When art criticism meets poetry: the case of Eleni Vakalo (1921-2001)

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Eleni Vakalo, a major Greek poet and art critic, contributed in a unique way to Greek letters and culture during the second half of the twentieth century. Born in Constantinople in 1921, Vakalo was raised in Athens where she lived until her death in 2001. She studied history and archaeology at the University of Athens and history of art in Paris. In collaboration with her husband, the painter and stage-designer George Vakalo, and a group of painters and art editors, in 1958 Eleni Vakalo founded the "Vakalo" School of Decorative Arts, where she taught art history for many years. She published many books of poetry and art, she had a regular column for art criticism in the newspaper *Τα Νέα* for 23 years, and she produced a series of radio programmes for the arts (1953-57). In 1965 she toured the United States at the invitation of the State Department and in the summer of 1967 she was invited to take part in the Harvard International Seminar. In Greece, she was awarded many prizes, including the first state prize for poetry in 1991 and the Academy of Athens award for the whole of her work in 1997, and in 1998 she became honorary professor in the School of History and Archaeology in the University of Thessaloniki.

Both with her critical essays and with her poetry Vakalo aspired to establish a new vision of things. However, the innovative nature of her work and the importance of her contribution were not fully appreciated in her time. In Greek literary tradition there have been many cases of poets or prose-writers who published excellent critical essays on literature and the arts, such as E. Roidis in the nineteenth century, and K. Varnalis, O. Elytis, N.

Kalas and G. Seferis, among others, in the twentieth century. In the case of Vakalo, however, art criticism was not limited to a side activity in relation to her poetry; on the contrary, it constituted an autonomous activity, equally important in quality and quantity of production. As a result, critics of her work did not approach it as a whole, but studied its two aspects separately. However, at a closer look, her poetry and her art criticism form a continuum as they are deeply interrelated through a unique and coherent worldview. Certain key-issues that concern her entire oeuvre are, for instance, the body, all its separate senses, movement, perception, consciousness, reality and illusion, vision and blindness, embodied knowledge etc. Moreover, Vakalo expected from readers of her poetry exactly what she expected from viewers of any work of art, i.e. that they should become subtly involved in the process of co-producing the artwork or the poetic text (D 1975, 1989, 1999).[1] In the case of her poetry this expectation is evident on the micro-level of the language practices employed (Kakavoulia 2004).

Systematically avoiding any trace of academic scholasticism, Vakalo wrote some path-breaking essays on art and its reception such as *The modern spirit in art* (D 1959), *The meaning of forms: Readings of art* (D 1975), *From the side of the viewer* (D 1989), *The loss of form within space* (D 1994), *Modern – Postmodern: Links and Distances* (D 2001).[2] She placed great emphasis on the role of the receiver in the artistic process, long before similar theories had gained currency in Greece or elsewhere (D 1959). In this sense, Vakalo acted as a precursor of a fruitful dialogue between cultural ideas and theoretical issues discussed in various European countries. Her contribution in this direction has only recently been fully acknowledged (Kotidis 1999, Kakavoulia 2004). She is the first theorist in Greece to consciously use the term "simulation" in order to describe the dynamics developing

[1] A bibliography of selected works of Vakalo, arranged in four sections – A, B, C and D – is given at the end of this article. References to her works are given by section and date.

[2] The translations of the titles of her theoretical books are mine. None of these books has been translated into English.

between viewer and work of art; and the first to talk about a theory of reception – already in 1959 – as a complex communicative, cognitive and emotive phenomenon that presupposes the creative role of the viewer, as the title of her book, *Από την πλευρά του θεατή* (D 1989), indicates. She studies the artwork well beyond its aesthetic properties.

The term "simulation" denotes a key innovative idea in Vakalo's essays (Kakavoulia 2004: 68-73). Simulation, a technical term used in cybernetics since the 1940s (Wiener 1948), is conventionally defined as the production of replicas of real phenomena, and it is related to imitation and substitution (Baudrillard 1979, Barthes 1972).[3] Vakalo's simulation, however, diverges from this current meaning. It refers to the perceiving process in which the viewer, directed by the specific morphological and structural features of the artwork, unconsciously employs a mental (and imaginary) repetition of the (imagined) movements and actions of the artist. The interaction that takes place between artistic form and viewer is a complex phenomenon, a creative decoding grounded at a first, basic level in a processing of sensory, visual stimuli. The author stresses that the reception of an artwork involves a whole range of sensory motor, visual, mental and affective processes:

> Seeing and perceiving visual forms is in itself not a simple process. In reality what we see are "shapes" which we assimilate with already familiar figures and we attribute to them features similar to those stemming from our own experience.
>
> (D 1989: 23, my translation)

This process may be described as dynamic: the viewer perceives an art object with his visual brain, his imagination and his memory. This process varies from one viewer to another, and it is here that the subjective nature of the reception of an artwork comes into play. This was an entirely new departure, when Vakalo

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[3] One should not forget the poetic "simulations", experiments with poetic language written by the two major surrealists A. Breton and P. Eluard in their book *L'Immaculée Conception* (1930).

first began to expound her theoretical views, in the Greece of the 1970s. Echoing Lakoff and Johnson's (1999) more recent notion of "embodied knowledge", Vakalo insists on the priority of the senses and the body itself in the process of a meaningful decoding of the artwork. Simulation is therefore used as an umbrella term that encompasses both the subjective experience of viewing and its socio-cognitive presuppositions. Simulation, then, is conceived of as a mega-function of "understanding" (reception) and of response:

> With simulation we enrich and discover the wealth of ourselves along with the wealth of art. And when this potential wealth in ourselves is evoked through a function of responding to the work of art, then new cognitive fields are opened up for the viewers who are thus enabled to further explore and produce associations related to their own experiences, associations based however on the limits and the terms of the work of art itself.
>
> (D 1999: 32, my translation)

A visual analogy employed by Vakalo in order to shed light on the precise meaning of simulation is that of the rider who has to become one with the horse if proper rapid motion is to be achieved (D 1975). In this image, Vakalo clearly shifts the emphasis from artist to viewer, by assigning to the latter the role of co-creator. The author traces the same phenomenon of both psychic and kinetic coordination ("συντονισμός") in primitive communities, where the magic realm of all rituals used mimetic identification through dance and movement (D 1975: 44-7, 96).

Vakalo's reception and response theory, grounded in the key notion of simulation as a general, though not specified in depth, theoretical framework of an aesthetic theory, meets with divergent approaches, such as Gestalt morphology,[4] Arnheim's theory of

[4] Gestalt theorists in Germany proposed already in the early twentieth century the notion of active, creative and subjective visual perception (Gregory 1998), agreeing with Merleau-Ponty that "to see means always more than just seeing".

visual perception (1954),[5] similar theories of reception proposed by Eco and Iser (Kakavoulia 2004: 93-124), theories of "sympathy"/"Einfühlung" (Krieger 1992),[6] and late cognitive (Lakoff and Johnson 1999) or more recent neurocognitive theories of perception of the visual arts (Zeki 1999). She explores the communicative nature of the viewer-artist interaction, the transition from sensory stimuli to perceptual awareness, suggesting that the viewer is not a passive receiver, but an active creative-"reader" of any artwork. Ahead of her time in making such statements (D 1959, 1975), Vakalo thus acquired the status of a precursor of interdisciplinary approaches to questions of reception and response.

As one of Vakalo's central concerns in theory, the subjective experience of viewing, but formulated by "the terms of the work of art itself", enters her poetry too in the form of visual metaphors and visual associations. Familiar space is constantly transformed by the strong imagination of an emotive viewer who operates on the basis of simulation, i.e. by assimilating what is new or unknown to one's already familiar or known figures and forms. Driven by morphological or image-schematic features, the poetic self, through an associative look at the world around, transforms what s/he sees into what s/he fears, longs for, wishes etc. Such is the case, for instance, of the image of sparrow-mouse in *Genealogy* (A 1971):

> Looking at a sparrow it seemed to me
> Often the sparrow seems to me like a quick grey mouse as it
> goes by, there is no great difference, nimble, beautiful the mouse
> too which we are afraid of, this is why we do not see
> how much they resemble birds
>
> (A 1971: 9)

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[5] Expounded in detail in his book *Art and visual perception: The psychology of creative vision* (1954).

[6] Edmund Burke in his treatise "Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful" (1757) is the first to translate as "sympathy" the German term *Einfühlung*, which was first used in the seventeenth century (Krieger 1992).

Through the subjective lens of imagination, the sparrow is assimilated to a mouse. Simulation is also at work here. The image of bird merges with the image of mouse as these two creatures share similar features (shape, form, movement, colour). The poet characterizes the mouse as "nimble" and "beautiful", exploring thereby the dark areas of fear. This type of visual metamorphosis is a recurrent theme throughout her poetry. Images stay for a while in the foreground and they soon fade away, replaced by other images; a universe of image transformations gives movement to the poems.

As a poet, Eleni Vakalo appeared for the first time with the publication of 15 poems in the periodical *Νέα Γράμματα* in March 1944, while she was still a student of archaeology at the University of Athens.[7] Vakalo is typically classified among the so-called first post-war generation of poets, along with M. Sachtouris, T. Sinopoulos, N. Valaoritis, M. Aravantinou, N. D. Karouzos and others (Vitti 1989: 430, Argyriou 1986). In her fifty-year presence (1944-1997) on the Greek literary and cultural scene she published 14 collections of poetry and three volumes of collected poems.[8]

Scholars and critics who attempted to map the poetic scene in post-war Greece found it difficult to categorize and classify the poets of this generation according to distinct movements, groups or schools (Savvidis 1982, Argyriou 1986, Menti 1995, Bakogiannis 2000). The social milieu and the socio-political situation, political activism, the strong influence of the generation of the thirties, as well as the influence of foreign poetry, played major and divergent roles in each case. In particular, the relationship of the first post-war generation to the generation of the thirties was the hot issue of debate among critics and scholars (Politou-

[7] Argyriou (1986: 103) writes that these first poems use a non-conventional "austere" language. In the same year (1944), and in the same periodical, the great post-surrealist poet Miltos Sachtouris also published a number of poems for the first time.

[8] See selected publications of Vakalo at the end of the present article.

Marmarinou 1982, Ziras 1982, Kechagioglou 1982, Argyriou 1979, 1986, and others).

However, one should not forget the important role the poets of the first generation played in the Greek post-war literary tradition: they opened up a polyphonic space for poetry and poetic innovation, they felt free to selectively use tradition or even modernist symbolism, they focused on experience rather than ideology or national identity anxieties. The language they used was the "common urban demotic" (κοινή αστική δημοτική) (Belezinis 1988: 102) with many prosaic elements. Vakalo has often been classified as a post-surrealist poet, or even a neo-surrealist poet (Meraklis 1987, Arseniou 2003), but these labels are not accurate in her case. Her poetry cannot be classified as strictly belonging to any post-war poetic movement, tendency or school (Anagnostaki 1962). Dallas (2000) correctly considers Vakalo's poetry as closely related to that of M. Sachtouris and E. Gonatas. Some minor principles she shares with surrealism, but she never used automatic writing or free association, or explored the notion of the unconscious. Vakalo – like other poets of her generation – wanted a language of poetry that bears no sentimentalist or nostalgic overtones, no confessional and self-centred rhetoric. The title of the collective edition of her poetry, *Before Lyricism* (B 1981), hints indirectly at her reaction against emotive poetry steeped in sentiment. Her views become more explicit in an interview:

> I think that my childhood experiences were crucial to my poetry. When we went to parties to the country, everyone would become lyrical. That was exasperating to me. I thought that in speaking about my mother, for example, I should never use lyrical expressions. I spoke simply of "my mother" and those words contained everything, my mother herself, my feelings for her, my description of her. And I wanted in just the same way to say "tree" or "sea" and for them to be there, complete, enclosed in their names. A poem is not a retrospective act of memory: it is made up of features formed in our common roots, in our own elementary behavior. It is a conscious reworking of mythology. (A 1971)

The need to write poetry without linguistic pretensions was a major quest of the post-war generation. The raw material for poetry is everyday language. For Vakalo poetry has a common root with ordinary speech, with simple language, and this is why the author denounces a poetic, over-constructed, posturing language. As Friar (1982: 42) says, "Vakalo uses language distrustingly, like a child learning to speak." By discarding what she calls a "lyrical sense of the world" (λυρική αίσθηση του κόσμου), Vakalo is concerned with the meaning of poetry itself. She hopes that the word may become the thing itself, and, along with Marianne Moore, the only poet she ever translated (Vakalo 1958), she is cautious about overcharging things with more emotion than they generate. Vakalo longs to render the "rhythm" in poetic language rather than "harmony" or "melody". Her views on what is poetry and what is poetic are equally unorthodox, unconventional. For her, poetry is everywhere as long as we can see it. We only need to open our eyes to see it, as she herself said in a radio interview given to M. Mitras (3rd Radio Programme, 1992):

> I must say that my opinion goes beyond a conventional concept, a given and established view of poetry. But this is what I really believe in and what I have fought for... that poetry is everywhere, even in the most common things. We don't need to seek for this "magic" by escaping from things. We need to discover it in all things surrounding us, that's the whole issue."
>
> (my translation)

Poetry is, thus, not a closed code, a specific idiom for specialists; poetry does not concern or address only an initiated audience. Most characteristic in Vakalo's poetic universe is a dialogic interchange between seemingly opposed entities or situations of things. Nothing vanishes or dies, but everything undergoes a series of transformations as one thing takes the place of its opposite. Up becomes down, within becomes without, danger, fear or death are the other faces of salvation, the world outside takes the form of the world inside, touching is seeing, pain or madness is wise knowledge, innocence is power, illness is the reverse triumph of

life itself. As seen from above the sky, a tree is alive, bears fruits and leaves, but as seen from beneath the earth in a dark mirror reflection, its roots plunge as deeply below as its branches grow high above, and it becomes thus a tree of genealogy, "a tree of individual and racial history" (Friar 1982: 39). In *The manner of our endangering* (A 1966) a tree becomes a raft, the sky becomes the sea, a fish becomes a bird. The poetic self constantly changes angles, whether outside the sea looking in or inside the sea looking out. Space expands, boundaries disappear and a continuous communication, a perpetuum mobile, flows between all things.

The nature of her language with its missing punctuation and conjunctions, its truncated and distorted syntax, the use of nouns, few verbs and even fewer adjectives, conceals an internal rhythm operating at the level of the sentence, requiring the reader to become closely involved in the production of meaning through an act of decoding, thereby making him/her, in essence, a co-creator of the poetry (Kakavoulia 2004: 178-90). Vakalo plays with syntax and word order, punctuation and hidden rhythmic structures. This is similar to the way in which a viewer has to become a co-creator of an artefact if its perception is to be effective and satisfactory. To mention an example from her poetry, the active involvement of the reader is achieved by the awakening of forgotten rhythmic structures inherent in the broader culture that the reader and the individual poem share (such as the fifteen-syllable line, in the wider Greek poetic context). Such is the case in the following extract from the collection *Events and stories of Kyra Rodalina* (1984: 248):[9]

> Κάποια φορά συνέτυχε να γίνουν έτσι όλα. Η κυρά Ροδαλίνα διάβαζε καθισμένη στο παγκάκι του κήπου, κι ήταν ωραίο απόγεμα, τα χόρτα κυματίζανε που ελαφρά τα έπιανε γλυκός χλιός αέρας περνώντας έτσι χαμηλά, κι εκείνη σα να έπλεε, σα να ήταν να μην ήτανε [...]. Και επειδή εκείνος πρίγκηπας ο πρίγκηπας που δεν ήταν σε θέση να καταλάβει, επιθυμία

[9] Those of Vakalo's poems that have not been published in English translation will be quoted in Greek.

> ακάτεχη εσύνεχε στο νου του το τίποτα με τα πολλά και λίγα θα
> του μείνουν, της Ροδαλίνας διάλεξε να πει το όνομά της. Κι
> εκείνη τον αγάπησε·

Well "hidden" in continuous text is a series of eight-syllable or fifteen-syllable lines. If we break down the visual continuum of the written text, some rhythmical metric structures emerge, revealing fifteen-syllable (iambic) verses and eight-syllable half-verses:

1 fifteen-syllable verse:
Κάποια φορά συνέτυχε να γίνουν έτσι όλα

1 eight-syllable half-verse:
τα χόρτα κυματίζανε

1 fifteen-syllable verse:
που ελαφρά τα έπιανε γλυκός χλιός αέρας

3 eight-syllable half-verses:
περνώντας έτσι χαμηλά,
κι εκείνη σα να έπλεε,
σα να ήταν να μην ήτανε,

3 fifteen-syllable verses:
επιθυμία ακάτεχη εσύνεχε στο νου του
το τίποτα με τα πολλά και λίγα θα του μείνουν
της Ροδαλίνας διάλεξε να πει το όνομά της.

1 eight-syllable half verse:
Κι εκείνη τον αγάπησε·

The textual disguise of the metrical and stylistic identity of verses is mainly achieved by visual means, i.e. by the continuous printed form of the text on the page. Vakalo – like other poets of her generation – selectively and unconventionally uses metre and rhyme in free verse, a practice already introduced by

the poets of the generation of the thirties in Greece (Daniel 1999, Afroudakis 1987). [10]

From a different angle, the interplay between reality and illusion is the central issue both in the first period (1954-1966) and in the second period (1971-1997) of her poetic production. Already in *The forest* (A 1954) Vakalo explores the reverse of vision, i.e. blindness as an allegory of vision and – at a second level – as an allegory of poetry itself. In the poem "My father's eye" she playfully poses the question of what the difference is between a real and a glass eye, since glass eyes can also fill with tears:

> My father had a glass eye.
>
> He would toss the eye in his hand before he wore it and would say it was a good eye.
> But I did not want to believe him [...]
>
> At last one day I saw him weeping. There was no difference at all from a real eye.
>
> (C 1985: 129-30)

The father actually wears the false eye. The glass eye, a cold simulacrum, bears no difference to a real eye when it comes to feeling pain and crying. What is then the value of the eye, of seeing before pain? It is doubted: "After this episode with my father / I became suspicious even of those who had real eyes" (C 1985: 131). The real eye, just as the glass eye, can equally carry an empty expression. In both cases, the absence of what is seen is equally cruel. Empty eyes have long been a literary topos for both artists and poets. Baudelaire, for instance, was one of those who wrote of empty eyes that have lost their ability to look. Melpo Axioti (1905-1973), the Greek modernist poet and novelist of the

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[10] In particular, in Vakalo's early collections (A 1945, 1948, 1940) we trace, on more than one level of her poetic language, the influence of "παραλογές" (ballads), a special type of folk song. "Paraloyes" also seem to be a source of influence and inspiration for Sachtouris (Hatzivassileiou 1994).

1930s, also wrote of a false (ψεύτικο) eye in her novella *Would you like to dance, Maria?* (1940[1], 1982). Yannis, one of the main characters of this surrealist novella, takes out his fake eye every night:

> Και κάθε νύχτα ο Γιάννης, την ώρα που σωπαίνουνε οι λύκοι μέσα στα αδιάβατα χαντάκια της ζωής, έμπαινε μέσα σ' εκείνο το σπίτι, κι *έβγαζε το ψεύτικο μάτι του*. Το μάτι, μακριά απ' το Γιάννη, καθώς στερήθηκε απότομα εκείνη *την έκφραση τη δανεική*, έστεκε τώρα ακίνητο, σαν χάρτινο δαδί αναμμένο.
>
> (Axioti 1982: 44)

Even though Vakalo and Axioti wrote in two different periods, they share the surrealist symbol of the fake, false eye. They both point to the illusion of vision as the sense that leads to things themselves, to one's deeper truths. Vakalo goes even further, choosing blindness as one of her favourite allegories of vision. Particularly in the collection *The meaning of the blind* (A 1962), she explores the symbolism of blindness. How does blindness relate to knowledge, intuition and – at a second level – to poetry itself? She challenges the metaphoric equivalence I SEE = I KNOW, established as one of the major cognitive metaphors of western tradition (Yu 1998, Kakavoulia 2004: 36-45), proposing instead the metaphoric equivalence I TOUCH, I HEAR, I FEEL = I KNOW. The author suggests that true and deep knowledge can be reached by attending to senses or emotions other than only vision: touching, hearing, feeling; and even further, she proposes that the experience of pain, painful emotional growth, or breaking the barriers of rationality can reveal the true sense of things.[11] The collection *The meaning of the blind* starts with a blind person enclosed in a room, trying to find a way out by touching things:

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[11] Characteristic is the poem "Ox eyes" from the collection *Genealogy* (A 1971) which ends with the following: "This is the truth, I tell you, you can see it, often, given the frenzy and the pain" (A 1971: 69).

The first hours spent in the poem by the blind
From the journal of the poem

They place me in a room

From the volume of silence I can hear that it is not yet
boundless night
when I shall go out through this house's door with no one to
forestall my footstep
Once I shall find this house's door wide open, I shall discover
where it is,
as when I touch things one by one along the wall, it is through
changing their dimensions that I grow to know them
(C 1975: 75)

Here, we have to do with a creature in agony and danger who is fighting to survive; a blind figure who knows the world by touching and hearing things, through shadows and darkness. The blind person is the man of touch and hearing, of poetry and emotion, of memory and imagination, just like other great blind people in western tradition have been (Borges, Milton, even Joyce). Blindness in *The meaning of the blind* is related to poets, prophets, seers and eventually comes to signify poetry itself in the poem "Their legend":

Great sleepwalking youths escape
They guess the poems, [...]
In the month of the bird crossings they hunt the bird of poetry
[...]
On their voice a shimmering landscape will rest above all
colours
He who counts in the alphabet of that cry floated by the passing
of peoples through the desert
Danger sinking my voice like a standing rod before I slip, it has
been heard, it shall be heard each night through the
openings of the air
and not the cypress tree is clasped as tightly by shade's body
(C 1975: 77)

This hyper-image of the sleep-walker, poet, seer, echoes the legendary blind figures of Greek antiquity: Homer, tragic Oedipus, Tiresias the seer. Blindness, poetry, oracles are all interrelated already from ancient times.[12] Vakalo's blind figure at the beginning of the poem is the one who has not been able to see yet, but by the end of the poem s/he manages to see the sun, to directly face the sunlight ("τώρα καθώς το μπορούσα/ κατάματα να βλέπω τον ήλιο"). However, making the luminous side of the world prevail is in itself a painful procedure;[13] Vakalo's sun is surrounded by darkness, it is a black or dark-rimmed sun, an "all black sun" (A 1962).[14] This reminds one of the Platonic allegory of the cave, in which the ultimate knowledge of the idea of good is symbolized by the final moment of a difficult process when the subject is able to stare directly at the blinding sunlight itself.

In this collection of "great poetry", as Anagnostaki (1962) characterized *The meaning of the blind*, comparing it to the poetry of Solomos and Kalvos, vision, all that we can see, eventually makes us blind so that the visible becomes a blinding illusion. Poetry, therefore, is a way to see real, true life without illusions. Vakalo's blind person is not only the man of touch, but s/he is also the creature with a sensitive ear who can understand the birds from their sounds, their croakings and the beating of their wings in the poem "The blind often must tell children fairy tales" (C 1975: 79). In Vakalo's universe the bird and the blind figure are closely linked, they share an unfamiliar sense of space, a different

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[12] The grand narratives about blindness in western civilization, however, do not include myths about blind women, especially blind female seers or priestesses. Instead, one should note that blindness has been linked since the ancient myth of Oedipus with the father-son relationship (Kakavoulia 2004: 271-9).

[13] The sun with its round shape metonymically evokes the actual eyeball, while the eye has been referred to as the "ήλιοειδέστερον" (most sun-like) of all sensory organs.

[14] Light and darkness, brightness and shadow, often recur in the poems' imagery along with a lack of colours other than black, white, and the intermediate shades (grey, silver etc.), with the exception of a rare presence of red, the colour of blood, and green – the green of fresh grass (A 1997).

perception of the surrounding world: the blind by touching and hearing, the bird by flying and moving freely in space. A dominant symbol in this 1962 collection, the bird is variously and heterogeneously depicted as beautiful or terrible ("τρομερό"), alone or in groups, sitting in trees or beating its wings, or croaking, spreading a big threatening shadow on the earth below, attacking humans or struggling with the "rodent of foundations", appearing as a bird-mouse or bird-soul, a bird-fish. A major literary topos of cultural and religious symbolism, a universal Indoeuropean and archetypal symbol for the soul, the bird in Vakalo's poetry is not the naturalistic sparrow of demotic poetry or of lyrical tradition;[15] it is sometimes identified with the chaos of things (A 1962, Anagnostaki 1960), at times it is depicted as a threefold creature that partakes of the world of earth (A 1954, 1971), that of sea (A 1966), and that of sky (A 1962, 1971). A creature belonging to three worlds at the same time cannot but be identified with freedom and with poetry.

The passage from blindness to true vision is described as an agonizing fight between the blind man and the "lovely" but also fearsome bird. The (blind) poetic persona suffers as s/he hears the birds flying away in freedom, or feels them "pecking first at my eyes". The bird tortures the blind figure until the final fall:

The meaning of the blind

With its plucked head and its small piping voice
Coming quick from the throat
Crossing – how fast – the zones of time
It gradually fought me,
Bored nests throughout my body for its fellows
And I became a dwelling for wild birds
In the midst of a desolation

[15] Anagnostaki (1962) points out that the bird in Vakalo's poetry is far removed from the lyrical bird of folk songs. Daniel (2001), on the contrary, considers that the bird in this poetry does have its origins in demotic poetry.

> The lovely bird shall dwell there now
> Whilst the rodent in the foundations
> Lies curled in a tangle of respiration
>
> (C 1975: 81)

At the beginning of the collection the bird is black with no shadow, linked with the blind figure's agony to leave the dark room, to break free. Yet this freedom is a difficult freedom, almost unattainable, symbolized also by a bird at the end of the poem (ibid., p. 82):

> The birds were traps and nets for souls, they left no clear sky

With this ending Vakalo's poem meets a whole poetic tradition that gave priority to a Jungian "seeking of the soul", in which the bird and its metonymies (flying, wings etc.) symbolized the immaterial soul, the impossible freedom of flying. From fairy tales to Shakespeare and Keats's odes, birds are those earthly creatures that break free from boundaries in ways unattainable to humans. In Shelley's poetry birds symbolize the problematic position of the poet in society. Also, for the cursed poets Mallarmé and Baudelaire, birds such as swans became symbols of the isolated poet or the poet in exile, the rejected and cursed poet.

Moreover, in Modernism the bird as a mega-symbol was frequently identified with art itself, an idea that pervades Vakalo's identification of the blind power of poetry with a lovely and fearsome bird, both a salvation and a "trap for souls".[16] This explains perhaps why the bird first appears in the night, the allegoric night of blind poets. Vakalo wants to suspend the senses until – in utter silence – the ontic truth of the things emerges, the pulse of the world can be heard; she wants to return to poetry its actual meaning, which is linked to doing, "ποιεῖν". With her poetry, Vakalo attempted to reach that archaic world of instantaneous identification, where horse and rider are one continuous

[16] The interrelation of bird and poetry itself is an idea that reminds us of Vakalo's favourite modern painter, Georges Braque (1882-1963), and his picture series (*Atelier*) of bird-cavalettos.

movement, where word and object coincide, where to name a thing is to create it, where a poem must not *mean* but *be*.

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Eleni Vakalo's complete archive with letters, manuscripts, notebooks and other texts is in the Archive Catalogue of the Firestone Library at Princeton University, U.S.A. ["Helene Vakalo Papers (C 0835)"].