

Mitsakis' "Whys"

Yannis Dimitrakos

Mitsakis' "Whys" constitute a small puzzle for Modern Greek Philology. Many researchers have attempted to provide us with an answer. They all conclude in nothing but ... delusional writing. What does that mean? Reading things, in the last two years, in a cartel on Seminar III (Les Psychoses), in Lacan's way, we have ... some inklings of an answer. The text is dedicated to those who like to solve small puzzles.



« Il s'agit, au fond de la psychose, d'une impasse, d'une perplexité concernant le signifiant. Tout se passe comme si le sujet y réagissait par une tentative de restitution, de compensation »¹.

Mikhail Mitsakis (1865-1916) was a peculiar figure of the Greek letters. At the end of the 19th century, one could hardly browse through a publication without coming across his name, or rather one of his many pen names. It could be a text on a train-travel in Thessaly, a reading note on Ernest Renan, or a short prose piece sculpted on the spot in the streets of Athens². The course of his life and his writing changed radically after the onset of his serious mental illness. In September 1896, after his first confinement in Psychiatric Hospital, where he died 20 years after the triggering of his psychosis, he ceased to publish. At the same time he began to write poems in French or Greek-French.³

The «Whys» are a series of Mitsakis' writings written, at least in part, in the same «mad» period with his French poems⁴. While Joyce's epiphanies deconstruct the Other of the common meaning, Mitsakis' "Whys" are, as we shall see, an effort of mending.

The manuscripts of the "Whys" are written in pencil on newsprint, contain fragmented thoughts or inspirations of the moment intermingled with various sketches. They all start with the word «why» and some bear the title «Questions and Answers».

There are about 400 sheets containing 800 "Whys", where he plays with the contrast between the meanings of words but also with their sound.

Why Baudelaire and not laid de la mer ?
Why Apollinaire and not apo Claire Star?
Why Luxembourg and not Miserenville ?
Why does it seem as if all Europe conspired to call us fat-a-listes ?
Why Corfou and not Esprit Sage?
Why do many in Corfu think that there can't be fou d'esprit?
Why does Mallarmé constantly mock us with his name since he is armed to the teeth?⁵

1. Lacan J., *Le Séminaire, livre III, Les Psychoses*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1981, p.219

2. Mitsakis M., *Un chercheur d'or*, translated by Gilles Ortlieb, Finitude, Bordeaux, 2012

3. See also Ploubidis, Dimitris, "The French poetry of Mikhail Mitsakis", *24 grammata*, www.24grammata.com/?p=4907, [last accessed 13/12/2016]

4. Ibid.

5. Karakalos A., "Mikhail Mitsakis - A Selection from the 'Whys' ", *i lexi*, 90, December 1989, pp. 1000-1004



But why do these paradoxical and at first glance naïve writings hold this particular value for Mitsakis ? We are just after the triggering and the advent of the breakdown of the symbolic system.

Jean-Claude Maleval calls special attention to the moment an item is disconnected from the signifying chain. Meyerson and Quercy note that a synthesis is flawed, a strange term disconnected and separated⁶ “from the system of social symbols.” What happens then? “An ineffable evil” that takes the form of a painful enigma. As to these isolated words, they ascertain, the task of explanation, as well as verbal expression, seems to be missing and what remains are “sudden and unexpected lucid moments, “fleeting flashes” that do not illumine anything.⁷

Something is broken in the language mechanism between syntax and meaning, and with these “Whys” Mitsakis tries to repair this breakdown. The «Why» is not exactly a pun. It is a repair attempt through the production of a mingling between syntax and meaning. A repair, in some sense, through the mingling of the two dimensions and the blurring of the boundaries between sound and meaning. This position should be attributed to the function performed by Mitsakis’ “Whys”.

6. Maleval J-C, *La forclusion du Nom-du-Père*, Seuil, Paris, 2000, p. 208.

7. *Ibid.*