic position does not coincide and, moreover, surprisingly seems to be antithetic. This situation can be characterized by the words of an Italian feminist Adriana Cavarero who reflects on the image of Diotima in Plato's dialogues: "Femininity itself belongs structurally to Socrates and Plato's philosophy. In other words, the works of Plato and Socrates seem marked by mimetic desire for female experience. The pregnant, birth-giving male, like the male who practices midwifery, stands as an emblematic figure of true philosophy" (Cavarero 1995: 92).

Now going back to the theme of the body. Adriana Cavarero through the prism of symbolic metaphor of Penelope used in *Phaedo* marks the absurd in undoing what Penelope is weaving from the philosophical point: "The soul of philosophic man will reason as follows: if it is the task of philosophy to untie the soul from the body, then the soul itself, untied from the body should not return to prior pleasures and pains, nor deliver itself to their chains, thereby doing Penelope's endless task, as she weaves and unweaves her cloth. Rather it should secure protection from these, by following discourse [*logismos*] and always keeping within it, by contemplating truth, the divine and what is not in appearance, and being nurtured by it." The soul constantly unties from the body in order to contemplate the pure ideas and waits for the ultimate untying originated in death. Women, however, are unaware of the untying the body from the soul (that is the true philosophy), but weave together what philosophers have undone (Cavarero 1995: 11-31).

What we see in the cycle of the poems the Penelope's symbol is used ("Penelope says", "The Suitors", "the Other Penelope") is precisely the deconstruction of these contradictory actions. Rooke's Penelope of our times decides not to weave, but to write, "Writing something/ erasing and being erased/under the weight of the word" in order to "cut with words the threads that bind" ("Penelope says"). She feels "absence from her life" leaving her body to write all the sorrow, untying the soul in order to reach her original nostalgic home full of Odysseus's love. She doesn't long for immortality, though death is not a threat to her. She is contemplating, separating philosophy from the body only for a while, reaching "the essence of (her)self by waiting" ("The Suitors").

In another poem *Iphigenia's refusal*, Anghelaki - Rooke almost like ancient Stesichorus⁴ rewrites the myth of Iphigenia, who refuses to sacrifice herself in the name of Trojan War, and thus prevents it: "Iphigenia refused. /for love, she said" (Anghelaki- Rooke 1997: 141). We find the three lines of ancient Palinode in Phaedrus where Socrates changes his mind and speech into another stream, to "the poetical figures", being afraid of blindness the god *Eros* can send to him for the previous words. She did it "for those who have once begun the heavenward pilgrimage may not go down again to darkness and the journey beneath the earth, but they live in light always; happy companions in their pilgrimage, and when the time comes at which they receive their wings they have the same plumage because of their love"- this is the way Plato is using poetry in prose in to praise the divine power of *Eros* in one of his best Socrates' speeches.

Anghelaki - Rooke rewrites the women stereotypes but in non-aggressive way, enduring them with strength and independent opinion, bringing them from the supplementary to the same historical role the male always played. These rewritings of past literary *topoi* in

⁴ There is no truth in that story,
You didn't ride in the well-rowed galleys,
You didn't reach the walls of Troy.
Palinode, Plato *Phaedrus*. 243a

nostalgic notes seem to go hand in contemporary feminist tendencies. (See “Magdalene, the vast mammal” as well as the above mentioned Penelope poetic cycle).

3/ the Cave

In her texts Rooke dwells near the eternal. The immortality of the soul, untouched by death, has already removed death from the dimensions of life and leaves it to the body.

In the poem “The Mystic” the poetess starts observing the transformations of the cave she descends following the mystic in white clothing, “a sponsor of unanswered questions” and there stands another creature -the “defrayer of incomprehensible”. The author tells us that she “has skipped something very important before [she] was born by time and day” and to understand why it happened so, she ought to walk all the way down the cave which “instead of a mouth had a sky-hole” and to get the answer from the creature, or an oracle, let us put it so.

We remember from Plato, that the walls of the cave are the sky and the fire up the heads of the cave’s inhabitants is the symbol of the Sun., the things outside the cave are the ideas, and the sun outside the cave is not the man’s hand-making. According to Plato, while coming out of the cave a man is able to comprehend the incomprehensible and to change if his eyes are ready for the sun light and the soul is strong (Plato 1992).

“We went out from the caves
And it was as if I was born again
Out of stones and soil”⁵.

In the Cave the consciousness, mind and the logic give way to hearing, touch, instinct and intuition. But we know that according to the teachings of Plato, the world of things perceived through the senses, is not true: sensible things continually arise and disappear, change and move, there is nothing lasting, perfect and true. Driven by great power of knowledge author finally understands what she has skipped, something that was missing and took her far away from the comprehension of the self. Thus she obtains παιδεία (Heidegger). The oracle “with the metal eyes - teeth” makes her remember it through “half- punishment, half- blessing”, using the function of remembrance of the soul. Finally, in half-mythological, half-religious interpretation of the Platonic cave (on every orthodox icon on Christmas we see the cave shining with “the great light” that reminds about the atonement of sins with the Christ’s birth; the salvation, the way out) the heroine comes to know that ἀλήθεια (all the uncovered, not hidden) is not the past, but a historically fulfilled present.

The Poetics of Aristotle in the light of neo-platonic interpretation by Kant, Goethe and others assumes that Aristotle tried to restore the prestige of the poetry by putting it in one line with the philosophical footing. Anghelaki –Rooke when mixing up the philosophical issues with the feminine question shows a new interdisciplinary side that poetry acquire through these transformations. The words of Plato reechoing in the female voice get a new pattern. In this context, modern poetry can no longer be seen as imitative reality, but it is constructing and taking part in this reality. It balances between philosophy, sociology, psychology, religion, science in general, without subordination to them, untying our souls while reading for at least one more moment.

⁵ Own translation. from Anghelaki – Rooke (1999:153-157)

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