

THE EMANCIPATING THEOLOGY OF LOVE: THE FEMINIST POETICS OF DIVINE IN MELISSANTHĒ'S INTERWAR COLLECTIONS

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Most scholars nowadays are familiar with the philological scandal provoked by the publication of Melissanthē's second collection of poems entitled *Προφητείες* (1931). The newspaper *Εργασία* conducted an extended survey of the poetess's talent, asking from noted male critics to answer whether she was capable to pull verses together or not. However, Melissanthē's interwar poetry has not attracted scholars' attention; in contrast, her postwar poetry and essays have been studied more thoroughly. This paper explores Melissanthē's extended interwar publications -in fact, three of them: *Φωνές εντόμου*, 1930; *Προφητείες*, 1931; *Φλεγόμενη βάτος*, 1935- in order to emphasize her subversive attitude towards Christian patriarchy. The invocation of Christian symbols responds to Melissanthē's desire to mark female liberation through the concept of love for the divine. The female eroticism, which was condemned for centuries by Christianity, is charged positively by Melissanthē and is highlighted as a means of liberation, resulting in the shaping of a different theology of love, far from its Christian connotation as an idealistic uplifting to perfection.

Evē Kougia-Skandalakē, using the pseudonym Melissanthē, published her first poetic collection, titled *Φωνές εντόμου*, at the young age of twenty-three, in 1930. While in this collection her conversation with religion is not immediately evident from the title, as it is in her other interwar collections (*Προφητείες*, 1931; *Φλεγόμενη Βάτος*, 1935; *Ο γυρισμός του ασώτου*, 1936; *Ωσαννά και Οραματισμός*, 1939), religious reflection irrigates most of her poems. However, this is not an attempt to express affirmative thoughts about the necessity of faith or Christian worship. In the third poem of the collection, the sonnet with the English title "Microcosme", one can see a strong reflection, both existential and ontological, about the relationship between God and humans. The verses "To

πρόσκαιρο όνειρο είμαστε ενός άγνωστου Θεού”, “Μες στην απύθμενη άβυσσο, στη φρίκη του κενού / κάποιου Θεού μας γέννησεν η απελπισμένη πλήξη” and “κρυφό σκουλήκι μέσα μας ενός Θεού η ανία” (Melissanthē ²2000: 13) reveal a creeping protest on the part of the poetess about the reason why God created humans, which leads to the confirmation that the latter were the result of an unpleasant psychological state that governs the primordial and life-giving force of the universe. In a few words, it appears that God created humans solely for the purpose of entertaining himself in moments of ennui.¹

While the austere aspect of God is also present in the other poems of the collection² in which He makes His presence felt, it is eschewed in the final, quite extensive poem entitled “Ο δρόμος του γυρισμού”. The title reminds to the reader the parable of the prodigal son, and indeed this is precisely the case, albeit with the gender roles reversed. In this instance, a life characterized by wantonness pertains to the female subject. Having lived a life consciously thrown to uncontrolled revelry, the heroine decides to return to the Lord. The landscape she must traverse to reach Him is depicted as a parched desert for the purpose of presenting the idea of solitude, but also the longing for its dissolution. The object of desire here is God, who, with His seductive call, draws the woman into His embrace:

*Μέσα απ’ τη φλογισμένη Σου Έρημο τη μακρινή
 σάμπως κύμα χρυσό από μουσική
 σαν μαγεμένος, η φωνή Σου αυλός
 παθητικός
 φτάνει ως εμένα
 [...]
 Ω! του Κυρίου μου μαγική φωνή
 που από την Έρημό Του ως εμένα φτάνει μακρινή.* (Melissanthē ²2000: 20)

1. This motive certainly has a long-standing tradition (and to a certain extent a Baudelairean basis) and would be worth exploring its presence in the realm of modern Greek literature. Furthermore, the root of the development of this theme can be traced back to Christianity itself, particularly in the *Book of Job*, which, as Minois succinctly puts it, expresses the impotent rage of a man who feels himself the victim of a rigid despotism and wonders why he was born (Minois 2010: 21; see also 449 for a similar treatment of the subject by Alberto Moravia).

2. This element is also found in her later collections, as in, for example, the triplet “Σφαγείο” from *Προφητείες*, with its characteristic epilogue: “Ο κόσμος είναι απέραντο σφαγείο / κι ο Θεός τις ίδιες σάρκες του πεινά” (Melissanthē ²2000: 41).

Of course, in these specific contexts, love is conceived abstractly and almost desexualized, as it takes place within the boundaries of the sacred. The adjective “παθητικός” should be noted, as its use strongly implies that the woman holds the initiative to begin the journey that will lead her to finding the erotic Other. She is the one who actively acts to return to the House of God. As Françoise Dolto has argued in her psychoanalytic interpretation of the parable of the prodigal son, the latter “had to live and satisfy all the needs, to make sure that they are not enough and that he has the ‘need’ of something else. [...] he had to live the experience of risking everything, reaching to the lack, to the absolute emptiness, in order to reach the other thing that is the desire and its power” (Dolto – Séverin 1979: 64).³ One should consider how radical it is for a poetess not only to replace the male subject of the parable with a woman but also to deliver the narrative control to her. In the parable of Melissanthē, the woman speaks directly, in the first person, revealing her voluntary decision to live away from the subject of her desire, God, until she becomes fully aware of His absence and decides to return for their definitive union:

*Τα γήινα στολίδια μου πώς τ’ αγαπάω, ω πόσο!
Τα κράτησα τόσον καιρό επάνω στην καρδιά μου
που πήραν τη θερμότητά μου
κι έγιναν με το σώμα μου ένα.*

Δεν μπορώ να τα πετάξω [...]

*Αν δεν έφευγα ποτέ μου από κοντά Σου
[...]
δεν θα είχα νιώσει τη χαρά του γυρισμού μου τώρα τόση
[...]
δεν θα καθόμουν στα πόδια Σου με τόση
τώρα ευγνωμοσύνη (Melissanthē 2000: 21-22)*

Their blending will take place at the end of the poem, with the invocation of another Gospel narration, that of the anointing of Christ. Melissanthē deliberately follows the mistaken entanglement of the two different versions according to which Christ accepted a woman to anoint his feet. On the one hand, the Gospel of Luke displays an adulteress in the house of the Pharisee, a narration with which the poem is verbally close, since Melissanthē points to the “αλαβάστρινο βάζο” (“And, behold, a woman in

3. The translation here of the French excerpt is mine.

the city, which was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at meat in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster box of ointment", Luke, 7.37).⁴ On the other hand, the Gospel of John speaks of Mary, the sister of Lazarus in Bethany, who took "a pound of ointment of spikenard, very costly, and anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped his feet with her hair: and the house was filled with the odour of the ointment" (John 12.3) – in fact, Christ says below that Mary's perfume was predetermined to be saved for his burial (John 12.7), something which Melissanthē's poem reflects in a transformed aspect, since death adverts to her heroine. Gradually, the boundaries of these two narratives were shaken and Mary Magdalene, as a repentant prostitute, was identified with the other two women as the one who came to the feet of Christ bearing the myrrh – an imagery expounded on modern Greek poetry (Kefalea 2016). The poetess follows this misunderstood overlap of one story upon the other, apparently because in post-Christian tradition Mary Magdalene holds the scepter of erotic union with Christ as his secret betrothed. Through this reference, the symbolic dimension of love between the woman in the poem and God is intensified even further. The female subject does not submit to God in order to glorify Him;⁵ she approaches Him instead so that their allegorical bond of love can be fulfilled, through which she achieves by herself her ontological self-awareness:

*Όταν το σκοτεινό σπάσει η ψυχή περίβλημά της
στο Φως σου τ' άσπρα θα ριγούν φτερά της
σαν κρίνοι
Και χρυσαλλίδα νεογέννητη θα πίνει
από της Αθανασίας την κρήνη
την ανθρώπινη θλίψη θα τινάζει
κι' όλο της το θυμίαμα θα κάψει
χορεύοντας στου λύχνου Σου τη φλόγα γύρα
κι η καρδιά σπάζοντας το αλαβάστρινο βάζο της
θ' αλείψει τα πόδια Σου
με της Μαγδαληνής τα μύρα*

4. All biblical quotations in English are from King James Bible.

5. Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke (1985: 15) has been the only one that implied this aspect in Melissanthē's poetry, despite the fact that her commentaries regard the postwar collection *Λυρική εξομολόγηση*: "Αυτός είναι ο Θεός, ο Κύριος, της Μελισσάνθης που είναι ίσως λάθος να ερμηνεύεται σαν μια καθαρή θρησκευτική στάση. Γιατί η ερώτηση δεν σημαίνει απάντηση και η μεταφυσική αγωνία δεν καταλήγει πάντα σε λατρεία".

Παθητικά θα τραγουδήσει
Κύριέ μου, όλη η ζωή μου Κύκνος
και θα σβήσει
Σαν ένας χείμαρρος χρυσός τότε κι εγώ
θ' αναλυθώ
μες στον ωκεανό της Αρμονίας
της Αιωνίας!

(Melissanthē 2000: 22)

Undoubtedly, the rhetoric of the poem is not determined by revolutionary linguistic choices that would encourage a feminist reading. However, it is important that love, in its religious dimension, is proclaimed here innocently by a woman and is considered as an essential part of her completion. Despite the fact that in the end the invocation of Mary Magdalene is emphasized by the adjective “παθητικά” through which the woman displays a submissive attitude in the face of the greatness of the man-God, we should take into serious account two things: firstly, in the other four parts of the poem woman’s self-reliance and the necessary renunciation of divine protection are strongly presented as prerequisites for her existential initiation into her symbolic erotic union with God; secondly, throughout the overall narrative economy of the poem, the repetition of this particular adjective forms a circular pattern: the passive erotic call of God at the beginning of the poem is completed with the passive song of the woman before her complete metamorphosis thanks to the finding of the divine Other. If this repetition implies an equal treatment of the two genders, since the woman is equated with the man-God, the way Melissanthē sets her heroine’s intermediate exposition, both at the narrative level and at the level of action, probably gives her an improved role, granting her a position of active participation in the realization of her own erotic and religious fulfillment. This imagery deconstructs the way the woman is being denoted throughout Christian texts, frequently degraded even banished from the main narrative action (Frye 1982: 107).

In her first poetic attempt, Melissanthē did not dare to challenge the established gender discrimination of Christian literature and customs. She only attempted to do so questioning hierarchical love, as was saved by popular culture. In the poem “Η νεραϊδοπαρμένη”, she reverses the myth of Sleeping Beauty. The once inert princess who waited for the manly prince to come and wake her up and save herself and her kingdom, now becomes the symbol of the warrior who undertakes to bring back to life the “ρηγόπουλο [που] την καρτερεί / χρόνους τώρα, στο μαγεμένο του

ύπνο" (Melissanthē 2000: 17). It is actually quite memorable the fact that in the global poetry such provocative poetic gestures will take place at a later time. For example, it is only in 1971 that Anne Sexton will transfigure the patriarchal core of famous fairytales in her renowned collection with the indicative title *Transformations*.⁶ But let us return to Melissanthē, who, in 1931, in her second collection entitled *Προφητείες* will challenge the Christian perpetuation of the image of the submissive woman to the man's love, as it can be seen in the sonnet "Μεταμέλεια":

Απόψε, είπα, πως μ' είχες πια κερδίσει
που ρόδισαν οι πόθοι μου όλοι ανθοί
«Μα πριν ή τρις ο αλέκτωρ τρις φωνήσει»
Κύριέ μου, σε είχα πάλι απαρνηθεί

Με κουφοκαίνε, ακόμη, πάθη, μίσση
-δεν έχουν οι αμαρτίες μου πια σωθεί-
Της Χάρης σου αν ανοίξει μόνο η θρύση
τότε κι υδρία μου ίσως πληρωθεί

Το τι μαρτύρησα απ' τη νύχτα εκείνη
που άδεια άφησα τη νυφική μας κλίνη
κι αρνήθηκα στα μάτια να σε δω!

Κοίταξε αν δεν πιστεύεις τις πληγές μου
Δος μου, το χέρι σου' νά, εδώ κι εδώ
Λοιπόν, μ' αναγνωρίζεις τώρα; Πες μου! (Melissanthē 2000: 33)

At first glance, one might argue that the reader is dealing with a stylized reenactment of two well-known Christian narratives: a) the triple denial of Christ by Peter, in order to avoid arrest and conviction like his master, and b) the doubt of Thomas when Christ, before his ascension, displays his wounds to the unbelieving disciple to convince him of the authenticity of his incorporeal existence. These are two biblical stories that deal with the issue of submission to the Christian discourse - a discourse understood here as the bearer of religious law, upon which a spiritually hierarchical theology has been constructed. If we agree with the opinion that the "σπαραγμός της ποιήτριας [που] γίνεται κραυγή στην αναζήτηση της

6. Her last poem discusses the same tale about Sleeping Beauty (Sexton 1971: 107). For Sexton's subversive preposition, see Ostriker 1982: 11-16.

Γης της Επαγγελίας” (Papachrēstou-Panou 2002: 292) predominates in Melissanthē’s work, the same holds for this poem. Its Christian imagery is directly linked to redemption, a concept that permeates throughout Melissanthē’s entire (at least) interwar poetry. Of course, one must focus even deeper. We may, then, begin to understand a bit better the forces behind the composition of this poem. The ritual that is set up within the verses concerns the interaction between a female subject and Christ. As much as feminine pronouns are missing -deliberately, since the poetess adopted an androgynous poetic profile (Athanasopoulou 2011: 327)-,⁷ something that intensifies further the ambiguity of the leading subject, it is difficult for a man to talk, even metaphorically, about his relationship with Christ through the use of the “νυφική κλίνη”. While Son of God can be considered figuratively a lover for the faithful (Frye 1982: 154), always maintaining the necessary manliness in the Holy Bible,⁸ “νυφική κλίνη” presupposes a lover, or, more accurately, a beloved, a characterization that a male poet would avoid using. The marital bed, as a place of distinct gender identities, would inevitably raise the issue of the gender identity for each one of the couple. Melissanthē appropriates the biblical narrative, so to crack the dominant/submissive dichotomy. Her heroine remains the lover of Christ but denies to coopt the role of the submissive woman, disregarding the sacred duty of being present in bed on the first night of marriage. Not only does she refuse the obligation imposed on her by patriarchal culture, but she also resists even in exchanging glances with her lover, Christ. If Saint Teresa believed that Christ penetrates the faithful like a spear (Salazar 2002: 114), that is as a par excellence phallic symbol through which the authoritarian masculinity of the man-God remains untouched, the heroine here not only refuses her symbolic subjugation to Christ -the male- but also cancels the act of a mystical union with him. The desire for a redemptive fusion, which would also mean spiritual liberation according to Christian doctrine, is thwarted, and instead, the heroine illustrates the transcendence of a structurally gendered scale of values that want women to be ‘enslaved’ to men (this symbolism is often found in the Holy Scripture).

7. The deliberate avoidance of grammatical types that reveal a female subject, whether authorial or narrative, is a characteristic that is also frequently found in the poetry of Zoë Karellē in the post-war years (Karatasou 2008: 199-211).

8. See, for instance, the words of Saint Paul: “For I am jealous over you with godly jealousy: for I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11.2).

Gazing is also reversed and, far from illustrating fear or withdrawal, promotes the idea of liberation, as female subjectivity is shaped within a doubly charged space, Christian but also social. Christ takes the place of Thomas, since the marks of suffering are no longer borne by him but by the heroine of the poem. Excluded from the space of torture, the figure of Christ appears weakened, as he cannot elicit pity for the pains he did not suffer. On the contrary, the pain corresponds to the female subject, and by extension to every woman in a male-dominated society. The poetess undertakes to represent womenfolk and as a consequence she internalizes women's sufferings. The layout of the poem "Μεταμέλεια" clearly shows that Christ is now called to touch the wounds of heroine's symbolic crucifixion, to "see in [her] hands the print of the nails" (John 20.25) and to acknowledge the pain that she suffers. Through this process, the woman acquires the power that was never given to her, presuming to command even the Son of God, since the grammatical mood of the final stanza is that of the imperative. Such a linguistic strategy gives a strong voice to the once silent female world, and therefore the latter is being transformed from passive to active. I believe that in this poem Melissanthē proposes not only the feminization of the divine, but also a dynamic re-signification of a male-dominated religious discourse, which now includes the experience of women.⁹

In favor of the woman's erotic advantage is also the bold declaration of her physicality as a cleansing force. The poem "Γυναικά" articulates a different reality around female sexuality far from being criminalized and conceived as degenerate through the "moral panic" of Christian discourse for as long as women asserted their sexual life outside the social conventions of marriage and procreation. Melissanthē overturns the stereotypical image of repressed female sexuality. For her, love is not enough to be pure, as the established patriarchy would like it. She invites women to surrender to their carnal pleasure, if they want to dominate over the once powerful men who were their conqueror. Initially in her poem female desire may

9. Similar radical actions can one detect in Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry much later, during the postwar period, who, as Giannakopoulou (2021) elaborates, "explore[s] female artistic consciousness and put[s] forward a female-centred poetic that distinguishes itself from traditional perceptions of women". On the topic, see Liapē (2017). For an introduction to the field of Christian feminist theology and its connections with broader cultural phenomena, see Athanaspoulou-Kypriou (2011).

take on a demonic appearance. In essence, however, the poetess appropriates society's fear when the woman risked acting without hesitation and embracing her erotic physicality, an act that could condemn her to the realm of being harmful to social harmony.¹⁰ The once diabolical pleasure that was supposed to flow from the bodily mechanisms of female sexuality now becomes the saving means that sanctifies the man, thus upgrading the role of the woman, who now becomes the key for the gates of Paradise to be opened:

Γυναίκα

*Είμαι η Γυναίκα και με φίλτρα σ' εξουσιάζω
στα μάγια μου δένεσαι σκλάβος ταπεινός
τη δύναμή σου στο κορμί μου επάνω σπάζω
σε με βρίσκειται η λύτρωσή σου κι ο χαμός.*

*Ουράνιο πνεύμα ή μαύρος δαίμων σ' αγκαλιάζω
και μες στις φλόγες σε βαφτίζω της σαρκός
στης ηδονής τα Τάρταρα αν σε κατεβάζω
σου πάθους το καμίνι θράζει ο καθαρός.*

*Τα χέρια μου κύκνων λαιμοί για φίδια μοιάζουν
κι ως σε χαϊδεύουν βελουδένια σε σπαράζουν
Και σου σταλάζω στις ολάνοιχτες πληγές*

*Βάλαμο θείο το φιλί μου ή δηλητήριο
Κι ενώ σε καίω με της κολάσεως τις φωτιές
Με του έρωτα σ' αγιάζω το ιερό μυστήριο. (Melissanthē 2000: 29)*

One should not assume, however, that within almost every verse of Melissanthē's poetry lies the belief that writing is intended to undermine the core of Christianity. Although her poetry quite systematically re-arranges the gender hierarchy that the institutional aspects of Christianity have established, she does not resort to deconstructing God. If, as Karl Barth has observed, "eros deceives", since it is based on a finite, worldly schema that sees in others "only what they are, and loves them only in their non-existential existence" (Barth 1968: 453-454), on the contrary, "agape" is the one that leads the human being to the depths of spiritual and emotional union with the Other, with God, a process that requires the rejection of evil: "Only the love, which is strong enough to abhor that which is evil

10. Tzanakē (2018) explicates in detail the charging of the female gender with harmful connotations through a series of medical, psychoanalytic, social, biological, etc. discourses.

can cleave to that which is good. Love forgets-and knows; forgives-and punishes; freely receives-and utterly rejects" (Barth 1968: 454). Melissanthē's poetry incorporates such a negative aspect, denying to consent to earthly "eros", opting to embrace the "agape" for the eternal, something vividly expressed in the poem "Ψαλμός Α'":

*Τι αξία θα 'χει, είπα, σε Σε, να ρθω,
όταν τον κόσμο πια θα βαρεθώ
κι όλες τις ηδονές του δοκιμάσω
Τι αξίζει, όταν τα πλούτη μου θα χάσω
την αρετή της φτώχειας να ντυθώ
Και τι θ' αξίζει να μετανοήσω
όταν δεν θα μπορώ πια ν' αμαρτήσω*

*Στα πόδια σου, τι αξίζει να συρθώ
όταν την τιμωρία σου φοβηθώ
Και φεύγοντας των τύψεων το μαστίγιο
Να 'ρθω, σε Σε, καθώς σε καταφύγιο.*

*Ή τώρα ή ποτέ να μην ερθώ
Ή τίποτα ή τα πάντα ν' αρνηθώ
Τους θησαυρούς μου όλους να σου σκορπίσω
κι όχι με ψίχουλα να σ' ελεήσω
και να μπορέσω να σου πω· νά δε με
τις πιο ακριβές αγάπες μου απαρνιέμαι
Κι ό,τι είχα συναγμένα με στοργή
στην πρώτη σου τ' αφίνω προσταγή
Μ' απ' το δειλό κορμί μου αν προδοθώ
όρκο σου κάνω να παραδοθώ
μονάχη μου στου δήμιου το μαχαίρι
ήμερο, εξιλαστήριο περιστέρι. (Melissanthē 2000: 52)*

In the biblical tradition, the first chapter of the Psalms establishes the tropes of religious authority, through the declaration of the submission of the faithful to the Mosaic law, a process through which the flock is divided into the righteous and the sinners. Melissanthē advocates for the omnipotence of the Almighty, completely denying woman's earthly hypostasis for the benefit of her indestructible existence, which is achieved through her love for her Creator. Semantically, however, the poetess's attempt to speculate on such theological issues seems to be quite heretical. The first Psalm -a reminder of the separation of sin from piety- is selectively ad-

dressed to the male: "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful" (Psalms 1.1). Nikodēmos o Agioreitēs -a significant erudite for the Christian literary tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church- in his commentary on the Psalm, following the narration of Genesis and the inferior hierarchy of women as described there, did not overlook to include them in the context of devout living through submission; the woman is a part of the man, not an autonomous entity: "ἐπειδὴ κατὰ τον θεῖον Απόστολον 'Κεφαλὴ μὲν τῆς γυναικὸς εἶναι ὁ ἄνδρας' (Α΄ Κορ. ΙΑ΄. 3) καθὼς δε ἐνόνονται με τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ μέρη τοῦ σώματος, ἐτὶ καὶ με τον ἄνδρα ἐνόνεται καὶ ἡ γυνή, ἥτις μέρος ἐστί τοῦ ἀνδρός" (Nikodēmos o Agioreitēs 1819: 2). The comparison here of the way the two sexes are united -the woman constitutes the body of a headless entity, which needs the head, that is the brain of the man, to function- indicates a widespread gender stereotype that women are disconnected from the realm of the spirit (Armstrong 1987: 237). Melissanthē attempts to inscribe women in the records of biblical tradition not as a mute presence, deprived of speech (symbol of the spirit), but as a dynamic voice that participates equally in man's familiarity with the divine. The idea of the symbolic decapitation of the woman which Nikodēmos's words consolidate, is being contradicted by the poetess's strong desire to overcome the desperation of a 'feminine writing' condemned to speak only of the body and the emotion, and not of the spirit. The conclusion of the poem, where the heroine strongly renounces anything material in order to be united with God, promotes the idea that a woman's love for the supreme entity of the universe is not derived from her soul, as Ernesto Sabato argues, attributing this feeling to the supreme principle of women, but is based on her logic. I invoke this particular philosopher as a typical case of the 'ghettoization' of women at the level of sentimental expression and their exclusion from the Word, which goes back to the higher principle of masculinity, as Sabato would want it (2004: 64), which Melissanthē eloquently overturns.

In the collection *Φλεγόμενη βάτος* Melissanthē strengthens the female power even more thanks to the overwhelming imagery of the triolet "Σαλώμνη". The titular character of the New Testament fueled a literary pandemic in the late 19th and early 20th century, triggering many writers to reconstruct in various ways the biblical story about the daughter of Herodias; all of these narratives have in common the indistinguishable boundaries between love and death (Dounia 2011: 200-219; Vasileiadē 2014: 11-20). Melissanthē's poem confabulates with this tradition, thus represent-

ing Salome in the sphere of deadly love. The imperative mood, the simple poetic wording, and the use of the first-person which seems to confess a story, are keys to the poem's rhetoric because all of them together promote the rough profile of female sexuality, mainly Salome's ability to lay waste with her erotic dance. Although her love is expressed in a rather exculpatory way, she is the one that asks for the death of John the Baptist; therefore, Salome's image illustrates here the debauchery of an unbridled eroticism as it was shaped throughout the earlier literary tradition. Undoubtedly Salome becomes a par excellence of femme fatale challenging Christian monism. Melissanthē, through the fragmentation of a man's/John's appeal to asceticism -John in biblical contexts summarizes the Christian ideal of conquering spirituality- seeks to redefine female eroticism and female sexuality within a liberated context, without further traces of guilt for the woman:

*Ας ανοιχτεί η αυλαία της αβύσσου
για να με βλέπουν μ' άδεια μάτια οι τρόμοι
πώς θα χορεύω του άδη εγώ Σαλώμη
—ας ανοιχτεί η αυλαία της αβύσσου—
Ω, Γιοχαννάν, θέλω την κεφαλή σου
Μαύρη που 'ναι τη η ασκητική σου κόμη!
Ας τραβηχτεί η αυλαία της αβύσσου
Με το χορό μου πάγωσαν και οι τρόμοι. (Melissanthē 2000: 85)*

In the same collection, there is a poem that also significantly upgrades female eroticism, the sonnet “Διά της αμαρτίας η σωτηρία”. The fact that the poetess uses the quotation marks, although it is not a direct quote, is a noteworthy sign that the poem engages closely with a specific liturgical text, the Troparion of Kassianē. Its first stanza contains both the words founded in Melissanthē's title:

*Κύριε, η εν πολλαίς αμαρτίαις περιπεσούσα γυνή,
την σήν αισθομένη Θεότητα μυροφόρου αναλαβούσα τάξιν,
οδυρομένη μύρα σοι προ του ενταφιασμού κομίζει.
Οίμοι! λέγουσα, οτι νύξ μοι υπάρχει, οίστρος ακολασίας,
ζοφώδης τε και ασέληνος έρωσ της αμαρτίας.*

The renowned Byzantine poetess and hymnographer, inspired by the anonymous adulteress saved by Christ from stoning, and composed a hymn paying tribute to the idea of forgiveness. In the Gospels the sinful woman, full of tears of contrition, acknowledges her transgression and

decides to offer Christ myrrh as a token of gratitude for his mercy (Luke 7:37-38; Matthew 26:6-7; Mark 3). The repentant woman bows down before the male figure of the Son of God in an act that symbolically intensifies the submission of women in a male-dominated society, where men have the right to forgive and dictate the boundaries of morality, whether they can be shifted or not, as in the case of the adulteress. Melissanthē's treatment of the story of the adulteress does not comply with the way it was depicted by her medieval predecessor. In her own poetic universe, the woman condemned as a sinner has a consciousness of her own autonomy regarding the extent to which she should be punished; the repeated attempts for repentance seem to be insufficient. Melissanthē's heroine finds no meaning in bowing down to the Lord asking for forgiveness. Instead, she strives for a rearrangement of what can be described as moral deviation, something which is associated with the concept of the Fall ("πτώση"):

*–Του πεπρωμένου ανεξιχνίαστο το μυστήριο!–
Ταΐζοντας πάντα την ακόλαστη πυρά
του ίδιου μου πάθους έγινα κι εγώ θορά
κλεισμένη μες στις αμαρτίας το δεσμωτήριο*

*Τις ανομίες μου όλες αν καίω, κλαδιά ξερά
με την καρδιά μου, επάνω, θύμα εξιλαστήριο
μα δεν μπορώ να γονατίσω πια στον Κύριο
στην προσευχή τα χείλη μου έγιναν σκληρά*

*Μετά από κάθε πτώση, αν φτάνει η μεταμέλεια
μ' απ' τις πολλές μου τις μετάνοιες σε κουρέλια
φθάρηκε πια της μετανοούσης η στολή*

*Της απωλείας η άβυσσος μέσα μου μιλεί
Τι από θανάσιμου αμαρτήματος τα ερέβη
μπορεί κι η προσευχή στα χείλη μου ν' ανέβει! (Melissanthē 2000: 75)*

Throughout the wider Christian discourse, the Fall of Man matters greatly, as it is the first act for humanity's entry into the earthly realm of punishment. Eve's disobedience to God's command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge entrained Adam into committing a sin. Being aware of their transgression, the gates of death, pain, and sorrow are now wide open to them. The ethos of Kassianē's Troparion, with its concentration on female desire, seems to include motifs suggestive of the male-dominated interpretation of Genesis, that is the conception of female desire through flagi-

tious connotations. Eve is seen as having led Adam astray; in return for her crime woman's desire in Genesis is regarded as indicative of her granting authority to man's power (Ricoeur – LaCocque 2005: 58-59). When she composed her hymn, Kassianē had a clear interest in depicting Eve as a fearful woman trembling before the power of the male-Christ; her main heroine, the adulteress, although she does not fear him, fervently seeks his forgiveness in her attempt to claim her redemption (Silvas 2006: 31):

*Καταφιλήσω τους αχράντους σου πόδας,
αποσμήξω τούτους δε πάλιν τοις της κεφαλής μου βοστρύχοις,
ων εν τω Παραδείσω Εύα το δειλινόν κρότον τοις ώσιν ηχηθείσα,
τω φόβω εκρύβη*

By promoting female sexuality in an emancipated sense Melissanthē diverts attention from how the same theme is depicted as a criminalized statement both in Christian texts and in the hymn of Kassianē. Once considered as impure and immoral when it escaped from the limits of male-dominated restrictions, for the poetess female sexuality not only flourishes but confirms the liberated moral geography of love: redemption is conquered only through carnal pleasure and disobedience to the punitive gaze of man-God.

Last but not least, let us remember a poem that Melissanthē did not include in her collections entitled "Μεταστοιχειώση" (it is not specified in her consolidated edition of her collections whether it is a published or unpublished poem). Within a scenery of revelation, the darkness or harshness of the erotic emotion that is integrated into all the other poems here is abolished. If we should agree that erotic desire is an ouroboros serpent, since it never reaches an end, thus often prevents people from reaching the sphere of completion, then this is precisely the gap that Melissanthē attempts to bridge with the following verses, leading the erotic burden to its discharge:

*Αγάπησα περίπαθα τον ήλιο
βαθύς ο πόθος μου ήταν σαν τον άδη
Ήμουν άγνωστη χώρα από σκοτάδι
χαμένη μες στις νύχτας το βασίλειο*

*Τη γύμνια μου έχοντας ένδυμα γαμήλιο
στο φλογερό του δόθηκα όλη χάδι
—στο φως πέφτει της σκέψης μου το υφάδι*

σαν ίσκιος από ναού το περιστύλιο—

Καθώς την άνυδρη άμμο της ερήμου
φλογίζει η πύρα του ήλιου την ψυχή μου
μες στα έγκατα των σπλάνων μου, ως με ψάχνει

Μα στον αιθέρα επάνω λυτρωμένη
κι απ' των παθών τα πέλαγα ανεβαίνει
σαν από θυμιατό μια διάφανη άχνη. (Melissanthē ²2000: 131)

In Byzantine literature, the solar image of Christ, born out of the syncretism with the ancient pagan tradition, was often associated with the Theophany, the revelation of God Himself within the world, as, for example, in the case of Romanos the Melodist's poetry (Stavropoulos 2019). A similar metaphor of the God-sun is also reconstructed by Melissanthē in order to depict the explosion of erotic magma. The first-person verb, in the active, through which the reader is introduced to the action of the poem, emphasizes the woman's self-determination to reach God and not the other way around. God reveals Himself and mingles with her because she chose so. Within this universal union the body has an essential role to play; in the end it is dissolved thanks to its reaction with the spirit. The vaporization of the physical hypostasis in these contexts becomes a prerequisite for the female subject to be liquefied and transmuted in spirit and thus reach deification.

*

Based on the above poems we can now propound some basic principles about the way Melissanthē handled the issue of love, which seem to be in effect to her poetic work during the interwar period. However, a thorough study of the linguistic, expressive and thematic choices of her poetry is still pending if one wants to understand her radical poetics. As Maria Athanasopoulou (2011: 324) has pointed out, "η πρωτοτυπία της [Μελισσάνθης] έγκειται στο ότι το νέο ιδίωμα απαλείφει τη συναισθηματική γλώσσα των παλαιότερων ποιητριών, μολοντί εξακολουθεί να ενδιαφέρεται για τα ίδια θέματα". I believe that the poems discussed here confirm this view. Melissanthē's engagement with love is significantly different from the way other female poetesses treated the same subject, often largely identified with commonplace and vapid sentimentality. These characteris-

tics of the so-called “women’s writing”¹¹ were frequent accusations made by male critics as they urgently sought from women the absolute outburst of emotion when they decided to engage in creating original literary work (Vasileiadēs 2006: 103-106). In this ‘game’, Melissanthē imposed her own terms to play, not only by avoiding similar practices but also by rewarding the profile of a poetess who dangerously -for men- approached the limits of intellectualism. This was, after all, one of the allegations she received for her second collection, *Προφητείες* (Makrydēmas 2023: 186-187), which confirms the male audience’s reaction to a woman’s attempt to speak about love in intellectual terms, associating it with the religious attraction to the divine.

By charging love with Christian complexion was a strategy that certainly lent a pioneering attitude to Melissanthē’s interwar poetry. The poetess did not dedicate herself to promoting religious themes that served the idea of Christian morality, which inevitably became closely identified with the nationalistic sentiment (Gazē 2011). Her verses challenge the patriarchal worldview of Christianity. Her focus is not only on the female body, but much more on the female spirit as an equal to the male, achieved through the interplay of the two elements in Christian contexts, which Melissanthē reinterpreted. Furthermore, she did not devote herself to abandoning the gender-based discriminatory Christian culture. On the contrary, she dedicated herself to rebuilding it so that women could be incorporated, since they remain alienated even today from Christian rituals and imagery, as far as Eastern Orthodox Church concerned. In this respect, Melissanthē somewhat foreshadows the similar project of the feminist Luce Irigaray, who advocated the transformation of the biblical legacy to include the woman in the divinity (Joy 2006) from which is still banished to this day (Jasper 2001: 131) – ironically Irigaray’s undertaking received harsh criticism from feminist circles.

Irigaray’s mild radical feminism, drawing on the already established patriarchal Christian tradition, aimed to relocate women in the realm of the sacred, which remained exclusively male-centered. Following Ludwig Feuerbach’s thought that “God is the mirror of man; God is nothing else than the nature of man” (Hekman 2019: 118), she envisioned a world

11. For the problematic and abusive treatment of the term, see the very interesting opinions of important female writers such as Adeia Frantzē – Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke – Rea Galanakē – Alkyonē Papadakē – Paulina Pampoudē (1990).

where women could be placed on an equal footing with men in the sphere of the sacred. The concept of God cannot be conceived solely through masculinity but should be expanded based on femininity. Melissanthē did not reach the extreme limit of her feminist intentions, as she did not demand the absolute abandonment of gender distinctions in the world of Christianity. This, of course, can be perfectly understood if we place her endeavor within its historical context, when feminism was in its early emergence and women did not strive to emphasize their differences from men but sought their identification with them¹² in order to achieve an equal (social, political, etc.) treatment. In any case, Melissanthē's interwar poetry may not have proceeded to create a new female reality by subsidizing female sanctity, but it did cause a reflection on the concept of femininity. The various gradations of her poetic voice did not focus on how vulnerable or not the female subject is due to patriarchal mechanisms of pleasure control but they echoed the silenced aspects of female eroticism and female physicality against the background of a Christian field of discourse, which traditionally treated these subjects with suspicion. God remains always masculine and mighty, for the poetess; however the erotic force that pushes the woman to approach Him often functions as a factor of His weakening. Melissanthē's female eroticism creates cracks in the body of male divine supremacy, hence enhancing, on the one hand, the reinterpretation of a set of beliefs that define the space of patriarchal religiosity, and on the other hand, the return to the primitive core of Christian teaching, to the words of Jesus himself, who sought gender equality, a teaching that was forgotten along the way under the pressure of androcentric power (Armstrong 1987: 59). In conclusion, the deliberate use of the Christian framework highlights the poetess's attempt to articulate her concerns about the nature of spiritual experience and its gender dynamics in the

12. Staying strictly within the limits of the conversation with Christianity, I think the same endeavor undertook Melpō Axiōtē, in a much more diminished way. In 1939, in her composition *Σύμπνοση*, Axiōtē discussed the marginalized position of women, trying at the same time to render men equally guilty for the Fall of Man, if we consider that the first part of the compound "συν" in the title also concerns them. Besides, the following verses along with the broader context of the composition seem to sarcastically refute the disapproval of women, since in the biblical narration of Genesis they are identified as the first sinners through Eve: "εμείς, τι άλλο θέλατε από μας / εμείς είμαστε γυναίκες — / πολύ μας πικράνατε. // Συχνά το φύλο μας προσφέραμε σαν πιάτο / μέσα σε φύλλα μουριάς / και / ωστόσο / καθαρίζαμε μήλο" (Axiōtē 2001: 16).

Christian context. Female eroticism, which for centuries was condemned or suppressed by Christianity, was positively charged by Melissanthē and emerged as a means of liberation and formation of an emancipatory theology of love.

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