

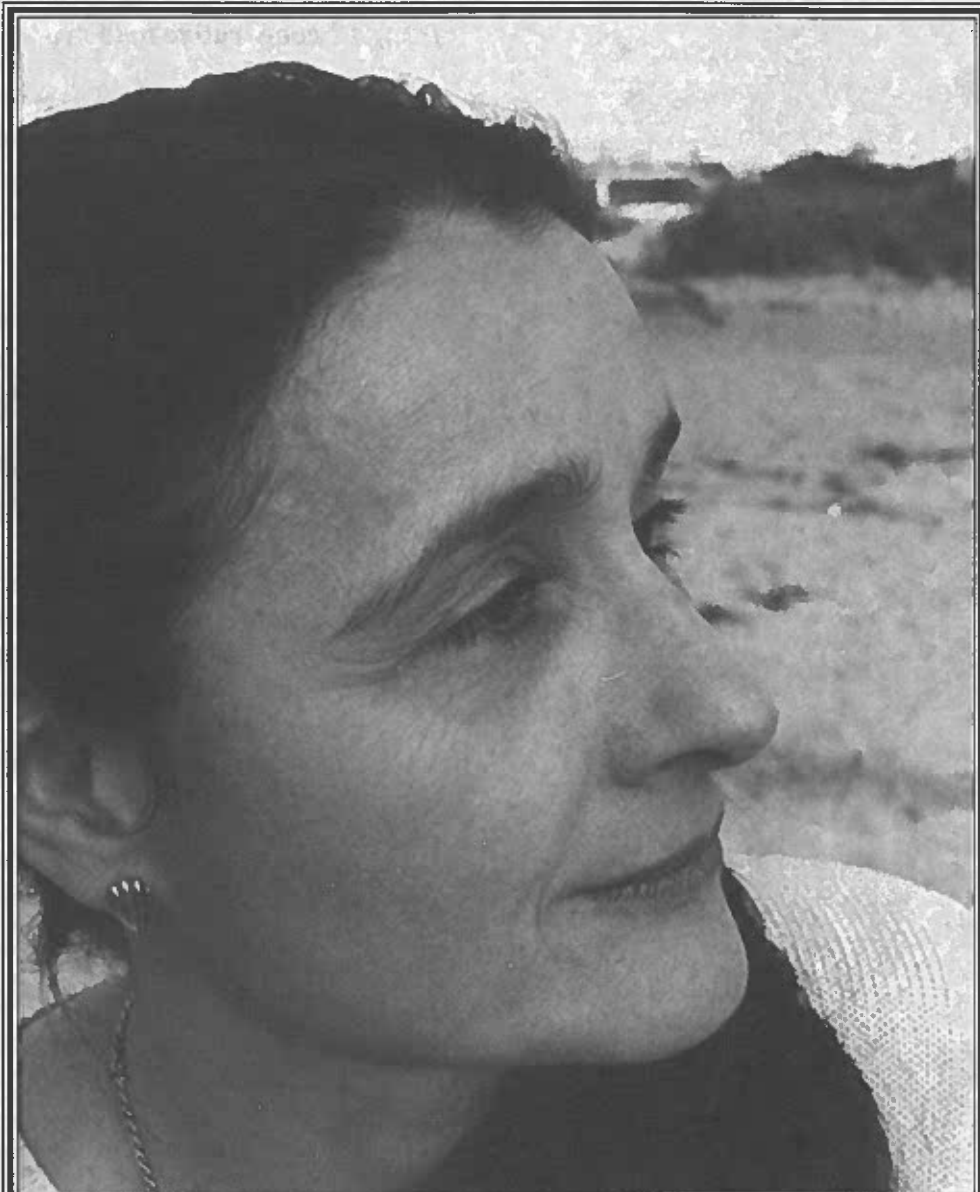
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Olga Broumas

The Hellenic Literature Society's Literary Review

Olga Broumas's Body Language

Christian McEwen

Olga Broumas published her first book at the age of 18. She won the Yale Younger Poets Award (for *Beginning With O*) at 29. "After a decade's dawdling she found herself "before a broad / horizon-reaching mesa full of brooks." The account she gives of her own human geography -

*Clear
From heart to mind a threshing
ground
where compassion, outrage, dignity
share breadth the sexual alone
had augured with its olive branch.*

- could well stand as epigraph to her book *Perpetua*. It is a lucid and vulnerable piece of work: more autobiographical, and at the same time more thoroughly political, than any she has written up to now.

In *Caritas*, the first collection she published in this country, Broumas described herself guiding a friend, flashlight in hand, "inside the small/ cathedral of my cunt." She used the blunt Anglo-Saxon word without apology, explicitly raising it to sacred status:

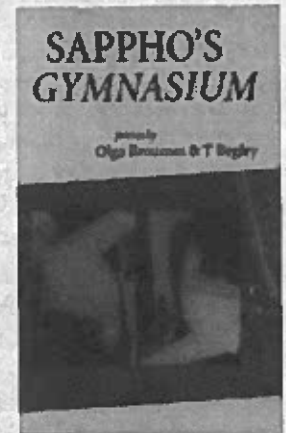
*A woman-made language would
have as many synonyms for
pink/light-filled/hole as
the Eskimo does
for snow*

That passage has been many times reprinted, as much for its shock value in a prudish and schizophrenic culture as for what it actually says. And, to this day Broumas is identified as a "cunt poet," a poet of things female, sexual, mystical, and mythological. Her declamatory poems are well known - "Sleeping Beauty" for example, with its consciously lesbian narrative of two women "Kissing/ against the light" in a public place: "This is the woman I woke from sleep, the woman that woke/ me sleeping." Her other work - subtler, more richly textured, less immediately accessible - has on the whole gone unremarked. Broumas is a poet of sexuality, of female comings-to-power, but she is also a nature poet, a poet of consolidation and healing, someone whose primary concern (and it is there at the very start of her career, in *Caritas* and throughout *Beginning with O*) is with language in and of itself. "In a different language, things occur differently," she said in our interview. As a stranger to this country, born and brought up in Greece and talking even now with a faint Greek accent, that is something she has never wanted to forget.

For Broumas herself, *Beginning With O* undoubtedly meant "beginning with Olga"; her life, her own experiences. But the initial also stood for "O, the O-/mega, horseshoe, the cave of sound." This was language as it existed prior to culture, language on its Ur-self, its state of pure possibility. It was there, before the "mangling," that Broumas wanted to situate herself. In "Thetis," for example, she took on the voice of a goddess teaching birth control to one of her young followers, and replaced the usual medical terminology



Rave, Poems 1975-1999
364 pgs, 1998



Sappho's Gymnasium
186 pgs, 1994

with beautiful watery metaphors:

*Inland
the women call themselves Tidal
Pools
call their water jars Women, insert
sponge and seaweed
under each curly, triangular thatch.*

Even now the accuracy and unembarrassed lyricism of this surprises. But that, after all, was Broumas's explicit intention: to transform the language of embarrassment, awkwardness, and felt ugliness into the language of confidence and self-love. Listen, for example, to the gentle earnestness of the lovers in "Rumpelstiltskin":

*I call you lovely. Over
and over, cradling
your ugly memories as they burst
their banks, tears and tears, I call
you lovely. Your face
will come to trust that judgment, to
bask
in its own clarity like sun. Grown
women. Turning
heliotropes to our own, to our lovers'
eyes.*

Language as confirmation: again and again Broumas worked to shape the language, to set up her own words, her own judgment, against the disapproving voices of the past. In her world, God himself was transformed, made present and intimate in the most vital way.

*A hand
With the glide of a tongue, a hand
precise as an eyelid, a hand with a
sense
of smell, a hand that will dance*

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to its liquid moan.

...
*the small
 hand of God
 inventing
 itself again.*

"A still small voice" is one thing: a tiny live hand is something else altogether. And yet if making love is a Good Thing and God cares for us, as preachers say, and wants to cherish us, doesn't it make sense that He/She/It might decide to get more personally involved? "Extra/ hand, extra/ pleasure" as Broumas put it, unafraid of her own ecstatic conclusions.

There was, however, a price to be paid for such originality. When *Beginning With O* was published, Broumas went from having a readership of six to having a readership of 6000. She was catapulted onto the poetry-reading circuit and "did 37 readings in something like 30 states in three months." On one level, she loved the chance to read. On another, the barrage of attention, praise, and

misunderstanding came as a burden. In a number of the houses she visited, her goddess poems had been cut out of the book and set up on altars, with flowers and candles in front of them. "Which should have been an honor, but it was terrifying to me. Because my purpose in writing those poems was to say, 'This is *our* power,' to take it away from the deity in the sky, the externalized, and to say, 'This is mine.'" When such a core intention went unrecognized, her confidence in a reliable audience began to falter. Small wonder that in both *Soie Sauvage and Pastoral Jazz* (and later, with Jane Miller, in *Black Holes, Black Stockings*), she should retreat into a more refracted, private, in her terms "coded" language, one in which she might be "understood or not understood, but not misunderstood."

Back in the Northwest after her 37 readings, Broumas applied to the Oregon Arts Commission for a grant. They gave her \$1,000 - "which at the time was like \$4,000 today" - and she took to the road, driving herself

*through Oregon
 the greeny garden looking
 for the heart felt heart
 reviving drone -*

For four months she did not speak. "I mean I went to the grocery store and said, 'Fill up the car,' but I really didn't talk for four months." To all intents and purposes she was on a spiritual quest, and the next book, *Soie Sauvage*, reflects that fact. The goddesses and myths and fairy tales are gone and Broumas is on her own, writing of the human body, love and sex and landscape, in poems that have begun to lose their syntax, to break down into lists and separate phrases:

*rush hour light so delicate
 in March in spring
 magnolia forsythia plum cherry every
 kind
 of bulb*

Such lines have the sketchy accuracy of journal keeping. And in fact, much of *Soie Sauvage* is written as interior monologue, with occasional forays in the direction of a few trustworthy listeners (among them Deborah Haynes and Gary Snyder, to whom the book is dedicated). Here, for example, is Broumas in "Namaste":

*Deborah
 we didn't know
 when we agreed to love ourselves well for a year
 it takes just that to want to
 understand.*

Her own attempts to understand reached back into the past, remembering the small Olga passed from hand to hand, and how the grown-ups had frightened her:

*Lifted
 from the table thumbs
 stray to your nipples lips
 stray to your lips they kiss
 touch fondle pass you round*

This was the child that Broumas as an adult wanted to rescue and reclaim. Love was the healer; she looked to trust of the body and work for reassurance "against the slothful odds: fatigue/ depression loneliness." Or to put it in the imperative of her beloved Zen

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ΙΑΡΥΜΑ
ΜΕΛΙΝΑ
ΜΕΡΚΟΥΡΗ



*"I hope to see the
 Marbles back in
 Greece before I die.
 If, however, the
 Marbles, are
 returned after my
 death, then I will be
 reborn"*

Athens must build the New Acropolis Museum not only for its citizens, for the visitors to Greece, and for the lovers of beauty, but also to house the cultural treasures of Greece. This was the explicit and most sincere wish of Melina Merkouri.

The *Melina Merkouri Foundation* was established by Presidential decree. Its primary goal is the creation of the New Acropolis Museum. In addition, the Foundation will coordinate initiatives for the return of the Parthenon Marbles (Elgin Marbles) back to Greece. Zule Dassin is the president of the Foundation.

Contributions toward the realization of the New Acropolis Museum may be deposited to the following accounts:

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Melina

Poet's Page

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teachers, "Sweep the garden, any size/ said the roshi."

By the time she came to write *Pastoral Jazz*, Broumas was able to turn her full attention to the old question of language. She wanted a language that would allow her to luxuriate in words as she luxuriated in the body: "A slow dilation sexual of time and grammar." The alternative was paralysis:

*So dry inside
the landlocked boat to dreamlife.
Island
with cypress, idle tongue, cold clit.*

There was the consolation of lists ("Chamomile tea clean hair down blanket/ black old-world chimneys against blue sky"), of certain numinous moments ("bodies of children in an act of play/ as if in water, hips in light/ green and white seas"), and the almost physical pleasure of words and phrases taken from languages other than English (very different from her old self in *Soie Sauvage*, where Greek had sounded "harsh/ and foreign to my ear"). "No problemas," she wrote. "Lindos suenos/ The sun is full today one lover says/ Swallow it whole/ Merci."

Another tactic throughout *Pastoral Jazz* was Broumas's swift reaching for the actual, in language so straightforward it seems to carry with it no burden of premeditation: "I put on your shirt because I miss you," or "How wonderful the light is on that tree/ just before rain." It is as if Broumas were trying to bypass all the difficulties of choice and self-expression and simply give what she saw, unmediated and complete. Insight condenses into a tiny wry proverb ("It's like with making love/ It does no good to remember") or a moment of Zennish humor ("Don't light match before filling pipe"). But still the dissatisfaction, the lingering distrust of words was there in the background.

Black Holes, Black Stockings, written in collaboration with Jane Miller, was in many ways the culmination of this method. Like *Soie Sauvage*, it too is the record of a journey, a strange and luxurious trip through unnamed Mediterranean countries, in which characters appear and disappear with the authority of dreams. There are many delights to be found enroute, like the magical list of blues ("Blue of rainforest green, of moss, ultramarine of closed eyes, evening pearl, berry black ... porpoise blue and whale gray, slate blue of metal... blue of sighs"), the sudden beat of a nursery rhyme ("when they were wet they were very very wet, and when they were dry they were funny"), the delicate *Songs of Bilitis*, translated from the French of Pierre Louys. But the brilliant surfaces grow wearing after a while, and the reader tires of the snatches of exotic gossip from which s/he is excluded: "Your aunt's daughter married a diplomat"; "Meanwhile the countess had sent her Russian editor to ask about our armchair." In addition, much of *Black Holes, Black Stockings* seems already to have found its preferred audience in the person of the fellow writer, and I at least was left feeling a little let down and unwanted in the glare of someone else's holiday. To know the background of the book, that Broumas was traveling on a Guggenheim, and that she and Jane Miller had made a pact to write together each day, and later "to take out all the ego we could identify," did not especially help. For all the anecdotes and pretty phrases, even the sudden potent memory of child abuse, the ultimate effect is somewhat cold. ■

Books in Brief

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τοπίο: "Κι άρχισαν οι ακτίνες να γυρνούν του Philips αμετάπειστες ας είχε πέσει ο ήλιος. Ύστερα οι πορτοκαλιές η θάλασσα ο δρόμος κατηφορικός. Άφρα το πεντάλ συνεπαρμένο σκίζαμε τα χρόνια. Στο Πανελλήνιο οκτώμισι ψυχή έριξα το ποδήλατο στην άμμο" ("Phillips").

Στα χαρακτηριστικά της ποίησής του προσμετράται η εξομολόγηση, η οποία έχει την ιδιότητα στα δικά του ποιήματα να ανακαλύπτει τις δυνάμεις του μικρού, ασήμαντου στην πρώτη ματιά, και του καθημερινού. Το εργαστήρι του δεν είναι και τόσο δύσκολο να περιγράψει: χρησιμοποιεί τα εργαλεία της μεταύπερρεαλιστικής ποιητικής, ενώ η μπιτ επινόηση κατέχει κι αυτή ένα μέρος, στον τρόπο με τον οποίο αντιλαμβάνεται τον κόσμο, σαν ένα απειλητικό φάσμα δηλαδή, κατασκευασμένο με τα υλικά της κατανάλωσης.

Η μεταύπερρεαλιστική τεχνική τον οδηγεί σε λυρικές εκκλήσεις των λέξεων, αποκαλύπτοντας τον κρύφιο ήχο τους, ενώ οι μπιτ επιρροές του τον βοηθούν να μιλήσει για το μαύρο κουτί του σύγχρονου τεχνολογικού κόσμου, που μόλις τ' ανοίξεις, το κλείνεις αμέσως ερημητικά, γιατί οι αποκαλύψεις του σε κλονίζουν.

Τα ποιήματα της συλλογής μετεωρίζονται ανάμεσα στο συναίσθημα και την εξομολόγηση. Παρ' όλα αυτά, φαντάζουν ως υπέροχες λαμπηδόνες, αυτονοούμενες από το ποιητικό σώμα. Αλλά ως εκεί. Ο Γ. Τζανετάκης σκάβει στο λατομείο της αυτοβιογραφίας του, παίρνει αυτούσιο το υλικό του και το αποτυπώνει.

Το εγχείρημα, ίσως, να ενδιαφέρει περισσότερο τον ίδιο, όταν βλέπει από μεγάλη απόσταση αυτή την ποιητική του κατάθεση: από τις σελίδες του περνούν ο γενέθλιος τόπος, η Καλαμάτα, με της ρίζεις του και τις κατακτήσεις του, όλη η ατμόσφαιρα του επαρχιακού μικρόκοσμου, τα διαβάσματα και τα παιχνίδια μίας υπό διαμόρφωση ψυχής. Δεν ξέρω πώς, αλλά ο ποιητής επιθυμεί να ξαναγίνει το παιδί και ο έφηβος που ήταν κάποτε, εξ ου και η ποιητική του συλλογή "Στο νήπιο με στυλό" μπορεί να θεωρηθεί ως βιβλίο εφηβείας, με τη ματιά, όμως, ενός ενήλικα.

Βασίλης Κ. Καλαμαράς (διαβάζω 12/99) ■



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