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## THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE WOMAN IN KARKAVITSAS' Η ΛΥΓΕΡΗ

In 1896, Andreas Karkavitsas published the novel *Η Λυγερή*, the Slender Girl<sup>i</sup>, a vivid account of young Anthi's subjection to an arranged marriage, planned to secure her father's business future rather than her personal happiness. Her predicament is intertwined with the ways of the village, according to which a young woman has to be virtuous, obey her father's will and accept the husband chosen for her. Anthi's marriage to Nikolaos Pikopoulos, the middle aged, ugly, greedy, employee-turned-business partner of her father's, is juxtaposed to her furtive romantic affair with Yorgis Vranas, a handsome young cart driver who is honest and hard-working but rather demanding in his ways and certainly inferior to her in social and economic terms.

The story is told in six chapters. The first five put Anthi in the context of the community<sup>ii</sup>. The last chapter, which is entitled 'Αφομοίωσις' (Assimilation), is dedicated to illustrating Anthi's transformation from an innocent young dreamer lover to 'the positive wife of Nikolaos Pikopoulos' (Karkavitsas, 1978: 78<sup>iii</sup>). What is more important, this transformation is said to be accomplished with the help of Nature because Anthi accedes to her new role and to womanhood through motherhood.

Ever since its publication the novel has always been included in the cannon of Modern Greek Literature. Literary Criticism has exhaustively discussed it with reference to language<sup>iv</sup> and the formal characteristics of *etude moeurs* (Vitti, 1991) or folkloric realism (Beaton, 1999), a genre peculiar to Greek Literature, which bears resemblance to European realism and attempts to stike an almost impossible balance between western literary influences, the idealised innocence of the Greek rural life, the wealth of folk tradition, the traumatic upheavals in politics and history and the writers' desire to both be proudly patriotic and advance mature social criticism.<sup>v</sup>. In this context, the novel has been considered as depicting the decline of the traditional way of life and the emergence of capitalism (Politi, 1981) or as an example of successful socio-ideological criticism (Gounelas, 1984: 149-159).

Instrumental to the novel's success, is the employment of a third person narrator in overall charge of the narrative. This narrator is not only interested in depicting scenes of folkloric bliss but also in exploring the psychology of individual characters, moving in and out of their mind and regularly explaining their attitudes by offering

his authoritative opinions about peasant morality, the psychology of love, and, most important, women and their nature.

Literary criticism accepts this male narrator as largely sympathetic to Anthi's predicament and argues that through him the author assumes a distance from the world he describes (Tziovas, 1993: 54; Vitti, 1991: 87- 88). This distance allows him to portray Anthi not just as a dutiful daughter but as a victim of society (social circumstances) or of an unjust sacrifice, something that stirs feelings of outrage in the reader (Vitti, 1991: 89). Yet, this third person narrator can hardly be compared with the one employed, for instance, by Jane Austen, and who remains discernible and identifiable throughout the narrative. He often moves so close to the characters that the reader can hardly tell to whom the expressed thoughts really belong. His strange neutrality has been attributed to the fact that while Austen's narrator belongs to an era of stable socio-cultural values, his Greek counterpart lives at changing times and conveys the uncertainty that surrounds him (Gounelas, 1984:157-8).

Although there are numerous critical essays that deal with the national and socio-cultural parameters of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek literature, other readings, which, for instance, take a different approach to social influences, put the reader into the picture, question the narrator's intentions, unearth the unconscious or speak of gender relations rather than human relations in general, have never flourished with reference to the specific era<sup>vi</sup>. It is beyond the purpose of this paper to explain why this has happened<sup>vii</sup>. Instead of that, the present reading uses the previous accounts as its background and attempts to highlight some of the issues that have not been raised with reference to *H Avgeri*. The approach is psychoanalytic-feminist. It deals with the narrator's confused objectivity and with Anthi's portrayal which, it will be argued, is only partially favourable to the heroine and rests upon a deep seated male anxiety about 'the woman' and 'her desire'.

It will further be shown that Anthi's portrayal relies heavily on the manipulation of the particular and the general (this woman / the woman or all women) which allows the narrator to oscillate between Anthi the individual and Anthi the representative of her sex. This oscillation is further supported by reference to 'nature' – the woman's nature –as a valid general explanation for her/their behaviour. The confusion of this woman with the woman, the display of authoritative knowledge about all things feminine, as well as the ease with which nature comes to the rescue of culture will be at the focus of our discussion.

Since the present reading is closely textual, it must be added that I do not equate the author with the narrator. I consider the narrative to be the author's fantasy, an arrangement of conscious and unconscious elements which speak a truth – his truth – when considered as a whole. This fantasy, this literary work, exceeds the author's conscious intentions and speaks better than him his success or failure in advancing effective social criticism<sup>viii</sup>.

For the best part of the following discussion, we will focus exclusively on two key figures: Anthi and the narrator as speaking and desiring subjects. Despite being seen through the eye of the narrator, we accept Anthi as an individual and examine both her spoken desire and her singular passage to womanhood. A preliminary discussion deals with her social status and her position in the Symbolic order (Other). Her passage to motherhood-womanhood is discussed in detail. It is argued that it constitutes a unique *act* in the psychoanalytic sense of the word and a rare artistic moment, obscured though it is by prejudice and male anxiety. Our inquiry also takes us through the unconscious underpinnings of the narrator's certainties, the content of his knowledge about women and the effects of varying the distance between himself as knower and Anthi as knowable<sup>ix</sup>. Also discussed, the narrator's position in relation to the Other and his enlightened outsider's attitudes towards peasant morality.

The wider context of the present reading is the representation and construction of femininity in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek literature. Although we expect gender relations to be quite inflexible and predictable in traditional patriarchal societies, the negotiation of power and meaning between the sexes always merits attention. Freud's 'anatomy is destiny' (Freud, 1924/91:320) is perhaps only too true for those societies even at times of change but the individual experience of learning to be man or a woman and of constructing one's masculinity or femininity vis a vis the other sex is never fully accounted by general and abstract principles.

In theoretical psychoanalytic terms, the present reading explores the difficult relationships of the subject and the Other as these are filtered through Symbolic, Imaginary and Real experiences<sup>x</sup>. According to psychoanalysis, a transition such as 'being married' is not only a position one is expected to occupy, but a position to be assumed and recognised as one's own. In that sense, the present reading explores subjectivity and sexual identity in the making, or, to use Butler's term, the discursive re-articulation of the subject with all the violence this may at times entail (Butler, 1997:99).

### **Object of transaction / subject to the Other**

Upon reading the early chapters of *H Avγερή*, in which the narrator speaks of Anthi's father and husband, one understands why Vitti speaks of the reader's outrage at the woman's fate. Panayotis Strimmenos – one cannot ignore the connotations of the word στριμμένος – the peasant grocer, is proud of his status in the village (35) and of his smart move of securing his employee's labour by marrying him to his daughter. Father deeply admires Nikolos and is very keen on making him his son. He affectionately calls him 'my child' long before the wedding and later advises the new husband to discipline his wife with the occasional slap.

If Panayotis Strimmenos represents the naive peasant who manipulates marriage traditions to his own ends, Nikolos, represents the ruthless upstart who sees marriage as the beginning of his financial success. The narrator spares no words in conveying his own disapproval of the man and Anthi's disgust for the future husband whom she sees as the bad demon of her love (17) and an animal transfigured into human in order to serve her family (38).

Trapped in a calculated transaction between two men, Anthi appears less like a human being and more like an object of exchange<sup>xi</sup>. Marriage out of love, one immediately thinks, would not have been as degrading. Not quite. When a trusted friend urges Yorgis Vranas to abduct the newly married Anthi, the latter cynically asks 'what am I to do with her now?' (117), implying that she has lost her integrity and her marketability since she has lost her virginity.

Apart from being an object of transaction, Anthi is portrayed by the narrator as a human being with feelings, thoughts and, most important, principles which reflect her views about her place in the Symbolic order and her attitude towards the Other. In the patriarchal society of the novel, women 'are' along the lines of cultural conventions which equate femininity to the emergence and decline of sexuality<sup>xii</sup>. They also 'are' under the gaze of the Other, the combined public and paternal eye which ensures that they remain virgin before the wedding and virtuous afterwards.

From the beginning, Anthi acknowledges the Other as the legitimate authority of her existence and solicits its approval. Even when she is forced to succumb to her father's plans against her will, she sees it as her obligation to obey her new husband and God under any circumstances:

Ητο γυναίκα, ανήκεν εις άνδρα και δια πάσαν πράξιν, δια κάθε σκέψιν της, είχε να δώσει λόγον εις αυτόν και εις τον Θεόν μιαν ημέραν' (142).

The price of obedience is highlighted in the incidents preceding her marriage and in particular in the collapse of her romantic affair with Yorgis Vranas. There comes a day, the narrator explains, in the girl's life when the dormant (sexual) instinct is suddenly awakened. Her father's house begins to feel like a prison and she longs for its serenity as much as a bird in captivity longs for its cage. The bird wants to fly away and build a new nest on another tree which looks leafier, shadier and greener (71). Sexuality matures in the field of vision as the sexes take notice of each other. It instigates love which seeks in the other person the ideal-ego, the narcissistic complement of the ego and the counter-point to the demanding paternal super-ego (Freud, 1914/1991: 88). Like any other girl, Anthi delights in seeing her lover, in receiving confirmation of her feelings and in imagining his soul full of love (16). Her and Vranas, we are told, are the perfect match in age and appearance: they are young, slender, graceful and good looking (17).

Love is natural and yet its exposure to the public gaze only reveals the incomensurable gap between the sexual instinct and the inflexible social law (Other) which calls for the its dramatic repression<sup>xiii</sup> and results in difficult choices. When Yorgis offers Anthi, in public, a piece of the *κουλούρα* he won at St George's fair as a token of love, she refuse to take it on grounds of decency:

Τι θα ειπούν έπειτα οι γονείς, τι θα πλάσει ο κόσμος; Τι θα γίνη το όνομά της; Καλή 'ναι η αγάπη αλλά και το τιμημένο όνομα πολύ καλλίτερον (73).

What Anthi wants at the particular moment as a female and as a woman in love emerges as an impossibility: if she chooses love she loses her good name, if she chooses her good name she loses love and if she chooses not to chose she loses both.

The same impossibility is repeated soon afterwards in a private meeting between her and Yorgis. Anthi refuses to elope with him against her father's will (Είναι η Στριμμενοπούλα με τ' όνομα αυτή και δεν εννοεί να ντροπιάσθη η γενεά της έστω και για χάρη του Βρανά. (97)) and thinks that death is preferable to a disgraced life.

Once again, sexual desire and her desire to protect her good name (Other) result in an irresolute conflict. Anthi jeopardises her love and her narcissism for her principles and emerges as a worthy daughter of her father. As a matter of fact, she emerges as a defender of the paternal order that is more dedicated to the task than the father himself and more uncompromisingly on the side of the paternal Other than the entire village.

With this gesture she goes well beyond the requirement that women be kept under surveillance lest they succumb to their lustful nature. This young woman is – exists – only under the gaze of the Other.

Anthi's early portrayal by the narrator as a silent consenting woman rather than as a rebel crushed into obedience is very important for understanding her subsequent transformation. The silent consenting type is far more difficult to classify, accept or reject than her rebellious counterpart. Her desire – what does she really want? – and her commitment to love remains inextricably linked to her suspicious obedience. Her silence leaves her open to interpretation and turns her into an ideal field for male imagination.

### **The subject who knows**

Given that the main socio-cultural function of the Other is to be the locus and guarantee of an ultimate truth<sup>xiv</sup> – God is the best example of this function – the village gaze as embodiment of the Other appears seriously compromised. Instead of being blind to desire the village gaze is tainted with sexual desire and appears almost voyeuristic. It sees rampant sexuality everywhere and lives by the certainty of its existence. And yet it maintains itself as *the* Law and delights in considering itself infallible and undecivable. Thus when Anthi exhibits signs of grief upon the termination of her affair with Vranas, the collective verdict is that she is a *σιγαλοπαπαδιά* (80) only pretending to be sad without managing to deceive anyone. This concise presentation of the fallibility of the village gaze is necessary in order to put into perspective another gaze, that of the narrator. Naturally, the narrator does not condone the village practices and sets himself apart from that community. He is not only other to the village as a city dweller but also as an educated man. He is in possession of objective knowledge which can shed light on village behaviour and beliefs. He is dominant and omnipresent and by having access to minds he can know with certainty what they can only surmise. But as a speaking subject he, too, is subject to the laws of the Other, though not necessarily to the Other of the village. Below we discuss how his attitude towards the slender girl reveals his disposition towards the traditional manifestations of authority and social order.

Early in the novel, the narrator expresses his admiration for Anthi's appearance, shyness and 'αφέλεια'<sup>xv</sup> (13). Anthi is the perfect type of *λυγερή*, the countryside beauty who is capable of causing desire:

Η Ανθή ήτο τέλειος τύπος μιας λυγερής του χωριού. Είχε υψηλόν και ανδρικόν κάπως τα ανάστημα, το στήθος εύρωστον, την μέσην περισιγμένη και λυγράν. Η κεφαλή της ωραία, εστηρίζετο επί λείου τραχήλου χυνομένου επί πλαστικωτάτου κορμού... Απ' όλου αυτής το σώμα, όπως εκάθητο ... **εφαίνετο αρχαίας ελληνίδος άγαλμα, ζητούσης φιλοξενίας** (14).

The slender girl is lovable because she is both unaware of her sexuality and ideally detached from what is more in herself than herself: the lifeless, statuesque pose which elevates the peasant woman to an ideal in the outsider's eyes<sup>xvi</sup>. Beyond the suffering woman the narrator sees in Anthi a lovable object. The prejudice towards beauty makes him look at her with a masculine gaze which is anything but objective since it proves susceptible to seeking an ideal.

The above description is not an isolated instance. The imaginary nature of the narrator's admiration of the slender girl is further illustrated as it gradually turns into disappointment at the deterioration of her physical beauty:

Πολλάκις η καρδιά μιας χωρικής φέρει τα ίχνη τόσων κλωνισμών, η ψυχή τα λείψανα τόσων ελπίδων, το πρόσωπο φαίνεται εκτραχυθέν υπό τόσων φροντίδων, τας οποίας ουδέ να φανταστή δύναται μια **σουσουράδα των πόλεων**... Αλλ' εκείνη, η αγροδίαιτος, μέσα εις το βαρύν και εκτραχυθέντα όγκον της, έχει μεγάλας και ρωμαλέας τας εντυπώσεις και τας περιπετείας, όπως η ελάτη του βουνού... (142).

Received wisdom and psychologism reinforce the narrator's pseudo-objectivity. Just as the individual λυγερή evokes an ideal beauty, every peasant woman has her fate engraved on her body and appearance infallibly speaks her truth. At this point one thinks: isn't the narrator veering too close to the peasant mentality he is supposed to expose? Is he not subjecting the woman to the un-deceived gaze as the village? Does he not compromise his alleged objectivity for the sake of the imaginary gaze?

Further on we come across the following generalisations:

Δια τούτο μόνον η παρθενική ζωή της, η διαρρέουσα εν αφροντισία και αγνότητι, δύναται να εκληφθεί ως αληθινή ζωή. Αμα όμως υπανδρευθεί, δεν είναι πλέον **η πέρδικα η πλουμιστή**, η από αυγής μέχρι της εσπέρας επιμελουμένη προ του ηλίου το πτίλωμά της, αλλά **κουρούνα** κλαίουσα τον περασμένον βίον της. Αλλοίμονον λοιπόν, αν αναγκασθεί να κλαύσει **και** την παρθενίαν της. Αν υπό την θέλησιν τραχέων γονέων αναγκασθή να συνδέση τον βίον της μεθ' ενός βερεμάρη, **η γυνή έχασε πλέον όλον αυτής το μεγαλείον**. Βλέπουσα τας νεανικάς ελπίδας διαψευδομένας, το μέλλον της μαραθίν, την καλλονήν της, δια την οποίαν υπερηφανεύετο, δοσμένη **εις αδιάφορον εξουσιαστήν**, όλον τον βίον της διερχόμενον άνευ στοργής, άνευ χαράς και απολαύσεως, μικρόν κατά μικρόν **χάνει πάσαν ιδέαν ανθρωπισμού, αποσκλυνεται και καταλήγει εις χονδροειδήν αναισθησίαν** (143).

The corollary to which is:

Εις τοιαύτην χονδροειδήν αναισθησίαν κατάντησε τώρα η Ανθή. **Το χρυσομάργαρον δοχείον συνετρίβη κ' έχυθη το πεντοβολούν ροδόσταγμα.** (143).



The woman is an object of enjoyment rather than a subject who enjoys, available to the husband to make good use of her. The transformation of *πέρδικα* into *κουρούνα* is natural, universal and unavoidable. In the process the woman loses not only her looks but also her humanity.

Despite the fact that the narrator appears to condemn the peasant indifference, his description does not part ways with the arguments of the traditional patriarchal order and he does not cease to acknowledge the father-husband pair as the rightful owners of the female. The narrator accepts the loss of beauty as the unavoidable effect of marriage and womanhood without challenging the traditional paternal order which is responsible for the brutalisation of the woman. This is when nature comes to the rescue of culture. The bird metaphor – a metaphor exploits similarities (Tziouvas, 1987: 136) – is offered as the ultimate natural rendition-explanation of social behaviour. One wonders if the reader is invited to knowingly agree with it at this point. In any case, naturalised objectivity allows the narrator to stir clear of the thorny issue of the paternal omnipotence. By displacing Anthi's predicament to the field of appearances and common beliefs, he transfers the problem from the symbolic to the imaginary domain thus ensuring that addressing it in its proper dimensions is indefinitely postponed<sup>xvii</sup>.

If any significant life experience involves, to some extent at least, an encounter with the Other and with one's misapprehensions and principles, one wonders if that ever happens to the narrator in the same way it happens to Anthi. Below we will first discuss how Anthi encounters the Other in the events of her transition to womanhood and we will subsequently discuss how her experience helps the narrator extricate himself from the dilemma of confronting the patriarchal Other's unjust omnipotence. It could be said that the lysis to Anthi's drama constitutes the main part of a narratorial fantasy which dispenses with the difficulties created by the crossover of the imaginary and the symbolic.

As a final comment to this part, let us compare Anthi and the narrator. Although he looks at her with narratorial omniscience and she is being looked at as an object of desire, they both appear on the same side of the Other, since they both accept it as the limit of their activity without any intention to turn against it. In that sense, Anthi is the narrator's counterpart – I would hesitate to say 'double' or 'opposite' – much more than the males, Yorgis and Nikolos, who command his sympathy and repulsion respectively but are left far behind in his esteem.

### Passage and the meaning of her act

We ask again: what is her desire? How does she turn into a woman and how does the narrator construct her transition from adolescence to womanhood?

As the deal between the father and Nikolos is finalised, Anthi's sacrificial, idealistic attachment to the Other is quickly replaced by actual submission. Anthi marries Nikolos Pikopoulos without ever revealing, we are told, the deeply hurt 'being' inside her<sup>xviii</sup> and secretly cries for being abandoned by her parents and her lover (115). She lives in a state of withdrawal which resembles mourning, cut off from social life, preoccupied with her wounded narcissism and indifferent to her husband's provocative remarks<sup>xix</sup>. Very soon Anthi and her family are isolated and marginalised as the village shows its disapproval of the marriage and blames her for betraying Vranas' love. The latter soon announces his engagement to Vasiliki, a young woman whom Anthi 'would not even have as her slave' (149). Vranas' wedding is a lavish affair, organised by his colleagues as a show of splendour and defiance. Everybody is invited and the bridal procession files past Anthi's window in order to make her jealous. The description is long and detailed. Behind the latticed windows Anthi watches, when suddenly:

Η Ανθή ήκουεν ακόμη τώρα μεταξύ των λυγμών της τους ήχους των τυμπάνων και διετήρη ζωηράν ενόπιόν της την γαμήλιον εκείνη πομπήν. **Κ' αίφνης η ψυχή της, προδιατεθειμένη εις την αυταπάτην, ενόμισε ότι αυτή κειτείχε την θέσιν της Βασιλικής επί του αλόγου και οδηγείτο νύμφη εις το σπίτι του Βρανά.** Εκλαιγε, ναι, αλλά έκλαιγε από την χαράν, την μεγάλην ότι κατωρθώθη τέλος εκείνο το οποίον επί τόσα έτη ωνειρεύετο η ψυχή της. (153).

The procession scene is one of the most important of the novel. For Anthi, it constitutes a violent subjective experience which crystallises in a visual form what had up to that moment remained in limbo: the trauma of being abandoned by those who were supposed to love her. More important, the scene symbolises her absence from the public gaze which used to function as the support of her existence. Suddenly all mirrors cease to reflect. The village gaze, to which she always tried to appear virtuous, prudent and modest has been withdrawn. The village has turned its eyes on another subject. Anthi is no more under the gaze of the Other.

The Imaginary support of love and the Symbolic support of the Other collapse simultaneously. This is not simply a matter of her realising that Vranas ignores her or that the crowd sneaks malicious contented glances in her direction. The narrator is

quite clear at this point: Anthi experiences her absence from the public gaze with the intensity of a hallucinatory event: she feels she is the other woman and rejoices. In psychoanalytic terms Anthi experiences the Real. The Real is what remains when the Symbolic and the Imaginary collapse. It is built around a lived traumatic experience which has been suppressed without having been symbolised in any form. It is usually encountered unexpectedly and out of context. The encounter with the Real takes the form of a vivid episode which brings the subject face to face with what she has so far managed to block out of consciousness (Fink, 1995: 24-28).

In Anthi's case, the intense nonsensical experience that comes from outside, the bridal procession in the street, exposes the relativity of the public gaze. Vranas' 'bride' is not Anthi in her specificity but any woman that happens to occupy the place of that signifier. The public gaze (Other) upholds 'the bride' without taking any notice of Anthi's particularity and her prior faithfulness to its Law. Thus the public gaze emerges as both indifferent and deceived<sup>xx</sup>. At that point the Other as support of her existence faints. What comes from the Real, from the unsymbolised remnant which subverts the symbolic order and speaks of the Other's inability to perceive distinctness, is both illuminating and lethal. The knowledge it avails is tragic in the literal sense of the word: it confronts Anthi with herself without supports, with the essential human lack and loneliness usually concealed behind symbolic bonds and loving relations. It shows that Other cannot be the ultimate guarantee of one's truth and existence. This experience might be considered liberating, if one considers it as the beginning of the absolute freedom entailed by grasping the limitations of the Other. Alternatively, it might be considered as devastating, if one considers it as the beginning of living in the vacuum left by the collapse of the supporting Other<sup>xxi</sup>.

We will postpone determining the nature of Anthi's experience until we have discussed the events that bring this scene to a closure. For the moment, let us add that the literary representation of this quintessentially Real moment is a true artistic achievement. Karkavitsas manages to write nothing less than the truth of the fact that the Other we usually take as the guarantee of our truth is full of inconsistencies and ready to collapse in front of our eyes. And yet, the unveiling of this radical truth goes rather unnoticed compared to the decline of Anthi's beauty.

Who is she after the knowledge of the Other's inconsistency? Is the name – her husband's name – enough to cover her loss? In psychoanalytic terms, who one is, is

not a matter of having a name but of recognising oneself as occupying a place in the network of symbolic relations and as long as Anthi lives in the vacuum of the Other's gaze, she is no one. Yet once again, the narrator does not focus on the predicament of living in limbo but on her physical decline:

Το δε σώμα απέβαλε την ζωηράδα και αγαλματώδη αυτού πλαστικότητα. Αι παρειαί έγιναν πλαδαραί, τα χείλη παχέα και πλήρη ραγάδων, **έχασαν την αγνήν φρικίασιν**, αι σάρκες ωγκώθησαν κ'εχάθη **η λυγερά μέση**, το κατά τι ανδρικόν ανάστημα, το οποίον έδιδε χάριν εις την παρθενίαν της κ' έδιδεν ιδέαν δρυάδος νύμφης, τώρα την μετέβαλεν εις **ωργισμένην δράκαινα φοβερού παραμυθιού** (156).

There is nothing for the male eye to delight upon. Femininity dwindles as the sexual appeal is lost. The bird vocabulary is abandoned. The woman is dehumanised. Once again, the narrator succumbs to the convergence of pseudo-objectivity and received wisdom and falls victim to the peasant shortsightedness he once distanced himself from.

Anthi's Real experience is finally dealt with in the events of subsequent months and in particular with her becoming a mother. Motherhood is always proposed as the natural way out of the existential quagmire. Motherhood gives a woman her natural place in the symbolic order, mellows the fierce she-dragon and rehumanises. Yet Anthi's passage to motherhood does not happen gradually or quietly. It is all compacted in one explosive moment which is supposed to illustrate the omnipotence of nature but which, in my view, reveals something more than it is meant to.

When Anthi asks her cousin what childbirth is like, the latter replies that is as easy as saying a word (σαν αν ειπής ένα λόγο: 157). When in labour she sums Nikolos to her assistance, he replies that he is too busy at the shop. Anthi explodes:

-Να στα μάτια του!... Και βάνουσοι βλασφημίας εκύλησαν από το στόμα της ακράτητοι, ως από καμμιά τελματώδη πηγγήν βρωμερά νερά...Ω, ήτο πλέον γυναίκα η λυγερή!

As she utters these words, Nikolos falls off a ladder and breaks his leg. Injured, he is carried home by four men. Upon seeing him, Anthi cries out 'my husband' (Τον άντρα μου!) and passes. She comes around with a baby in her arms. Again she cries out τον άντρα μου:

Η λυποθυμία εκείνη επί τη θέα του συζύγου της εις τοιαύτην κατάστασιν μετέφερεν αυτήν ακόπως και αβλαβώς εις την θέσιν της μητρος.... Ναι, ένας λόγος, αλλά πότε και πώς τον είπεν αυτόν τον λόγον! Τώρα μόλις άρχιζεν να σκέπτεται πώς και πότε το εγέννησε αυτό το

παιδί η Ανθή. Κ' αίφνης εσυλλογίσθη το πάθημά της, την φοβεράν πτώσιν της, και ηθέλησε να σηκωθεί από την κλινην να σπεύση έξω, επαναλαμβάνουσα την τρομεράν κραυγήν:  
- Τον άντρα μου!... που είναι ο άντρας μου! (160)

In the begining it was the word, a word spoken out of turn and out of order. Her long silence is broken like the waters of childbirth, as she breaks ranks with the paternal order and forgets her committment to His authority; as she repeats the experience of her desolation by breaking off the links with His latest representative, the husband. The birth of this woman is a dirty affair, a manifestation of the supernatural power of her word which hints at her Real origins. She speaks the desolation she is experiencing. She is not born within the symbolic order but in (its) defiance.

Her simultaneous passage to motherhood and femininity signifies a new relationship with the symbolic order. Anthi passes into the symbolic by passing out. She is subjected to a symbolic elision which leaves her with a gap (of memory), a discontinuity. The woman who has experienced the fading of the Law, fades away herself and re-enters it altered and subjected. She gives up the Real of her unharnessed verbal power and her unclassified experience. And it all happens in the gap, in the interval between the two mentions of 'my husband'.

Commenting on a similar case, the screenplay of Rossellini's *Stromboli*, Zizek shows how not to mistake such a unique moment for compromise. The heroine of *Stomboli*, Karin, is a refugee married to a local fisherman but lives in the hope of reaching Argentina one day. Stifled by her new life she decides to run away and attempts to cross the volcano. Smoke and fumes choke her and she fades. There are two endings to the film, an American and an Italian. In the first Karin wakes up to a bright morning and decides to return to the village. In the Italian version the film ends with Karin repeating off screen 'My God! Oh merciful God!' and with a shot of the billowing volcano. Zizek's comment concerns the irresolution of the Italian ending which exemplifies the Lacanian *act*:

'the act done (or, more appropriately: endured) by Karin is that of symbolic suicide: an act of "losing all", of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the "zero point"... The moment of this *symbolic suicide* can be located in a precise way: it takes place between the two mentions of God. Karin reaches her lowest point of despair and dejection when, running from the village (the social link), she finds herself surrounded by the volcano, all social ties pale with insignificance, she is reduced to her bare "being there": running away from the oppressive social reality, she encounters something incomparably more horrifying, the Real... After we pass through the "zero point" of the symbolic suicide, what a moment ago appeared as a whirlpool of rage sweeping away all determinate existence changes miraculously into supreme bliss – *as soon as we renounce all symbolic ties*. And the

act in the Lacanian sense is nothing but this withdrawal by means of which we *renounce renunciation itself*, becoming aware of the fact that we have nothing to lose in a loss' (Žizek, 1992: 43, italics in the original).

If Karkavitsas had ended Anthi's story with the double mention of 'my husband', the novel would have captured an altogether different truth. The meaning of the fragmentary nominal phrase *τον άντρα μου* would have remained wonderfully suspended. Anthi's return to the world would have been a matter of interpretation and the author – male prejudice excluded – would have exhibited his sensitivity to the meaning of an act he can describe but not comprehend. That would have created some scope for claiming that he advances fair social criticism.

As things are, Anthi's passage to womanhood replicates her previous impossibilities: if she chooses to mourn her loss for ever she loses life, if she chooses to re-enter the symbolic order she loses her innocence and her charm in the eyes of the narrator and the community. The woman who chooses life is despised and constructed as inferior or as naturally succumbing to an obscure nature inside her. Her act, which rests precisely upon not hesitating to sever all ties with the symbolic order, looks suspiciously like an act of cowardice than an act of freedom, and the radical freedom implied in the loss of loss, her emerging on the other side with nothing to lose but her illusions, is eclipsed under the clutter of the natural-ised motherhood. Thus Anthi the woman is condemned for not adhering to mourning her loss for ever. The narrator not only deprives her of the radical meaning of her act but takes away much of her humanity as soon as he delivers her to womanhood.

Soon afterwards, we are told, a transformed Anthi begins her reign at home:

Ναι, τώρα τον ανεγνώριζε και τον παραδέχεται ως άντρα της τον Νικολόν. **Δεν εσκέπτετο πλέον**, αν ήτο αυτός κατάλληλος να καθέξει την θέσιν αυτή εν τω βιώ της. **Δεν ήθελεν ο νους της ν' ασχοληθή εις τα παρελθόντα**. Εσκέπτετο μόνον ότι αυτός την κατείχε, ότι τώρα ήτο πατήρ του τέκνου της, η δύναμις και η ψυχή της νέας της οικογενείας' (163).

The first steps are described with an allusive and obscure vocabulary:

Αι **πηγαί της αισθητικότητος** της Ανθής πάλιν ήνοιξαν. Είναι αληθές ότι τώρα δεν ήσαν, όπως κατά την παρθενίαν της, **διαυγείς και ήρεμοι**. Ήσαν όμως **και αυτά πηγαι ζωής, πηγαι ανθρωπισμού και αναπλάσεως**, σύμφωνοι προς το νέον βίον της (p. 164).

There is no other mention of 'sensuality' and 'humanity' in the text to guide us in an interpretation of its content. The word 'sources' or 'springs' will always evoke the outbreak of filth associated with her birth and 'these too' will always bear witness to

the inferior quality of Anthi's humanity. It is not clear whether 'sensuality' indirectly refers to Anthi developing a sexual attraction towards her husband but soon husband and wife converge and when Nikolos predicts the doom of the cart drivers' clan, Anthi feels admiration (θαυμασμόν) and a great attraction (ἐλξιν ακράτητον) towards him (167). With this 'attraction' the imaginary settles in and Anthi finds a new mirror for her narcissism. Through this process – argues the narrator – Anthi is assimilated to the new life like a tree transplanted from its native land to a different climate<sup>xxii</sup>. His last world is that the slender girl can now hardly be recognised beneath the woman, as Anthi has been transformed from Vranas' dreamer lover to Nikolos' *positive* (θετική) wife (169).

### **The narrator again**

Just as Anthi withdraws from the public eye, the narrator's rendition of her life behind closed doors and the unlimited access to her mind prove, once again, that she is transparent to his omniscient gaze. The more she retreats from the community, the more the narrator is able to psychologize and denude the peasant woman of her early charm. We wonder what happened to the evokative object of desire, the slender girl and the Greek goddess that sought hospitality.

The narrator's changing attitudes towards Anthi can be summarised in two words: denigration and display of knowledge. As the young woman falls off the pedestal of 'slenderness', the narrator's knowledge (of her) increases dramatically. As the object of desire moves further and further out of grasp, the psychology of the young woman emerges clearer and clearer till it holds no mysteries. As the plot unravels, the woman is narrativised and explained.

And yet this process is never completed as there always remains some grief over the disappearance of the slender girl. This remainder allows us, in retrospect, to understand the narrative as something other than the young woman's story: it is a long process of disengagement from loss, or, to use Freud's terminology, a process of mourning. Mourning as the healing of wounded narcissism after loss involves the internalisation of some of the attributes of the lost person (Freud, 1917/1991: 258). The narrator, who mourns the loss of the slender girl, takes inside himself the memory of her image. Slenderness itself is isolated and internalised and so is the lifeless pose of the Greek goddess who finds hospitality inside none other than the narrator himself.

Earlier I suggested that Anthi was the narrator's equivalent in the symbolic Other, since they both held similar positions towards its authority. I also posed the question whether the narrator experiences a process of disillusionment similar to hers. I would suggest that the similarity between Anthi and the narrator is only ever resolved on the imaginary level. Her loss parallels his loss. He shadows her suffering and that makes him as important as her. Only, while the woman passes to the other side via a radical act and a tragic insight, the narrator-man emerges wiser and less compromised in a different manner. His compensation is knowledge acquired at her expense and at her indifference: when all is said and done, Anthi does not know how she crossed over to motherhood and womanhood and, most important, she does not want to know either. She is content with having rediscovered a new form of narcissism in the substitute phallus-baby<sup>xxiii</sup> and in the mirroring of her husband. Through this refusal she is constituted as a double opposite: of herself, her previous self, and of the man, the thinking-knowing man. Thus her fainting into ignorance, her symbolic death, gives him license to speak, and this is his narrative<sup>xxiv</sup>.

Finally, Anthi's 'voluntary' descent into oblivion settles another problem neatly: the narrator's relation to the Other. By constituting himself as the only one who really knows, the narrator rejoins the symbolic Other with the power of knowledge. By the end of the narrative he confirms himself as the incontrovertible source of authority, the ultimate Other of the narrative. In the certainty of his knowledge, the potency of the Other, once threatened by the shortcomings of the village gaze, is naturally restored.

### **The author and his anxieties:**

Reading *Η Λυγερή* today, it is impossible to accept the heroine as the average individual in decline without taking into consideration her sex or the gynophobic attitude that emerges from the novel. Attempting to explain the latter together with the author's intentions, one has to admit that Karkavitsas' treatment of the woman pivots on anxieties which involve him as a male subject. The present paper has tried to show that the construction of femininity and womanhood amount to the construction of a myth that bemoans the loss of beauty, imagines the woman assimilated to her 'nature', projects social compromise on that and allows the omniscient male to evade the only real issue that underlies the whole story: his attitude towards the traditional, patriarchal authority which, despite the call for change, remains essentially unaltered. Thus, when all is said and done, the narrator may distance himself from the repressive



world of Anthi's village but asserts himself as the indisputable authority in all things feminine. He calls Nature to his help and, having managed to confine Anthi to voluntary stupidity – she does not want to know – he emerges as the one who finally comes to know the woman in her alterity, in her irreducible otherness which man regularly imagines as his opposite.

In her study on the birth of the feminist consciousness in Greece between 1833-1907, Varika observes that the transition from an agricultural organisation to an urban-based market economy leaves the woman in a vacuum as far as her role and function in the new society are concerned. The positive attributes of her position in the agricultural economy subside and she is perceived as a useless and irrational consumer of her husband's wealth (Varika 1996: 76). When the need to establish a positive role for the woman becomes too pressing, nothing other presents itself as the suitable candidate but the idealisation of her biological difference from the male (1996:84). Maternity is elevated to a social mission and confines the woman into a well defined territory 'έξω από την οποία η παρουσία των γυναικών δεν έρχεται σε αντίθεση μονάχα με την Ηθική, αλλά και με τη Φύση και την Ομαλότητα' (1996: 87).

There can be little doubt that *Η Λυγερή* chimes in with the difficulties of the redefinition of the woman at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In that sense, the rural woman is as much the victim of her father as of the enlightened male who takes it upon himself to (re)define her role and nature. Through that gesture, it should be added, the same male tries to keep at bay his concerns about his own place and role in a changing world. The projection of irresolute difficulties onto the other is the most common mechanism of defense in all fields of human activity.

I will end this paper with some comments on the sexual anxieties that support the socio-cultural concerns at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. My comments are limited to the particular novel and are aimed at revealing the tensions under the fantasy of the subdued, assimilated woman.

On a first level, *Η Λυγερή* describes the demise of the peasant woman as the quintessential representative of femininity. The urban σουσουράδα is the new type of female. Silly and frivolous though she is, she maintains her good looks and her sexual appeal while her rural counterpart loses hers under the strain of her hard life (142). As one type of desirable female substitutes another, the substitution is dully intellectualised and the author can provide 'objective' reasons for the abandonment of the former. But we cannot fail to notice that both types of women are structured

around deception. Drapped in silk or wrapped in a shroud (Varika 1996:76) the woman is essentially a deceptive apparition of something that used to be – the lost slender girl, the Greek goddess, the rural innocent beauty, the soft cheeked woman – which leaves the male in a state of loss and mourning.

But why loss and mourning? In disentangling fantasies it is important to determine the position of the subject in the overall construction. The subject may be the external orchestrator of the unravelling scenario or a participant, one of them or many. If the narrator is the closest the author will ever get to a being a single character in this novel, and given the latter's profound emotional involvement in Anthi's affairs, we could say that the author participates in the narrative as an outsider who is pinned down to passivity, one that only looks on and explains, unable to enjoy in an active sense that is usually associated with masculinity. In his fantasy he imagines himself as deprived of his enjoyment and as losing the woman to superior forces. Would it be an exaggeration, then, to suggest that Anthi's assimilation to the new order only veils the intellectual's fear of losing out (as a man) to the ascending capitalist?

Although the fear of loss of masculinity could be devastating enough on its own for any traditional 'active' male, further examination of the authorial fantasy reveals more complications. There emerges the new peasant woman who does precisely what he cannot do: she lays claim on the new order and the material wealth she helps secure. She annuls her sacrifice and turns from a passive victim into an active agent of enjoyment. The woman who re-appropriates the masculine symbolic order, who plays the system like a man – like her husband – is seen as a monster, probably more so than the husband in comparison to whom she appears as an unnatural excess. Thus, Anthi's adventure implicitly conveys yet another latent anxiety: about the (new) woman's enjoyment, which the author can only imagine in masculine clarity and as appallingly similar to a man's as the changing times would permit. In this latent fear we can perhaps recognise the traditional male's anxiety about the imminent over-modernisation of the woman.

Converted to the discourse of nature this anxiety translates into the woman's inability to love truly and idealistically. If Anthi's transformation was only the product of social coercion, she would possibly be exonerated of blame. If, on the other hand and as it happens, it is in her nature to eventually fall in love with any man at her side, then the innocent girl is, once again, a deceiving mirage and woman is the most unreliable being on earth. With the help of nature, the apparition of the unloving,

cruel, castrating female once again find its way into male ontology; just in time to obscure the fact that some men, like Yorgis Vranas, soon move on to the next slender girl.

In my opinion, the potentially inexhaustible source of scenaria of monstrous feminine transformations and threats to masculine enjoyment is the male author's inability or reluctance to consciously address the question of the woman's status, enjoyment and relations with the other sex. Following Butler (1999), I would suggest that the author misses the fact that gender and sexual identity emerge as compensation for the heavy repression of the sexual instinct in both sexes. Karkavitsas lays the finger uncunningly on this truth while describing the sexual awakening of young females. Womanhood is loss but so is manhood. Sexual identity and gender may be built upon natural dispositions but personal histories always reveal that gender is enforced in an essentially cruel manner. The sexes learn to 'be' man and woman vis a vis each other in the same way they learn any other social role but the victimisation of the woman and her construction as the betraying, inferior counterpart to the male clouds the issue. A slightly different approximation of the repressed core of the fantasy concerns the question of the woman's ontological status: is she to be defined by herself or as an adjunct to man? The question is posed in the text with Anthi's Real experience. Lacan proposed a controversial maxim for the woman's relation to man: woman is the symptom of man. This maxim has two readings. According to the first, it implies that the woman does not exist in her full ontological consistency. Man can gradually explain her and she 'disintegrates in precisely the same way a symptom dissolves after successful interpretation' (Zizek, 1992:155). Dissolving as symptom means that man purifies his desire of the pathological remainder – death instinct – the woman represents. Needless to add that this interpretation describes the male prejudice against women.

We recognise familiar overtones in this description. Anthi is imagined as voluntarily succumbing to the male order which sets the limit of her liberty. She dissolves in front of the male eyes of the narrator and falls off his esteem. The latter uses her to explain away his own fear of loss of enjoyment and makes this knowledge the perfect defence against it.

The second interpretation draws on Lacan's redefinition of the symptom in his later works as 'a formation which confers on the subject its ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship to enjoyment' (p. 155).

According to that, 'woman is a symptom of man' means that man exists only through the woman qua his symptom, as his ontological consistency is suspended from the symptom:

'Man ex-sists, lies 'out there' in the woman (ibid). Woman, on the other hand, does not exist, she insists, which is why she does not come to be through man only – there is something in her that escapes the relation to man, the reference to the phallic signifier' (Zizek, 1992: 156).

This 'not through man only', Zizek adds, is condensed in the meaning of her act, through which she can no longer be understood as 'passive' in comparison to the 'active' male. The term 'active' in man's case only signifies the relentless activity to which the male takes refuge in order to escape the proper dimension of the feminine act' (ibid).

To the extent that the author envisages his passivity and the woman's enjoyment in restrictive masculine terms, the encounter with her radical difference is always doomed to reproduce prejudices and to miss the truth of the fact that the woman is never fully within man's grasp. To interpret Anthis' passage to womanhood as her decline or to veil it with expert knowledge always reveals man's inability to come to terms with the deadly and liberating truth to which her Real experience opens the way.

Karkavitsas' novel illustrates, among other things, how the opportunity of a positive redefinition of the woman's role was missed at the turn of the century. The female reader today may find it hard to uphold the position of the omniscient Other proposed by the novel or to agree with current literary criticism that only society is to blame for Anthis' 'demise'. In my opinion this is not very different from seeing her as man's symptom in its first interpretation. Re-readings of the Slender Girl with a view of achieving a better understanding of the era should necessarily include the discussion of masculinity and femininity and the representation of both by a male subject who, taking advantage of his position as the subject who knows, constructs and marginalises the woman – any woman, including the reader.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>i</sup> Beaton 1999: 80 proposes the translation 'the Fair Maid' based on the folkloric connotations of the title. I have decided to adopt the rather quaint 'Slender Girl' in order to emphasise the importance of looks over folklore.

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<sup>ii</sup> Their social orientation of these chapters is evident in their titles which are chosen after individuals, representative of social type or class and, in one case, after a place of collective activity (Η κυρά Παγώνα, ο Διβριώτης, Οι Πανηγυρισταί, το Καλό Πηγάδι, Οι Καρρολόγοι). Much of their content is devoted to descriptions of rural everyday life.

<sup>iii</sup> All quotes are from the 1978 edition of the novel and in subsequent references only page numbers will be given.

<sup>iv</sup> The gradual shift from the formal register, *katharevousa*, to the popular spoken variety, *demotike*, already under way at the time is evident in the particular work, since Karkavitsas makes the former the language of a narrator and the latter the language of the village. See also Vitti, 1991: 87

<sup>v</sup> See Gounelas 1984: 49 and Vitti 1991:87 for the ideo-political and historical background of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Greek Literature.

<sup>vi</sup> A brief feminist account of Η Λυγερή appears in Varika 1996. The particular reading is only used as a literary example in support of socio-political arguments and does not take into account the literariness of the text as such.

<sup>vii</sup> It has been pointed out to me that, like many writers of his era, Karkavitsas *just* uses the peasant woman to convey personal and collective anxieties about the changing times and that that should be a sufficient explanation of his interest in the women of his time. Anthi *just* represents the ‘individual in decline’ in the transition from a pre-capitalist to a capitalist economy. But why the woman? And why is *her* decline the best example of the worst case scenario of the new era?

<sup>viii</sup> For a comprehensive psychoanalytic definition of the term ‘phantasy’ (fantasy) see Laplanche & Ponalis 1988: 314-319. In the last section of the paper I discuss the unconscious underpinnings of the authorial fantasy. For the narrative as the fantasy of the author, see also Segal 1993:168.

<sup>ix</sup> For a discussion of the woman as knowable see Moi 1993.

<sup>x</sup> The psychoanalytic Other encompasses many meanings, such as the symbolic/ unconscious/ super-egoic structure which is both internal and external to the speaking subject. In the present paper I am interested in the socio-cultural function of the Other as the locus and ultimate guarantee of the subject’s truth and in discussing what happens to the subject when the Other’s unquestionable authority comes under pressure. In the novel the authoritative Other is represented by two complementary figures: the pan-optic village gaze and Anthi’s Father in his social-symbolic function as the bearer of good name and honour. Lacan often uses the terms Other as synonymous to the Symbolic order, the network of relationships into which one is born and in which one occupies a specific place. The Symbolic order is complemented by the Imaginary and the Real. The former is the order of narcissism, love and hate as defined by Freud. The word ‘imaginary’ also implies that this order revolves around the visible: appearances and deceptions. The Real is the residue of language and signification. It mainly accommodates intense lived experiences (traumata) which have never been adequately worked through and represented in language. We will later see how the Real manifests itself in this novel.

<sup>xi</sup> Butler 1999: 52 argues that the regulation of women’s sexuality and the exchange of women in marriage reinforces the bond between men. The relations established in that way between patrilinear families are based on homosocial desire. The pact between Strimmenos and Nikolos is a typical example of that.

<sup>xii</sup> At opposite ends of the spectrum we find the virgin, who is young and innocent, and the old hag, a witch (25) or a withered woman (μαραμένο λαδικό) who envies her own kind.

<sup>xiii</sup> Bulter commends: ‘a “sexual identity” is a productive contradiction in terms, for identity is formed through a prohibition on some dimension of the very sexuality it is said to bear, and sexuality, when it is tied to identity, is always in some sense undercutting itself’ Butler 1997: 103-4.

<sup>xiv</sup> In theory any figure embodying the Other should ideally be/appear to be free of desire and should not extend desirous/sexual demands to the subject. This is the only way in which it can function as the subject’s absolute point of reference.

<sup>xv</sup> The word ‘αφέλεια’ is usually interpreted as ‘innocence’ but it also means ‘naivete’. Certainly the narrator does not admire the young peasant for her intellect.

<sup>xvi</sup> Karkavitsas could not have been more Lacanian in exemplifying the imaginary nature of love and the role played by vision. Lacan explains that love is triggered by the way an extraneous image corresponds to pre-existing ideals: ‘It’s one’s own ego that one loves in love, one’s own ego made real on the imaginary level’ (Lacan: 1988: 142).

<sup>xvii</sup> The imaginary and the symbolic perform completely different functions. The former produces investments of love or hatred as well as misrecognitions which impede the speaking subject from reaching the truth in her/his discourse. Addressing a problem in symbolic terms involves, first of all, dispelling imaginary misrecognitions, clarifying one’s relation to the Other and advancing an interpretation of a situation after the previous stages have been successfully accomplished.

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<sup>xviii</sup> Karkavitsas uses the word 'being' (115) for the first and last time in the novel. It is impossible to say whether the neuter word is chosen on purpose. The word hints at a human essence very different from what unfolds in the gendered imaginary and symbolic and is a far cry from the bird vocabulary usually employed in the definition of the woman.

<sup>xix</sup> Girls, according to Freud 1924/1991: 321, do not respond to the threat of castration in the same way as boys. The equivalent in the loss of the penis in their case is the threat of the withdrawal of love. It could be argued that Anthi undergoes castration by going through the emergence and violent repression of sexuality and the loss of the love of her mother.

<sup>xx</sup> The other partner of the village gaze, the gaze of the father, has already collapsed as a locus of authority, and yet, something of it remains. Although Panayotis Strimmenos is reduced from a representative of the Law to a helpless old man, Anthi continues to justify the father's decision to marry her to Nikolos. At the same time she feels betrayed. It is perhaps this essential ambivalence to the Father that will determine her return to the Symbolic order.

<sup>xxi</sup> For a detailed discussion of the dissolution of the Other and of living in 'subjective destitution' see Zizek, 1992: 59.

<sup>xxii</sup> The last lines remain ambiguous. In the beginning the tree is said to be transplanted from the tropics to a northern climate but subsequently the transfer from Lapland to the Alps of another or, perhaps, the same tree appears to contradict the previous extremity of change.

<sup>xxiii</sup> For a thought-provoking criticism of the Freudian idea that the woman compensates her narcissism by receiving a substitute penis, see Moi, 1993.

<sup>xxiv</sup> For a similar point in French literature see Segal 1993.