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Tactility as an infallible way of understanding materiality: Poetic examples from Eleni Vakalo's Before Lyricism

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**Tactility as an infallible way of understanding materiality:
Poetic examples from Eleni Vakalo's *Before Lyricism*¹**

In order to undertake the approach of some indicative examples focusing on the matter of *tactility* (and, therefore, touch) and, of course, *materiality* that acts as our theme, we are going to use instances from Eleni Vakalo's *world*, which is poetically composed in the unit "Before Lyricism", I believe it is helpful to start my declaration with a beneficial observation. This observation, or precisely, ascertainment belongs to Eleni Vakalo and comes from the important essay published in 1959 with the title «Τὸ μοντέρον πνεῦμα στὴν τέχνη» (The modern spirit in art) in the first volume of journal *Κριτική*, whose publisher was the eminent poet, Manolis Anagnostakis. In this essay, Vakalo aims to give the main points of a progress, or, precisely, the mark of an overcoming that is observed from the start of 20th century and continues till her time, mainly in the field of plastic/visual arts, but also to outline the basic points as for the difference between traditional and modern understanding of art. As essential appears the thesis that modern art suggests "apart from a new plasticity and a new way of expression" («Τὸ μοντέρον πνεῦμα» 54), the innovation of dialectical activation of the receiver (the viewer) of the artistic product, so that the receiver acts as the "extension" («Ἄπὸ τὴν πλευρὰ» 35) of the artist. I'll quote the ascertainment that concerns us: "[...] we think if we could fit the things in systems, we can also conquer them" (Βακαλό, «Τὸ μοντέρον πνεῦμα» 43).

Starting my approach with this compact given phrase, I emphasize on Vakalo's attempt to show, and, at the same time, to condemn the belief that stems from the attitude towards things and their *materiality*. This attitude appears instituted and consolidated within the shape of western culture. The belief that things can be conquered once they are classified in fixed systems doesn't end up in nothing more than a delusional awareness which comes to light from the conventional acquisition of the things' outer side. Obviously, this kind of knowledge stems from and interweaves with the established regimes of truth.

I emphasized on the preceding statement in order to make clear that Vakalo's poetry differs from this convention and systematization and, simultaneously, concurs with the "modern spirit", with its expressive and plastic innovations, which she instills in her poetry, using the *confluence*² of poetry and plastic arts, functioning, therefore, with (inter)artistic way, the activation of the receiver of course, but also with the important familiarization of a revisionary attitude as

¹ In the title of this declaration, the particular terms "Before Lyricism" are placed in italics because they refer to the title of the translated in English edition of Vakalo's poems. In *Before Lyricism*, Karen Emmerich collects all the poems that Eleni Vakalo published from 1954 until 1966. Cf.: Vakalo, Eleni. *Before Lyricism*. Translated – edited by Karen Emmerich. Ugly Duckling Presse, 2017.

² Using the term *confluence*, I try to translate in English the Greek term *διακλαδίσματα* which Vakalo proposes in her theoretical essays in order to show the intensive and continual correlation between fine arts. Art as a whole, from Vakalo's perspective, and, in particular, the genres of art proceed with mutual parallel redevelopments, which act as signs of the artistic progress. Cf.: Βακαλό, Ελένη. *Η φυσιογνωμία τῆς μεταπολεμικῆς τέχνης στὴν Ἑλλάδα Αφαίρεση*, v. A'. Κέδρος, 1981, pp. 22.

for the traditional cognitive data. This revisionary artistic attitude concludes or, especially, comes to light with a turn towards things, namely towards their *materiality*. Thus, we could say that in Vakalo's anterior to lyricism (*προλυρική*) poetry the *materiality* –the sensed (*aistheton*)– gains dominant importance.³

Eleni Vakalo, art critic –with an eye to plastic arts–, and a poet enlisted in the collectivity of the so-called 'first postwar generation' is a singular and radical figure of modern Greek poetry. The singularity of her poetic figure stems from characteristics which compose a personal poetic way. The avant-garde structure is clear. The experimental characteristics can be observed in the poetical period that concerns us most, namely in these twelve years from 1954 till 1966, during which Vakalo publishes six poetic collections. These collections are connected under the title "Before Lyricism". The apposition of her poems, of this composed unit, at a stage anterior to or, as Kimon Friar states, "beyond lyricism":

From *The Forest* (1954) [...] she has been writing a series of poems which, in reaction to emotive poetry steeped in sentiment, have attempted to go 'beyond lyricism' by going back to 'before lyricism', to that archaic world of instantaneous identification where horse and rider are one continuous movement, where word and object are identical; to that primitive magic realm where to name a thing is to create it, where a poem must not *mean* but *be* (21),

is, apparently, purposeful and shows a statement of artistic creation which comes to light with the abandonment of the traditional poetic norms and the air-brush of "subjective vibration" (Θέμελης 305). So, it ends up in what is called "pragmatognosia" (Πλαστήρας 343), which describes the apprehension and the acquaintance with the inmost and unseen being of things, the *unconcealedness* ("The Origin" 57) of beings, if we wish to use a Heideggerian term, this that Vakalo poetically calls "the things other", surpassing the common-sense concerning dualism and contrasted enclosure. The importance of this unit can be depicted with the following words:

Before Lyricism was mostly an attempt to go away from the shapes of poetry and I could add from the cosmology of poetry, not to govern on things, not to mention them under 'ego' but to be mentioned on them. In a way, coequal condition and not dominant... («Ελένη Βακαλό» 23)⁴

With a cognitive intention, the suggestion in these poems, some of which follow, is the re-arrogation of instinct as a method to approach a positive "re-barbarism",⁵ which is an aftereffect of this human beneficial attitude between

³ Cf. Frantzi's helpful conclusion about Vakalo's poetry: «[...] μια ποίηση ικανή να ξαναβρεί την επαφή με την υλικότητα και τη σχέση του σώματος με τα πράγματα [: a poetry that is able to regain the connection with materiality and the body's relation with the things]»: Φραντζή, Αντεια. "Εμενε ποίημα. Μια περιδιάβαση στο ποιητικό «Δάσος» της Ελένης Βακαλό. Νεφέλη, 2005, pp. 45. [This is my translation]

⁴ This is my translation.

⁵ «Νομίζω πώς ή Βακαλό έννοει τὸν "έπαναβαρβαρισμὸν" σὰν μιὰν ἐπαναφορὰ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου στὶς φυσικὲς του ρίζες, σὰν μιὰν ὀδὸν ἀπολύτρωσης ἀπὸ τὸ κοινωνικὸ ψεῦδος κι ὅχι φυσικὰ σὰν μιὰ πισωδρομὴ στὸ πρωτόγονο στάδιο τοῦ ἀνθρώπινου εἴδους [: I think that Vakalo means the

nature and culture. Precisely, the key to gain knowledge about an unfamiliar word of corporeality lies in the return to the natural human state. This is the only way humans can understand and know the natural world free from dualism and objective knowledge, these steelyards, we might say, which are bequeathed by culture.

As long as the objective knowledge is out of context in the poems of this unit, it is advisable to gain knowledge using the body. The incorporated knowledge arises as the possible effect of "equation"⁶ with the thing, which must not be taken as something that stands opposite (as an *antikeimenon*) but as a "subject" that demands its approach as an intact beingness. Thus, we can see the leading role of senses, which act as the only and the best way to achieve "pragmatognosia". Without the senses, that act as means of gaining "equation" with the thing, the incorporated way of knowing –and knowing in general– wouldn't be possible.

Consequently, the touch is preferable to other senses, especially to the eyesight. In comparison to eyesight, that accounts for a distant knowledge (bearing in mind the distance between the eye and the object), the touch demands the proximity to the *materiality*. Additionally, the eyesight, intertwined with the consolidated cognitive system of western culture, is sufficient only for the things' surfaces. At the same time, touch is capable of recognizing things multivalently, discovering and revealing the quality and structure through their *tactility*, the shape (scheme), the dimensions and the shaped mass through their *materiality*. To that extent, the touch as the instant and accurate sense, turns out to be dominant and the only one able to lead to the comprehension of the created world in many poems in "Before Lyricism".

The following underlined verses demonstrate this distinction and preference for the touch. These verses come from the first collection of this unit –the first *revolutionary act*⁷ in poetical terms– named *The Forest*, published in 1954:

Do you really know whether you're inside or out
 Of the closed spaces that always exist?
 It depends entirely
 On the slant of the sun
 Even at the seaside
 On Sunday excursions
 In rowboats

're-barbarism' as the human's retrieval in their natural roots, as a way of salvation from the social falsehood and not, of course, as a regression at the primitive stage of mankind]»: Αναγνωστάκη, Νόρα. «Προοίμιο στήν ποίηση τῆς Έλένης Βακαλό». Διαδρομή. Δοκίμια Κριτικής (1960-1995), Νεφέλη, 1995, pp. 19. [This is my translation]

⁶ «Η γνώση ἀποκτᾶται μὲ τὴν ταύτιση. [...]. Άντι τῆς ἀντικειμενικῆς γνώσης, ταύτιση-ένσωμάτωση· ἡ σωστὴ λέξη θὰ ἡταν [...] ἐνδοσκόπηση: ὅχι μόνο μὲ τὸ μυαλὸ ἀλλὰ καὶ μὲ τὶς αἰσθήσεις, ὅχι μόνο μέσα στὸν ἔαντό μας ἀλλὰ καὶ μέσα στὸ ἄλλο ποὺ εἶναι καὶ αὐτὸ ὑποκείμενο καὶ ὅχι ἀντικείμενο [: The understanding can be acquired with equation. [...]. Instead of objective knowledge, incorporated-equation: the correct word could be [...] introspection: not only by using our mind but also our senses, (introspection) not only through ourselves but also through the other which is also subject not object]»: «Σὲ β' πρόσωπο. Μιὰ συνομιλία τῆς Έλένης Βακαλό μὲ τὸν Άντωνη Φωστιέρη καὶ τὸν Θανάση Νιάρχο». *H λέξη* 15, 1982, pp. 396. [This is my translation]

⁷ "This poem/ Is my last revolutionary act/ Before I obey/ The advice of foreigners": Vakalo, Eleni. *Before Lyricism*, op. cit., 20.

While around them
 Huge ships steam off
 A whole fleet
 With us in their wake
 Like children's prams being taken
 From the park
 At dusk
Leaving our hands
This feeling of our hands grasping
[Leaning] on benches
 The dew painted
 Not only
 In the forest (Vakalo 7-8)

In these verses, the dominant tactile organs, the primarily organs –“the hand is a tool of tools” as Aristotle said (65)–, which –with intention and movement– are able to lead to the exercise of knowledge, are displayed. Resting, deactivated, motionless and empty of material they seem as if they are dead. The aspiring dead hands are those from which the ability to approach, to touch and to know the *materiality* has been removed – briefly, the ability of “equation”. It's worth mentioning the important verse as for the touch (“This feeling of our hands grasping”), which acts, naming this sense periphrastic, as a statement that overcomes the static demand for its regaining and ends up in an explicit statement of its (the sense of touch) duration. Its display between the two verses brings to light the hands deactivation, intensifies the weight and the volume, while touch is appointed as the state during which it is possible for the hands to touch and to know.

With this poetic example, I tried to show that in Vakalo's poetic *world materiality* and touch should be seen as correlative. The absence of the thing, of material, weakens the sense to such an extent that it seems to be opiated, abolishing every intention of corporal knowledge in the end. The thing functions as a stimulus of action, namely it gives life and moves the sensory organ, acting as impulse so as to fulfill the end of its being. In the second example, I will focus on the first verses of *The Forest* again:

The shape of the forest has
 The shape of a jellyfish
 That you catch in your hands and it slips through
 As a wave
 Pushes it out
 Perhaps this happens
 Because
 It moves... (Vakalo 3)

Here, Vakalo strives for cognitive conquering of the “shape of the forest”, of this unfamiliar and mysterious *place* which is approached from the inside but remains always covered and discovered. With an eye to depict the unknown with words, the constant change and the fluidity of shape, an analogy of tactile structure is used. So, “[t]he shape of the forest” is, clearly, compared to the fluid

“shape of a jellyfish”. The hand, again, conquers the “shape of a jellyfish” and by that, the changeable contour, the movement and the slide can be understood. Consequently, the corporal knowledge gains the shape of the forest, as with the “shape of a jellyfish”, fluid and abstract.

Moving forward to another example coming from *Description of the Body*, the poetic collection published in 1959, it becomes obvious that this collection as a whole is the artistic fulfillment showing Vakalo’s theory of corporal knowledge. The body, in this “unfamiliar” description, doesn’t come into the center as a body familiar and known from an anatomic perspective but as a mass made of *plastic* processing. Under these circumstances, only *tactility*, “equation” with this mass and the internal touch, which touches it in depth can function as factors that contribute to its cognitive access. The touch dominates here and appoints every attempt of understanding and conception of this formed, corporeal and material mass, because from the starting point every conventional and distant knowledge of corpus has been abolished:

The body you see with simple limbs some knowing
what to call each separately, and together how they
pass in bands you hadn’t noticed in motion, and other
points all over the body to which you’ve never given a
thought

Begetting an emotion
You no longer know it
As simply you knew it before

It is touch.
Watching, huge blind eyes graze the body, each naked
of its lid, whole, embeds in the body, watching after-
ward from there... (Vakalo 51-2)

Apart from all this, it’s worth referring to the organs that perform the tactile motion as they touch the body. These organs are not the hands –as before– but the eyes, which are embedded in the mass, “blind” and “naked from its lid[s]”. Blindness⁸ –seen as the blindness of automated eyesight– is the characteristic that makes even the eyes organs of a powerful and “fundamental touch”,⁹ which can be seen as an aggregate¹⁰ of senses in Vakalo’s poetry.

⁸ Nora Anagnostaki, one of the most erudite critics of Vakalo’s poetry, points out in 1960 that Vakalo chooses the sense of touch “in order to touch the meaning of the real” («ν’ ἀγγίξει τὸ νόητρα τοῦ πραγματικοῦ»): «Η μέθοδος της είναι ή μέθοδος τοῦ τυφλοπόντικα: ἀποκλείει τὴν ὄραση γιὰ νὰ βλέπει καλύτερα [: Her method is the mole’s method: excludes the eyesight so that [she] sees better]»: Αναγνωστάκη, Νόρα. «Προοίμιο στὴν ποίηση τῆς Έλένης Βακαλό». Διαδρομή. Δοκίμια Κριτικής (1960-1995), op. cit., 13.

⁹ I use here a crucial Deriddean definition for touch as it is found in *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*: Derrida, Jacques. *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*. Translated by Christine Irizarry. Stanford University Press, 2005, 70.

¹⁰ I approach touch, in this poetry, as an aggregate of senses, bearing in mind that, in some cases, senses like taste or olfaction are able to function in a tactile way so as to ensure corporal knowledge. This approach can be connected with Jean-Luc Nancy’s *tactile corpus* at which actions as “looking, [...], smelling, tasting” are included as capable of operating in a tactile manner. Cf. Derrida, Jacques. *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy*, op. cit., 70. Therefore, the other senses – even the

Blindness, which acts as a condition for showing this tactile function in *Description of the Body*, turns out to be –as a complete blindness now– a regulatory condition in the poems published three years later, in 1962, in a collection with the title *The meaning of the Blind*. In these poems, touch does not just appear as the ideal option out of all the senses for approaching the knowledge of *materials*, but, first and foremost, becomes an unavoidable necessity. With the touch dominating all the other senses, that also function in a tactile way (except for the eyesight), the audition and instincts like fear are sharpened and play a major role in “pragmatognosia” and in finding the lifesaving escape:

THE FIRST HOURS WHEN THE BLIND ENTER THE POEM

–From the diary of the poem–

They place me in a room

I can hear it from the mass of silence that the endless night has
not yet come
When I will walk through the door of the house before any-
one can overtake me

One day I will find that door wide open, I will find out where
it is,
as hugging the wall touching the objects one by one adjusting
their positions I come to know them

Mostly I suspect before the bird comes like a clock to strike
their names complete
–the bird a mere shape inscribed in their iron or wood... (Vakalo 72-3)

Consequently, the understanding of things is connected, as we can see from the verses above, to the struggle for freedom, striving away from ignorance and restriction in a closed and delimited place. In this poem, Vakalo gives what has been left after continual processes that account for the stages that we have already mentioned: the stages of connection between *tactility* and *materiality* of things and the sense of touch. The precise function and action of the sense to “adjust the positions” of things, understanding the shape, the structure, the weight etc. is depicted with a characteristic accurate expression by words.

As we can conclude, for a hypothesis which closes only for now, in the poetical unit “Before Lyricism” Vakalo tries, apart from a cosmogony for which almost every artistic product aims, a “cosmognosia” –an understanding of *cosmos/world*– which depends on the major factor of re-conquered touch as an infallible corporal ability to approach the uncountable, natural and material world that surrounds the body.

eyesight under particular circumstances – can be seen as extensions of touch in Vakalo’s poetry as long as they are able to act with the immediacy and accuracy that characterize touch.

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Περίληψη

Τίνα Γκοσίου

Η αφή ως αλάνθαστος τρόπος κατανόησης της υλικότητας: Ποιητικά παραδείγματα από την προλυρική ποίηση της Ελένης Βακαλό

Με την εστίαση στην προλυρική ποίηση, που γράφει και δημοσιεύει η Ελένη Βακαλό κατά τη δωδεκαετή περίοδο 1954-1966, επιδιώκεται στην προκείμενη ανάλυση η ανάδειξη του νήματος που τη συνυφαίνει με την υλικότητα, την απτικότητα, την αφή και τη σωματική/ενσώματη γνώση. Αυτή η προλυρική ποίηση - ριζοσπαστική στην ουσία της και ερειδόμενη σε διακαλλιτεχνικά ερείσματα- προσεγγίζεται ως ένα εγχείρημα κοσμογονίας, ως εγχείρημα δηλαδή δημιουργίας ενός κόσμου με κυρίαρχα δομικά συστατικά τις υλικότητες. Ως προέκταση της κοσμογονίας προτείνεται από τη Βακαλό η ζήτηση της "κοσμογνωσίας", της γνωσιακής δηλαδή προσπέλασης του ανοίκειου και επικίνδυνου κόσμου, που έχει ποιητικώς συγκροτηθεί, διαμέσου του σώματος. Σε αυτή τη γνωσιακή απόπειρα, που εντοπίζεται ολοτελώς διαφοροποιούμενη από την αντικειμενική γνώση και ευθέως ελευθερούμενη από τη στενωπό του δυϊσμού, οι (ανα)κατακτημένες, ενεργοποιημένες αισθήσεις επιτελούν μείζονα ρόλο, γεγονός που τεκμηριώνεται μέσω ορισμένων παρατεθειμένων στην ανάλυση παραδειγματικών ποιητικών χωρίων. Ιδιαίτέρως, η αφή -αίσθηση που προϋποθέτει την εγγύτητα στην υλικότητα και, ως εκ τούτου, επιτρέπει τη ζητούμενη από τη Βακαλό «ταύτιση» με αυτήν- προτείνεται ως δεσπόζουσα για το άδραγμα της γνώσης. Πλην της αφής, ως γνωσιακοί παράγοντες στέκουν και όλες εκείνες οι αισθήσεις που μπορούν να λειτουργήσουν απτικώς - ακριβώς και αμέσως. Με τις ενεργοποιημένες, λοιπόν, αισθήσεις ως μέσα η σύνολη γνωσιακή απόπειρα απολήγει στη «μη-κρυπτότητα» της υλικότητας η οποία αφενός κατορθώνεται μέσω της "αποκωδικοποίησης" των απτικών της ποιοτήτων, αφετέρου στέκει εξεχόντως ως το δεσπόζον ζητούμενο της πειραματικής ποίησης της Βακαλό.