

University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies

April 4, 2005

Speaker: Karen Van Dyck, Columbia University

Topic: Psycharis's Reading Room

Presiding Chair: Vangelis Calotychos, Columbia University

Responder: Peter Mackridge, Oxford University (visiting scholar, Princeton University)

Rapporteur: Karen Emmerich, Columbia University

Attendees: Venetia Apostolidou, Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki (visiting scholar at Teachers' College); Peter Constantine; Constanze Guthenke, Princeton University; Lisa Keller, SUNY Purchase; Chrysi Kotsifou, Columbia University; Mark Mazower, Columbia University; Monika Kallan, Foundation for Hellenic Culture; Neni Panourgia, Columbia University; Effie Rentzou, Princeton University; Elena Tzelepis, Columbia University; Ioanna Theocharopoulou, Columbia University, Liana Theodoratou, New York University; Christos Tsiamis

Summary of Presentation:

Van Dyck introduced her paper as part of an ongoing investigation of orality and demoticism, a project that uses language and multilingualism to think through certain questions about culture and treats transliteration as a prism to reflect bigger issues of linguistic and cultural change. In the Greek case, the Greek alphabet carries with it stories of the Greek past; there is, too, something deeply alphabetical about the way the Greek diaspora deals with its experience. Van Dyck is interested in actual instances of transliteration in texts of the Greek diaspora—Olga Broumas's *Beginning With O*, Thanasis Valtinos's *Sinaxari tou Andrea Kordopati*, Elia Kazan's *America America*—but also uses transliteration as a conceptual framework for thinking about issues of diasporic experience. Her talk tonight focused on Yiannis Psycharis's *To taxidi mou* (1888), a text that deals with issues of multilingualism and transliteration at a time when the book was still the primary means of dissemination of information. *To taxidi mou* played an important role in the language question, which reached new heights in the 1880s; Psycharis's text is a strongly demoticist linguistic tract that is often read as a kind of national allegory, but almost never for the theory of translation it presents.

Van Dyck focused on one chapter from *To taxidi mou*, the "*Cabinet de Lecteur*," as a way of pointing to a more nuanced way of thinking about language than the traditional association of language and nation that usually arises in discussions of Psycharis. Throughout his work, Psycharis associates *katharevousa* with false etymologies, expressing his distaste of diachronic, orthographic connections between ancient and modern words and his preference for synchronic, phonetic similarities between Greek and Turkish, etc. In "*Cabinet de Lecteur*" Psycharis formalizes this distaste by making *katharevousa* look ridiculous on the page. By connecting illegibility with transliteration Psycharis signals larger problems of transfer and transportation, also pointing to the multilingualism of monolingualism, the existence of multiple registers of language even within demotic Greek. When, in the reading room in Constantinople, Psycharis picks up a newspaper written in *katharevousa*, he cannot help seeing and hearing French. He represents this on the page using

transliteration as his model, with French words popping out from under the Greek. He then continues with his translative reading of the newspaper, creating two columns, Greek on the left and a mix of French and German on the right; soon, however, he feels the need to switch the order, having the French and German come first, with the Greek following in the second column: it makes more sense to read the newspaper backwards, he says starting with French and ending up in Greek. (Van Dyck suggests here that more thinking needs to be done into the connection between *prototypo* and *typono*, between the original, the prototpye, and type itself.) Here Psycharis is making fun of the fact that the Greek is reproducing a potentially non-existent French or German text word for word, thus pointing to the ways in which *katharevousa* is not contiguous with the Greek experience.

Psycharis seems, then, to be using the Greek and Roman alphabets to work out power relations between languages and cultures. Van Dyck sees this point as present, too, in Psycharis's description of the map hanging on the wall by Psycharis's chair. Bothered all along by a slight rustling noise, Psycharis finally looks up and sees that the noise is coming from a map of Europe, where figures dressed in different colors on each country are laughing at him, and at the *katharevousa* newspapers, saying that Greece should find its own language and not try to copy from elsewhere. Purist wrapping of foreign languages within *katharevousa*, Van Dyck says, thus brings the foreign gaze within Greece, ultimately making Greece the laughingstock of Europe. If we only see the starting and ending points of Psycharis's journey, we see monolingualism and demotic Greek as only possibility for modern Greek nation, but if we look in the middle we learn other lessons about how multilingualism plays into monolingualism, how material practices of printing brings together languages in a relationship of palimpsest. In bringing Psycharis's work to the fore, Van Dyck is trying to argue that any discussion of nation is also one of diaspora.

Summary of discussion:

Peter Mackridge, the respondent for this session, expressed his interest in the idea that during the debate over the language question, each side was really trying to produce a "pure" version of Greek (according, of course, to different criteria) that was filtered through all kinds of diasporic experiences and multilingualisms within and without Greece. However, he took issue with the notion that what is at stake here is really a question of alphabets and of transliteration, rather than a question of different languages—French and German just happen to be written in a different alphabet than Greek, and the real issue at hand is linguistic rather than alphabetic difference. The alphabet, Mackridge suggested, is an extra, rather than constitutive of the problem between languages. He returned to the example of *America America*, pointing out that in the case of immigrants taking on or being given new names at Ellis Island, that change often had nothing to do with the alphabet, as so many immigrants were illiterate. He also brought up the way in which in the Balkans during the Ottoman Empire languages were not inextricably linked to particular alphabets: a Greek-speaking Jew from Ioannina, for instance, could write his or her Greek in Hebrew letters. He also pointed out that since Saussure linguists have seen language as primarily oral, and given Psycharis's status as linguist and his association with Saussure, the oral aspect of language was undoubtedly given precedence.

Van Dyck responded that nonetheless, she thinks that in many of these Greek diaspora texts things often happen with letters that allow us to ask questions (post-Derridean questions, perhaps) about what's happening with language that has to do with this piece of paper, type, written language. In her research, she first noticed it happening with contemporary texts—Broumas and Spanidou, for instance—and was then driven by these texts to look further back, to the moment when Greeks started coming to America, to the 1880s and the obsession with the language question and how it gets played out in texts that involve or stem from a kind of multilingualism. Liana Theodoratou then asked how one can separate language from alphabet, oral from written, to which Mackridge responded that, in his opinion, that was precisely what Van Dyck was trying to do, by using translation and transliteration metaphorically.

Questioner brought up the issue of what was happening at the level of the Greek government during Psycharis's time, and the way in which an official codification of the language was trying to produce one single register out of hundreds of dialects in a nation whose borders were still not entirely fixed. *Questioner* also suggested that we think of this movement in terms of the wider context of similar codification processes going on in Europe and the U.S. at the same time. In addition, as concerns the distinction between demotic and dialect, she cautioned against taking the term "diglossia" too literally: rather than two registers, what diglossia signifies is a split between one official register and everything else, which actually manifests itself in an explosion of linguistic signs. Diglossia, she said, originally meant the double language used by politicians: within parliament they used one language, and with constituents another one entirely. This last comment led to a discussion about the history of the term "diglossia," with one audience member stating that Psycharis has coined the word as a linguistic term, Van Dyck adding that only with Psycharis did "diglossia" come to signal the language question, and Mackridge stating that Charles Peterson coined the term in English, using the examples of Egypt and Greece. Diglossia, Mackridge commented, is simply the condition of having to different versions of a language that are used in fairly different, demarcated realms, and can be said to exist in any literate culture: there is a difference, for instance, between spoken French and the official French of *Le Monde*. In the Greek situation you had demoticists who were championing the institution of demotic as an official written language, meaning that demotic was in effect competing in the same sphere as *katharevousa*.

Questioner then made a number of connected points. First of all, she said that we should be looking also at the general context for this work and considering the fact that poetry at this time—Mallarmé, for instance, with the first visual poem—is beginning down the path of an intense preoccupation with the written and particularly printed form that continues with the dadaists and concrete poetry and resurfaces again in the 1960s. She also suggested that instead of transliteration, what Psycharis is doing in "*Cabinet de Lecteur*" is actually a kind of transcoding: you can see this in his shifting of dates from one calendar system to another. Her third point involved a reference to Embirikos's *Amour Amour*, where the name of a Russian river is translated into Greek letters, but carries the French meaning of "love"; thus three meanings are coming together in a single text, from a writer well versed in all.

Questioner then referred back to the image of the map in Psycharis, and the anxieties about outside influence, suggesting that we can speak in the same terms about linguistic changes taking place in Greece today, too, where the language being used in the daily and periodical press is starting to conform to American usages and idioms.

The same *Questioner* also pointed out the importance of sarcasm in Psycharis's text as a reflection on a kind of linguistic insincerity he perceived taking place at the very moment when Greece is setting out to construct itself as a modern nation, and the concurrence of both political and existential components to this attempt to do away with linguistic schizophrenia. Constantine then asked if Psycharis—born in Odessa, raised in Constantinople and Germany, writing eloquently in French—was perhaps struggling with Greek when he wrote *To taxidi mou*. Mackridge responded that if you compare Psycharis's language to that of, for instance, Karkavitsas, writing just a few years later, Psycharis's language does seem extraordinary, and a lot of French creeps in, particularly in his letters. Mackridge characterized Psycharis as a "terrible purist," trying to keep Greek away from Western influence, and yet heavily influenced himself by European languages and traditions.

Questioner then brought up the issue of timing: in 1888, ten years after the Congress of Berlin, at the high point of Europeanizing diplomacy, Greece was hoping to benefit, and trying to cast itself in as European a light as possible. Constanze Guthenke then commented on the fact that Psycharis's charge against *katharevousa*, that it's taking over French and German syntax, is leveled by people like Soutsos against demotic Greek, too. Educated in a Western context, Soutsos returns to Greece and begins arguing increasingly strongly for an archaizing language: the language we speak on the street, he says, is so thoroughly tainted by the French we've been educated in that the only way of clearing that taint is to write in ancient Greek. The same charge, then, is being leveled by both sides of the debate.

Questioner commented on a parallel process of linguistic construction in Norway, in which Danish was being used as the written language when Norway became a state. A similar process of codification of distant dialects took place, and is still taking place, helped along by writers and linguists. Calotychos then wrapped up the discussion by combining Tsiamis's earlier point about sarcasm and Constantine's doubts about Psycharis's proficiency in Greek in order to question the extent to which Psycharis's text can be read as parodic. If diaspora is, in some sense, the site of this kind of parodism, how is our reading back into this text as a diasporic text prejudice our way of interrogating Psycharis's project? Calotychos also pointed to the echo of Psycharis's map in the opening of Theotokas's *Elefthero Pnevma* (1929), in which the same trope of the map is used to raise questions about individualism and belonging.