Criticising the Critic: The Greek Modernist Poet G.T. Vafopoulos on Greek Literary Critic Antreas Karantonis

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Abstract
Was the chief literary critic of the 1930's, Antreas Karantonis (1910-1982), spiteful and unfair in his critical texts about the poetry of G.T. Vafopoulos (1903-1996) and was Karantonis a critic who adapted to the poetic evolution? The prominent poet of the 1930's generation has expressed the opinion that Karantonis has been unfair to his poetry but research on the critical texts shows that, besides the negative views, Karantonis also expressed some positive ones regarding Vafopoulos' poetry. In addition, the constant critical adaptability that comes as a result of the critic's communication with the shifting poetic codes, and for which Karantonis' work is reproached by Vafopoulos, could be considered as an essential – perhaps even the most essential – virtue of the dynamic function of critical discourse.

Keywords: *modern Greek poetry, literary criticism, G. T. Vafopoulos, Antreas Karantonis.*

It is common belief that the study of both the artistic expression as well as the litterateurs' analytical thought shed light not only on their work, but also on various aspects of literary theory and criticism. G. T. Vafopoulos' (1903-1996) diverse literary work includes depositions of an analytical type. For the development of our topic, material has been mainly drawn from his book *Ποίηση και ποιητές* (Vafopoulos 1983) with the sufficiently enlightening subtitle "Μελετήματα", as well as from the text *Το πνευματικό πρόσωπο της Θεσσαλονίκης* (Vafopoulos 1980), which Vafopoulos defines as a "chronicle" (Vafopoulos 1983:12 and Vafopoulos 1980: 4), although initially – and in general correctly – describes as a "short essay" (Vafopoulos 1980: 7, 27, 49, 50, 63,66). Vafopoulos also provides us with many information on literary criticism and its representatives in his *Σελίδες αυτοβιογραφίας* (Vafopoulos 1970-1975) but, as far as the investigation of his opinion about Antreas

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Karantonis (1910-1982), one of the most important literary critics of the 20th century, is concerned, we regard that it is best to delve into analytical documents which are founded on more composed and reasonable lines of direction through their textual nature, instead of approaching autobiographical texts, which give forth an emotional warmth of high level on the one hand, but are not accompanied by the author's obligation of the highest possible impartiality on the other. Passing some stages of his poetic course in review with a main line of direction his first collection of poems *Τα ρόδα της Μυρτάλης* (1931), G. T. Vafopoulos also touches upon Antreas Karantonis. Initially, he does this in an indirect way, restoring T. K. Papatsonis' avant-garde role as well as his poetic value in both of the aforementioned reports (Vafopoulos 1980: 18 and Vafopoulos 1983: 39),[1] because it is well known that one of the main critical misfires of Karantonis was the lack of recognition and underestimation of Papatsonis' poetry (Vayenas 2011: 209-210). Vafopoulos then proceeds to mention that 'he was very impressed by [...] the book [...] *Ο ποιητής Γιώργος Σεφέρης*' (Vafopoulos 1983: 40)[2] and talks about a 'prodigy' (Vafopoulos 1983: 41) — he is right, if we think that Karantonis' critical age was much more mature than his actual one: the essay of reference in mention, which impressed Vafopoulos, was published in 1931 when Karantonis was only twenty-one years old. At length, Vafopoulos underlines Karantonis' disdainful position against him, talking about "a negative, [...] almost hostile stand of this critic towards a man that was definitely not the worst author of Modern Greek literature" (Vafopoulos 1983: 42).

In his two main studies, *Εισαγωγή στη νεότερη ποίηση* (Karantonis 1958) and *Γύρω από τη σύγχρονη ελληνική ποίηση* (Karantonis 1962), studies that were unified in one edition at one point and thereon, Antreas Karantonis does not mention Vafopoulos at all, while from the poets of Thessaloniki he mentions with positive comments Zoe Karelli, Giorgos Themelis and Manolis Anagnostakis (Karantonis 1984: 284, 290, 291, 294, 323, 326). In his book (Karantonis 1976), the chapter 'Giorgos Vafopoulos' is composed by two earlier book reviews; the first refers to the collection of poems *Η μεγάλη νύχτα και το παράθυρο* which was first published in 1956 and the second to the collection of poems *Επιθανάτια και Σάτιρες* which was first published in 1967 (Karantonis 1976: 56-59). In the first review we read: "There is a certain unbridgeable gulf between the soul that becomes aware of the sentiment and the mind that processes it poetically. During this process what happens is that the sentiment, the poetic breath, are lost,

evaporated and what is left is only the intellectual process. Vafopoulos is more of an intellectual poet than is needed for him to preserve his poetry and instil it to us" (Karantonis 1976: 54).

This is definitely a negative critical assessment, nevertheless not a malicious one nor — to be fair — entirely unfounded. In the second review, Karantonis' concluding deduction is that 'if the *Σάτιρες* were gone — or if they were printed separately — the *Επιθανάτια* would gain one more area of sanctity' (Karantonis 1976: 59), so he is in part negative in his review of Vafopoulos' collection. Other than that, he is absolutely positive to the point of praising Vafopoulos' work highly — one cannot argue that sanctity as a characteristic of poems does not belong to the negative statements of literary criticism. However, the last words of the review of 1956 of Vafopoulos' work are more revealing: "It seems like Vafopoulos gets every now and then carried away by such inconceivable little spites. And in these we have to include the passion with which he tried to push forward the fact that Palamas was hiding his age, as well as the pettiness with which he commented on a trip of Palamas' to Thessaloniki in 1929, as far as we know. How can a poet be interested in such matters?" (Karantonis 1976: 56).

'And why not?' would be a fair response, when we know that some of the most functional verifications of the philological and ideological field of modern Greek literature came from the critical and philological contribution of the poets (it would be a verbiage to name any here). On the other hand, Karantonis indicates his faith in the old romantic stereotype of a poetry of which its creators should not dismount Pegasus and step on the 'wasteland' of philological and factual trivialities. It is pointless to comment in length on Karantonis minor chronological error — Palamas' trip to Thessaloniki was in 1927; besides, the 'as far as we know' indicates his uncertainty of the year he mentions. It would be useful, though, to trace the reasons of the negative characterisations (inconceivable little spite, pettiness). Texts by G. T. Vafopoulos were published in issues of the literary magazine *Νέα Εστία* in 1950 (15 May 1950, 01 July 1950, 01 August 1950) in which it was claimed — and not without good cause — that Kostis Palamas was probably born in 1857 rather than in 1859. The claim was refuted by Spiros Melas implicitly and in a direct way by Harilaos Sakellariadis — Sakellariadis' refutation was published in the magazine *Ελληνική Δημιουργία*, of which the editor was Melas. Sakellariadis used insolent characterisations regarding Vafopoulos, like 'disrespectful',

'ungrateful', 'illiterate' (Vafopoulos 1983: 148-149), while Karantonis, even six years after the dispute, does not seem to embrace Vafopoulos' viewpoint.

In a letter to the magazine *Νέα Εστία* (01 May 1954), G. T. Vafopoulos refutes a publication of Antreas Karantonis' in the aforementioned magazine (01 March 1954 – Vafopoulos 1983: 273-278), in which, according to Giorgos Katsimpalis and his assertions, Vafopoulos appears during a conversation as an amusing denier of Solomos, in the presence of Palamas. The latter, according to Karantonis, 'starts to recite in a deep, passive voice verses from Solomos' *The Cretan*. That was the answer of Palamas to the young man's nonsense!' (Vafopoulos 1983: 273). Vafopoulos offers his own convincing version and explanation of the incident, which is needless, of course, to expand on anew here. As is known, Vafopoulos had published a text in the newspaper *Μακεδονία* (Vafopoulos 1983: 126) right after Palamas' visit to Thessaloniki (= December 1927), in which text he was outlining the exaggerations on behalf of Palamas' devotees as well as those of his sworn enemies. He elaborated further on this central idea much later in his lecture 'Ο Παλαμάς ανάμεσα σε δύο υπερβολές' (Vafopoulos 1983: 132-145), which was 'given in the lecture theatre of Y.W.C.A. of Thessaloniki, on 08 May 1954' (Vafopoulos 1983: 132).

> It was natural for the anti-palamic view of Apostolakis at the University to cause the contradiction. The corrosive influence upon the souls of the youths had to be confronted with some kind of antidote. And, since that strange aficionado of heroes had no peers either within the University or outside of it, it was imperative that the screws should be tightened. A circle of Palamas' devotees reflected that only the poets' presence in Thessaloniki could play the role of the screw on the fence that would restrain the movement that was created from Apostolakis' view. And an invitation was sent to Palamas and a reception schedule was organised in the same way as the receptions of political leaders are organised on the eve of an election [...] The unsuspecting people of Thessaloniki were applauding the poet without even knowing why and they were wondering who that important man might be, for whose sake those spectacular events with the band were taking place, which were the sole privilege of the Republic's President or the Prime Minister (Vafopoulos 1980: 30-32).

Antreas Karantonis deserves the characterization of the *palamist* and that of the favourably disposed towards palamic poetry – when he was nineteen

years old, in 1929, he printed the study *Εισαγωγή στο παλαμικό έργο*, in 1932 he published the volume *Γύρω στον Παλαμά*, while in 1971 a second volume of the same title was published. Maybe he was annoyed, because Vafopoulos entered the fields of karantonian criticism. He must have arguably been annoyed by Vafopoulos' correct political evaluation that those who organised the triumph of Palamas in Thessaloniki were 'all known venizelian agents', having as a result the strong reaction of "the anti-venizelian press, with an exemplary diligence towards the spirit of the time. So, an affair that commenced as an intellectual substrate and was now taking on an expression of a secularist movement could not avoid the partisan characterization (Vafopoulos 1980: 132 and Vafopoulos 1983: 126).

Note well that throughout his entire critical course Karantonis — as well as a significant portion of the so-called 'bourgeois intelligentsia' from the interwar era onwards — strongly supported the deeply conservative view of liberating the important literary expression from the political events and facts. Let us not be confused, for instance, by the aforementioned (Karantonis 1984: 323, 326) favourable view on Anagnostakis, which simply indicates that Karantonis was a competent reader: he felt that the exclamatory political charge was absent from the poet's allusive and pithy expression, while the existential parameters functioned together with the anguish and the deeper traumas the political partisanship brought. It seems that Karantonis was becoming aware that the latter only covered but a part of the expressive and emotional landscape of the poems, long before the creator himself distinctly clarified that he is both a love poet as well as a political one (Fais 2011: 59).[3]

Karantonis' negative predisposition towards Vafopoulos was enhanced by the latter's intellectually warm and friendly relationship with I.M. Panagiotopoulos. It is well known that I.M. Panagiotopoulos 'expostulated through the pages of magazine *Νέα Εστία* in 1947 [...] with the clique' (Vafopoulos 1983: 279) which, according to him — an opinion that was shared by many in the long run! — was constituted by Seferis, Karantonis and Katsimpalis.[4] However, when Vafopoulos published his short essay *Μια τραγική αντινομία* (Vafopoulos 1983: 279-284), in which he entirely and evidently stood with I.M. Panagiotopoulos' side in regards to the context of that particular dispute, Karantonis had already passed away (27 June 1982), whilst when Vafopoulos' very praising *Χαιρετισμός* to Panagiotopoulos in 1979 (Vafopoulos 1983: 247-269) was published, Karantonis' critical opinion was already shaped and known. Nevertheless,

the critic already had arguable evidence regarding G. T. Vafopoulos' support of I. M. Panagiotopoulos dating back to the 1950's: dedications of poems from one to the other (one in particular, was made to Panagiotopoulos, in Vafopoulos' collection *Η μεγάλη νύχτα και το παράθυρο*, which received a negative review from Karantonis in 1956), as well as a glorifying text of Panagiotopoulos regarding Vafopoulos' poetry in the magazine *Καινούρια Εποχή* (Vafopoulos 1983: 258, 261, 262).

Cited below, is a passage from G. T. Vafopoulos' text about *Τα ρόδα της Μυρτάλης* (Vafopoulos 1983:39-46), in which the poet's opinion regarding the critic is clearly stated (the first syntactic period refers to the influence that was exerted on Vafopoulos' poetic thought by Karantonis' study *Ο ποιητής Γιώργος Σεφέρης* — 1931): "[...] I had almost accepted Karantonis' theory about this internal change of poetry within the external frameworks, as these were shaped by Solomos and Palamas.

Karantonis' posterior work constitutes a confirmation of the theory that criticism does not break fresh ground, but walks along with the poets on their own course. Seferis was a poet, namely the one who applies the laws of aesthetic rules and not the one who encodes them. And much later, he gave a new form in his poetics, shattering the external frameworks, which he no longer found of use. So, Karantonis' brave new theory underwent a test and was contradicted by the poet himself. And the new critic rushed into encoding Seferis' new poetic elements, inventing yet another theory, based on the new seferic forms. The power of his persuasiveness influenced a lot the youths of his time. Yet not those who had served term for a long time in the realm of aesthetic theories. Because this brilliant intellectual, in spite of being fully capable of being a leader, he chose instead, perhaps due to an acquired weakness, to play the part of a follower. He kept adjusting his critical belief to the given facts of the times. He later became the advocate of surrealism in the most extreme form of the manifestations associated to it, almost convincing the youths of the time that poetry would thereon be tailor-made in the atelier of Aragon and his school. In his rejection of the surrendered forms, he accomplished, with remarkable mastery, not to touch upon the palamic work. His persuasiveness managed to reconcile, as often as the justification of his theories demanded it, the most warring trends of poetry. And, eventually, his poetic theory gained the elasticity of adjustment, within the context of Seferis' and Elytis' poetry, in all its subsequent forms. Once again, poetry proves its catalytic power (Vafopoulos 1983:40-41).

Karantonis' constant critical adjustability is, indeed, remarkable and it is precisely this critical adjustability of his that may have had a share in Karantonis being considered not just the main representative of literary criticism of the 1930's, but also the first critic that brought out the modernistic trends in our poetry and fought for their sway (Vayenas 2011: 209).

A sign of his adjustability is that he removed T. K. Papatsonis' name from the unfortunate remark regarding the 'incoherence and contorted delirium a la Papatsonis' (this particular phrase can be found in this form only in the first edition of the study *Ο ποιητής Γιώργος Σεφέρης* — see Karantonis 1931: 22 / Vayenas 1999: 328-329 / Vayenas 2013: 26 / Kokoris 2006: 25-27); a sign of his tendency to be in harmony with the poetic developments is that when he, such a biting naysayer of Ritsos' poetry, realises its complexity (political projections aside) and its existential reserves, he begins a critical note in 1966 with the phrase: "Yiannis Ritsos will one day complicate matters for criticism with many and difficult questions" (Karantonis 1966 and Karantonis 1976: 296).

Let it be noted here that both Papatsonis' demerit of work and the rejection of a large part of Ritsos' poetic works are considered — and are, indeed — two of Karantonis' biggest critical misfires.

Literary creation and its criticism are linked together, through a complex nexus of relationship interactions. It is familiar and platitudinous, but — definitely — and the comparison is correct, within the context of which, if criticism is considered as a strong branch with healthy offshoots, artistic creation can be considered as the tree trunk. Criticism is necessary but by nature secondary, since, even though some aspects of literary modernism and deconstruction have pronounced themselves against the contrary, it cannot replace primary literary creation. Consequently, Vafopoulos' reproaches concerning a critic who never became a leader but remained a follower are considered rather excessive. In addition, Vafopoulos reports on Karantonis' constant critical adjustability in a negative spirit. The sense that we get today by the reception of our older literary criticism outlines that our great critics' steadfast (from a point of their critical course and on) philosophic-aesthetic principle — let us remember, for instance, Fotos Politis' Hellenocentric idealism, Kleon Parashos' and Tellos Agras' neo-symbolistic construct of a romantic nature or Markos Avyeris' viewpoint on ethics through a Marxist scope) led to their works having a lesser draw than Antreas Karantonis' contribution to

criticism has had. In other words, his constant critical adustability born of the communication of the critic with the shifting poetic codes, for which Karantonis' work is reproached by Vafopoulos, could be considered, having as a criterion the texts' endurance through time, as an essential — perhaps even the most essential — virtue of the dynamic function of critical discourse.

Around the mid-1970s, a superficial treatment of the facts would outline a diminution of the gap between Vafopoulos and Karantonis. However, the emerging improvement of their personal relationship does not prove any important change in their points of view. Karantonis' positive assessments, which were received by Vafopoulos as a 'repentance' (Vafopoulos Ε': 249) on behalf of the critic, do not refer to Vafopoulos' poetry, but on *Σελίδες αυτοβιογραφίας*, volumes Γ' and Δ' (Vafopoulos Ε': 250, 255).[5] Moreover, their short meeting 'at a tavern in Pallini of Athens' (Vafopoulos Ε': 256) and Karantonis' offering of books to Vafopoulos 'with cordial dedications' (Vafopoulos Ε': 256) reflects both men's affability and good will. In addition, they both cover the serious and publicly stated divergences.

The texts show that Karantonis as a critic and Vafopoulos as a poet, who judged his critic, had a complicated relationship. Karantonis' positions on Vafopoulos' poetry were not only negative. Finally, Karantonis' critical adjustment to the new poetic evolution is not a drawback of a critic, as Vafopoulos believed, but an advantage.

Notes

1. Vafopoulos had also noted in Σελίδες αυτοβιογραφίας (Vafopoulos 1970-1975, Α': 373-374): 'Along with Cavafy, the honour of the one who was the first to apply the new poetic expressions belongs to Papatsonis'.
2. Translations of phrases from Greek into English have been prepared by Dimitris Kokoris.
3. 'I have been characterized from time to time as a political poet. Personally, I do not think I am a political poet. I am both a love poet as well as a political one. These two are combined. It was the times that combined the two'.
4. The reverberations of the conflict were also transferred in the issue of magazine Νέα Εστία that was dedicated to I.M. Panagiotopoulos: 1329, (15 November) 1982.
5. Karantonis' two positive comments about the third and fourth volumes of the work in question were published in the magazines Τηλεόρασις (3 February 1974) and Νέα Εστία (15 April 1976), respectively.

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