

The Anarchist Poet of Exarcheia

What We're Gonna Do Is Read Her Poems

Robert Knox

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a review of

Now Let's See What You're Gonna Do: Poems 1978–2002 by Katerina Gogou; translation by A.S., forward by Jack Hirschman. fmsbw press 2021

A biographer of Katerina Gogou terms her “the anarchist poetess of Exarcheia,” the so-called “edgy alternative” Athenian neighborhood with its political murals and anarchist bookshops. I have been to Athens, once, but the tour guides never pointed us that way. So, I will take on faith a biographer’s description of Gogou, who died in 1993 by her own hand, as “Greece’s greatest anarchist poetess.”

I will take on faith as well the accuracy of the translation of her work by A.S. in this collection of her poems because the quality of the results speaks for itself. According to the book’s foreword by the American poet and social activist Jack Hirschman, the translator does not wish to give his full name for reasons having to do with political differences. Altogether, the social and economic background of this book is foreign territory for me as it would be for anyone without a close knowledge of Greek history since 1940. But its themes are universal.

Gogou was born during the Nazi occupation of her country. In his forward, Hirschman tells us that “this wonderful, rebellious, indeed revolutionary period poet...was raised during the Greek Civil War—the bandits’ war,” fought between the West-backed government and the Greek Communist party in the late 1940s. She began acting on stage while still a child and won recognition for her roles in popular comedies. Later, Gogou appeared in more than 30 Greek films while remaining critical of the conventional social order the popular cinema represented.

Gogou’s writing—somehow the word poetry, especially at the book’s start, seems too polite a term—offers some similarities to the postwar American Beat poets. Blunt, plain-spoken diction; a slangy, street-talk assessment of politics, people, and lifestyles. But little of the warmth found, for example, in the work of Allen Ginsburg. In the poems from the volume titled “Three Clicks Left (1978)” Gogou’s untitled verse offers relentless monologues of denunciation, voiced in compelling imagery and diction. They have the perverse compulsion of a beautifully filmed train-wreck. Only here, of course, language has to do all the work.

For instance: “Our life is jack-knifing in dirty dead-end streets rotten teeth, faded slogans/ a somber wardrobe smells of piss and antiseptic and rotten sperm.” The whole poem is quotable, even lines seemingly taken out of context. In fact, what characterizes so many of Gogou’s poems is their utter lack of context. If you don’t know the story, these lines hint, think hard and catch up. As in this poem’s concluding lines: “Next time they’ll let us have it/ we shouldn’t run. We should hold our line. Let’s not sell our asses so cheap, man./ Don’t. It’s raining. Gimme a smoke.”

I don’t know if the unstated background suggests a street fight, or a strike, or nothing so dramatic, but their immediacy is infectious. The tone and diction are like tough-guy detective or crime story fiction, though marshaled for a far different purpose. One reads these words and imagines a smart-phone video from Portland last summer.

Another poem offers the rare location (London, 1977) and begins: “And here/ even more the Blacks/ are mopping the spittle from the asphalt/ with their tongues” and follows with a vulgar term for Asians who “open “HOTEL doors to whites/ and here as well waiters/ who emigrated so as not to become waiters...”

Perhaps the poet, still working as an actress, has gone to England for work as well, just like the street cleaners and the waiters, but discovers that in her case too things are no better than in Greece:

“here I am again [she writes]...gone to pieces in public parks/ masturbated at private porn shows/ I vomited blood and rancid white salad in the subway...”

The cold presentation of desperate personal details reminds me of work produced at a similar time by Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, but Gogou’s poems go straight back from the personal to the political: “Oh yeah, buddy, I’d like to throw one/ and blow all the bugger-machines of the world/ sky high.” You don’t find that in the Beats or in the American confessional poets.

Back in Athens, in another unnamed poem, Gogou depicts what her friends do to get by: “They do whatever comes along./ Peddlers of cookbooks and encyclopedias they build roads and connect deserts.../ cornered in the old days and forced to drop their pants...” Her women friends are “taut wires on roof terraces of old houses...My friends,” the poem adds later, “are always on the move because you haven’t given them an inch.” That inch could be psychological, but we suspect it’s definitely economic.

Toward the end of this collection (in the volume titled “Homecoming,” 1990), the poems move from a frank expression of her world’s personal/political dynamic to something closer to autobiographical literature. Some poems dating from 1991 describe a hospitalization. The poet recalls the details of childhood struggles, addresses her words to family members. Still first-person demotic in tone, the poems narrate events, report dialogues, quote her father.

Near the end of a long prose-poem titled “Father, say something, talk to me,” Gogou refers to family particulars and familiar places. In an unsparing monologue, she takes us back to a park beside a cemetery, her voice that of a child, at ages five or six or seven.

On top of conflicted childhood memories, Gogou recalls that when she worked in a theater, her father predicted, “Society will crush you.” The poem, now a full-blown confessional, passes from political (“I passed on from Trotsky...to Anarchy”) to personal crisis (“I kept maiming those I loved and then drug needles...”). Once again, a comparison to Plath and her famous poem “Daddy” suggests itself. But Gogou’s poem is a much fuller story, her relationship to her father longer and deeper, and its impact, on me at least, more affecting.

In the collection’s final offering (“...And I love life very much”), the poet reaches back to the foundations of her country’s literature: “My destiny is Greece/ My name is Odyssea.” Gogou’s voice, once so uncompromising, now announces, with classic resignation, “I feel my end approaching.” The contrast is devastating. And then, a final flare of resistance: “The spear they thrust on my right side, whoever they were, they managed good...They did a splendid job.”

Gogou’s voice is strong, incisive; perhaps unique. That voice should be heard, and her poems more widely read, even by those who may be more familiar with Homer, tragedy, and the classical philosophers than with Greece’s modern history.

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