

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

October 26, 2009

Speaker: Foteini Tsalicoglou

Topic: “Margarita Karapanou, Madness, Creativity, and a Mother's Personal Letters to her Daughter”

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Stathis Gourgouris, Neni Panourgia, Constantine Tsoucalas, Nikki Leger, Karen Van Dyck, Lyssi Athanasiou, Christos Tsiamis, Yiorgos Kalogeras, George Fragopoulos

Summary of Presentation:

Professor Tsalicoglou’s talk grew out of her recent work editing the volume *M’agapas den m’agapas*, which presents the letters Rita Lymperaki wrote to her daughter Margarita Karapanou between 1962 and 1974, when Lymperaki was living in Paris and Karapanou mostly in Athens. Both women were important writers in Greece, though at the time the letters were written Karapanou was still moving from adolescence into adulthood. The book came out nine years after Lymperaki’s death, and Karapanou died just six months afterward. Tsalicoglou, a close friend of Karapanou’s, edited the volume, and she began with a quote from Borges, about how every biography is in part an autobiography; because of her close involvement with the topic, she noted that there would be autobiographical elements that came out in the talk, as well.

Tsalicoglou began by reading the first letter in the book, the only one written by Karapanou, just before the book went to print, in which she speaks of wanting these letters to be published so that the whole world would know how much her mother loved her. Tsalicoglou then noted that there are a number of questions raised by the publication of this kind of book. First of all, who is interested in the personal letters written by a mother to a daughter during the twelve years spanning 1962 to 1974? Why should they be published? Do they interest the historian, the anthropologist, the writer? A letter can have any number of meanings as historical documents, but although these involve two well-known writers in Greece, these are personal, and perhaps of interest only to the indiscrete, or to psychologists? They do, Tsalicoglou says, offer psychopathological material. But why present them in a talk like this, in a department concerned with literature?

Margarita wanted the letters to be published, and they belonged to her, she was the recipient. There is always the one who receives the letters, and in this case the one who sent them was dead, and in no position to object. But is Margarita’s wish—to show her mother’s love for to the world—enough to warrant their publication? And is that wish fulfilled by the publication of the letters? Tsalicoglou noted that most people who read these letters gets mad; these letters provoke strong feelings of anger. So at first glance her desire doesn’t really seem to be served by the book—though on subsequent readings it seems like perhaps she might be right. The book thus serves as an object lesson for the

complex nature of emotions, that there might be love in all this, and even devotion. Tsalicoglou told a story from when Margarita had been admitted to a private clinic in Paris, an asylum, and when she arrived she had to be isolated for fifteen days, and wasn't allowed any visitors. Rita went every night, watching the light in her daughter's room so she would feel like she was supporting her daughter even when she couldn't see her.

In 1946 when Margarita was born, Rita was already the successful author of two books. Her social circle had mostly already left for Paris, and though Rita wasn't very political, when Margarita was three months old she left as well. Tsalicoglou noted that Lymperaki's social standing was certainly a part of people's anger at her when reading the letters—it wasn't just anger at a mother for abandoning her daughter, but anger about her money, an indication of the kind of negative ideas people had about her, including ones related to her social class. In that sense, these letters are evidence of a particular age. There's also a literary value to them, since Rita is a writer and Margarita is becoming one, though they're not *trying* to be literary.

In the letters she writes to her daughter, Rita often seems to be trying to make up for her absence, to be even more present, a guiding force. Like the person in the watchtower of Foucault's panopticon, Rita is trying to control from afar everything Margarita does; she's thinking about what Margarita is eating and wearing, sending her clothes. There is absolutely no masculine element in these letters, they are solely between a mother and her daughter. And when Margarita starts psychoanalysis at age 20, at the midpoint of these letters, going 3 or 4 times a week, you begin to sense the possibility of a breakdown—something felt not only by Margarita but also by Rita in Paris.

Tsalicoglou noted that the letters often seem like they're being written to a lover, and compared them to the letters of Madame de Sevigne to her daughter—only in that case the daughter got married and left the house, and the mother falls apart, whereas Rita doesn't have to leave but does. In the letters she also creates a series of games, posits the possibility of returning any time she wants, though of course she never does—a pattern described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with the game of fort-da, a game created in order to deal with absence. Tsalicoglou ended her talk by speaking of a new thought she had on this trip, in the Monet room at the MoMA, looking at one of his paintings of the Japanese footbridge in his garden. There is nothing naturalistic about this painting, which was executed when Monet was old and not very well, and had already had cataract surgery. There's no way of knowing whether he was experimenting with form, or whether that way of representing the bridge is a result of his bad vision. But in the end, what does it matter what the relationship of reality to the painting is? Likewise, it could be that Margarita's talent as a writer stemmed from her fragile psychological state, but it also could be that she wrote what she did *despite* that often debilitating condition. But again, what does it matter whether or not her books are products of a psychological collapse? What matters is that they're gripping, that they stay with you.

Summary of discussion:

Q: Could you give a bit more biographical information, and also about her father? If these are the letters from a mother to her daughter, where is the father in all this?

A: Margarita was born in 1946, and as soon as she was born Rita divorced Karapanou. So Margarita had no father figure to speak of.

Q: He too was from a very well-off family. But could you speak a little about the language of the letters?

A: Yes, this is a wonderful point. Many are written in French. The language they spoke to one another was mediated, and so with the letters there's a mediation within a mediation. Kafka once said that letter-writing is like a conversation between ghosts. But those ghosts—if you tickle them, they laugh, if you prick them, they bleed. They are very real ghosts. Today things might be less real, with internet and SMS. The ghosts might just be ghosts.

Q: If they are writing in French, or in something in-between, what happens to the notion of the mother tongue? After all, this is the mother writing.

A: Yes, I would say it's Greek-French, perhaps. It's always something in-between, always a mixed language.

Q: You referred to Madame de Sevigne, and I'm interested in the literary part of it, in letter-writing as a literary form. In the time of de Sevigne, it was also a recognizable form for the novel as well, the epistolary novel. But even in a more contemporary setting, we can never escape the fact that any letter we write, even letters talking about the family fields or property, they're always weighted with a kind of literariness. In this particular situation, since they're both writers, that element becomes even more intense. It seems impossible to not think about the fact that if we talk about real love and immediacy here, we're talking about a fictionalization. Lymperaki creates her daughter, and herself as well, even if there's a real recipient. Yes, there may be real emotion, but there's also a clearly literary level to this. And then if you add in the element of this mixed, mediating language, it becomes even more so. So why do they do that? How does the writer face the literary creation of herself, her creation of herself as a literary subject?

Q: And the fact that Karapanou gives these letters to a psychologist, or to her mother—she gave them to you, and she said she saw you as a mother, and a sister, and you were then the executor of this correspondence.

Q: Something that always made an impression on me is that there is no life outside literature with Karapanou, everything that comes out in her books exists, it's true. After seeing that through the years, I came to understand that it's my problem that I want biography: it's all there in the literature, and all the letters are just continuations of what she's been writing, it's always on the page.

A: But from the moment you begin to speak about your life, even out loud, isn't it always a self-narration?

Q: I guess I'm saying that you reach a point where the opposite happens, when everything she lives is then in the literature as well. What exists outside of that? And does there need to be anything? Do we really *need* biography? The feeling I had when I read the letters is that there *isn't* anything outside of the writing, that the whole relationship is wrapped up in those words.

Q: During the discussion I've been thinking about Robert Lowell, who wrote about his wife in poems, and then also quoted from letters, reworked them into the poems. There's a kind of ethical problem there, the turning of his personal life into literature, because the poems came out while both were still alive. But he was reworking it, making it into art, whereas here we just have the letters themselves.

Q: But we don't want to say that the fact that it's a literary document means that it's not real. I just think that the real thing is still there, but it can't possibly be separated from the language we call a literary language. It's in even the most trite, cliched phrases, even in the phrase *s'agapo*—well, it's the most cliched phrase, but also the most powerful.

A: Margarita had this way of using words that we're embarrassed to say because they're so cliched, and with her they became real, she could use them in this way that made them real. Shortly before she died she gave a reading, and afterwards she looked at everyone in the audience and said, *Sas agapo*, and while it made me feel very uncomfortable, I don't think it was her having any kind of literary moment there. Why did that *sas agapo* not have that sense of cliché in the moment? Why did it lose all that and become real?

Q: I wanted to return to the issue of the mediated self in these letters. I just wanted to note that these letters aren't written for publication. And if you think of the difference between what you have here and the letters between Seferis and Theotokas, for instance, you see that it's really not all the same. Those letters were all written to be published. In a way everything Seferis ever wrote was written with one eye toward publication. But these are private letters, and there are definitely people who think it's disrespectful to publish them.

Q: But I think that the literariness even exists even in letters that are entirely private.

Q: Isn't it a question if any writer or author can distinguish himself from the writing of anything at all? When a writer is a writer, anything he or she writes will use the language in that particular way.

Q: Can you say more about what you said about whether her writing is separate from her sickness? If whatever she writes is literature, isn't whatever she does a kind of manic depression, too?

A: This is a big question, which we get with other writers as well, like Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath. I want to think that here it's the talent that's writing, despite the psychological difficulties, not because of them. She's the subject, not the object, and each of these writers deals with this psychological disruption in a different way. I'm just not sure yet what talent means. And I would also say that when I was studying, in graduate school, I certainly went through the anti-psychiatric mode, everyone did, about there being no such thing as madness and we all have to be free to express ourselves in the way that we can. But that's a mistake. If we read what Margarita herself says in *Mipos* about the pain she suffers—well, from the moment there is pain, you can't talk about letting madness free to gallop. There was also this very moving television interview she did, largely about her manic depression. And afterwards people asked me why I'd let her do that, why I'd let her go on television and show herself in that light. It was 2009 and people were saying things like that.

Q: You were talking about Rita and how she was trying to fill in her absence through the letters, and then also said how so many readers get mad when they read them. Well, I read them and didn't get mad at all. What I saw was an incredible pain, a mother feeling for her child. And I think we really need to think about the meaning of choice, if we want to say that her departure was really a choice.

A: Should I tell you what happened? She was pregnant and saw her husband cheating on her with her friend. That pushed her to leave.

Q: In writing these letters, I also have the feeling that Rita is teaching her—as a child, an adolescent, and a future writing. She's not just overseeing her, she's trying to educate her, too.

A: But sometimes she does go too far. There's a culture of uniqueness towards Margarita, and that's where it frightens me. She's always telling Margarita how unique she is, how she has this unique capacity to inspire love. I remember the poem Plath wrote as soon as her son was born, which I have in the book as well, about how she does not want him to be exceptional, how it is far better not to be. None of Rita's letters to Margarita manage to live up to what Plath imagines for her son.

Q: From what I hear, before Lymperaki's death they lived together, as two adult women. Was there a conversation about all this, about the events of the past?

A: Yes, they did talk about it. And I want to say I think Margarita is a much better writer than her mother, and that she knew it, though Rita might not have. For me *Kassandra* was an axe that breaks the frozen sea within, as Kafka said a book should be.