

I N T R O D U C T I O N

At the end of Jenny Mastoraki's macabre *Tales of the Deep*, a collection of poetry full of murder, abduction, and misunderstanding, the reader finds "What that Missive Said," which purports to contain the contents of a letter. But instead of offering some long-awaited clarification, this poem warns us not to trust anyone, not even the person who is speaking. He may be a murderer or thief. The strangest twist, though, comes in the final lines which ask us to feel sympathy for the culprit.

But when someone talks to you with terror, with voices of those lost in ghastly caves and marshes—

above all you must consider what he might mean, what dismembered corpse he is hiding in his cellar, what biting kisses, murders, muffled nights, crossed noiselessly by trains (darkened by heavy curtains, with rags and cotton round the wheels), what iniquitous desires, rage, murmuring, howls, fireworks by the patrons' tombs, avengers who soak him in blood while he sleeps, what thief, finally, in a deep, brass bedchamber, smothered in linen, and cries—

and you must feel for him, above all feel for him, my dear Arthur or Alphonse. (143)

Not only do we never read the real letter, but the poem suggests that *no real* letter can exist. The missive is *missing*. Nothing is what it seems to be, not the murderer or the murdered, not the writer or the reader. The plea to Arthur or

Alphonse is an invitation to go back to the beginning, to the *alpha*, and write the letter ourselves. Authorship, authority, and authoritativeness are all mixed up.

I begin with this unsatisfying conclusion to Mastoraki's *Tales of the Deep* because it introduces contemporary Greek women poets' recent preoccupation with misunderstanding, not only as an issue for the poet, but for any reader, critic, or translator who reads this poetry. The task of considering "what he might mean, what dismembered corpse he is hiding in his cellar" belongs to anyone who picks up this poetry. My title, *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding*, refers to the proliferation of double entendres, obscure references, and indirect constructions in Rhea Galanaki's *The Cake*, Jenny Mastoraki's *Tales of the Deep*, and Maria Laina's *Hers*, as well as more generally to the challenges facing writers in Greece under and after the dictatorship (1967-1974). My title, however, also refers to the rehearsal of misunderstanding prompted by my translation of this poetry.

Authors under Authoritarianism

Rhea Galanaki, Jenny Mastoraki, and Maria Laina were all students at the University of Athens on April 21, 1967, when a group of junior officers took control of Greece, defeating in one effort the senior army officers, the electorate, and then the king. The colonels, as the junior officers were called, imposed strict disciplinary measures: incarcerating leftists and enforcing curfews, dress codes, and press laws. The colonels' call for order, clarity, and cleanliness had a popular appeal, and at first only a small percentage of the Greek population mobilized against the authoritarian regime. It was after the economic downturn of 1973 that growing numbers began to express their opposition in public; after the tragic events of

the Polytechnic in November of the same year, when the colonels' tanks killed thirty students, national and international forces rallied and succeeded in restoring democracy.

There was, however, one form of resistance that played a central role from the beginning of the dictatorship and had a special significance both for Greek society at large and for the colonels themselves: the resistance of writers to censorship. The general public, while less aware of the torture and imprisonment that the colonels inflicted, were immediately conscious of censorship. One of the regime's first legislative actions, for example, was to stipulate that *katharevousa*, the official, "purist" language of constitutions and laws since 1911, would now also be the language of state and education. Although students were used to writing *katharevousa*, tolerance of the demotic language in schools during the 1960s had been increasing. After the coup this trend was abruptly halted and the use of *katharevousa* rigidly enforced. Unquestioned rights such as the free distribution of books or even the layout of newspapers could no longer be taken for granted. The Book Index, for example, banned not only those titles that openly criticized the regime but those whose authors' names sounded vaguely Russian, and even ancient texts that parodied the misuse of power, for example, Aristophanes' *Birds*. In one infamous case, a poet was hauled into the police station for his "communist leanings" because he had written a poem in which his lover's lips were "red."

Writers from early on set about uncovering the contradictions and hypocrisy that the regime was busy concealing. They would pretend to cooperate with the regime's mandates, only to subvert the whole project. This was evidently one reason for titling the first resistance anthology *Eighteen Texts* (1970); if, as the Press Law dictated, all books had to have titles that corresponded exactly to the contents, then the resistance would use empty titles such as *Eighteen Texts*,

6 *Poets, New Texts, and New Texts 2*. Editors of certain newspapers were known to print the regime's mandatory statements in the same type and format as obituaries. A headline in huge wood type that read "The dictatorship is rapidly receding . . ." followed by the words "in Spain" in small type performed a trenchant social commentary.

It is in the context of a regime which tried to suppress such linguistic confusion and a literary establishment which for the most part worked to expose it that Rhea Galanaki, Jenny Mastoraki, Maria Laina, and a whole generation of younger poets first began publishing their poetry. While their elders—established poets such as the Nobel Laureate George Seferis and well-known leftist poets of the postwar generation such as Manolis Anagnostakis—for the most part returned to their previous poetic practices after censorship was lifted, for many younger poets (particularly the women), silence and hermeticism became the ground zero of expression, not a passing inconvenience. The epigrammatic poems in Galanaki's first two collections are almost impenetrable to the uninitiated. Laina's poems, though more lyrical and expressive, have a similar reined-in feeling to them. From her book *Tolls* on, Mastoraki asks at what expense one gets past censors and other kinds of toll-collectors. Censorship and the inability to say what one means is a recurring issue in their poetry.

When the colonels' regime fell in 1974 these women continued to deploy writing strategies that, although initiated in response to censorship, proved useful in articulating other power struggles. For Galanaki, Mastoraki, and Laina, the challenge to authority became a feminist problem in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Drawing on the formative experience of writing under an authoritarian regime, these women forged a poetics that established a gendered relation to censorship. The tactics for stabilizing signification upon which

censorship relied were redeployed in their collections to unsettle and disrupt fixed meanings and sex roles. Writing as a woman developed, for them, out of writing under censorship. Unlike Lefteris Poullos and Vassilis Steriadis, two innovative young poets who baptized their generation "The Generation of the 1970s" and initiated influential poetic trends, these women did not discard the formal training that censorship provided.

The politicizing of American Beat writing in Greek poetry during the 1970s and 1980s provides one striking example of where certain male and female poets of this generation parted ways. While Poullos and Steriadis completely embraced the freedom associated with Beat writing, drawing on its use of obscenity to challenge the colonels' regime's "Greece for Christian Greeks," Galanaki's *The Cake*, equally sexually explicit, also explores the less liberatory side of Ginsberg's "Howl" or Kerouac's *On the Road*. In her collection the man takes off on his motorcycle, but his freedom depends on a woman at home. Similarly, in a nod to the new international net of references deployed by her generation, she uses the foreign word "cake" for her title, not the traditional Greek words *τούρτα* or *γλυκό*, but then goes one step further and turns this into a feminist issue by pointing out who bakes the cake.

Perhaps most significantly, though, the use of cinematic sequences of images, which typifies this generation of poets, becomes in these women's hands a feminist narrative poetics. As far as Galanaki, Mastoraki, and Laina are concerned, poetry should not transcend linguistic and sexual confusion in a single poem's lyrical escape; instead it must partake of and participate in the confusion over the course of a longer series of poems. The sustained rehearsal of misunderstanding in their collections functions as a feminist ploy which enables them to take up more time and space in their

writing. By connecting one poem to another through repeated images and postponing resolution, a place is opened up. This is no easy task—as Laina points out, “Besides in this narrative / the difficulty / of finding a space is clear” (261). Each collection, nonetheless, manages to create a kind of typographic “room of one’s own” between the covers of the book. In the 1980s women poets of this generation, as well as prominent women poets of earlier generations such as Eleni Vakalo, Kiki Dimoula, and Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke, developed strategies initiated under censorship for feminism.

Toward an unauthoritative poetry

The collections I have chosen are significant to the rise of women’s writing in Greece as well as being pivotal works in the careers of each poet. Born in Crete in 1947, Galanaki began as a poet but has emerged in the past decade as one of Greece’s most highly acclaimed novelists. The collection *The Cake* (1980) registers this shift from poetry to prose, forming a bridge between her early epigrammatic poems, *Albeit Pleasing* (1975) and *Minerals* (1979), and her first prose works, *Where does the Wolf Live?* (1982), *Concentric Stories* (1986), and her noted historical novels *The Life of Ismail Ferik Pasha* (1989) and *I Shall Sign My Name as Louis* (1992). *The Cake* is the most explicitly feminist text by Galanaki to date.

Mastoraki’s *Tales of the Deep* similarly represents a move toward longer prose poems and women’s issues. Born in Athens in 1949, Mastoraki is regarded as one of Greece’s leading poets and translators. With each collection Mastoraki has written, misunderstanding has progressively become a more private affair and women’s experiences have figured more and more prominently. Her book *Tolls* (1972)

is explicitly about the difficulty of writing under censorship and the ways in which history and myth, from ancient to modern times, shape poetry. Her next collection of poems, *Kin* (1979), takes up similar issues with respect to personal history and myth, family genealogy, and feminine sexuality. Her last two books, *Tales of the Deep* (1983) and *With a Crown of Light* (1989), deal almost exclusively with the sufferings of those cut off from their histories, communities, and families: self-absorbed lovers, abandoned children, fugitives. In *Tales of the Deep*, particularly, what one can and cannot say is a feminist matter.

Laina’s *Hers* also opens a window on the relations among misunderstanding, gender, and narrative poetry in the 1980s. Born in 1947 in Patras, Maria Laina is widely regarded as one of the best writers of her generation. Since the mid-1980s she has also been writing for the theater. Her most recent collection of poetry, *Rose Colored Fear* (1992), received the National Prize for Poetry. The central problem throughout Laina’s poetry is how to come to grips with a look that censors her by not recognizing her, how to describe a kind of love that others do not understand. While Galanaki and Mastoraki define feminine sexuality in relation to the opposite sex, Laina hardly ever mentions men. The love she wants to describe, at times lesbian, at other times, autoerotic, is never socially acceptable. The project of clearing a space for such a kind of love is charted over the course of her earlier volumes: *Beyond* (1970), *Change of Scene* (1972), *Punctuation Marks* (1979). But it is in *Hers* that narrative and women’s issues intersect in the typographic project of finding a place on the page.

How do these collections create a tentative space for women’s writing? To what extent does women’s writing undermine authority by positing misunderstanding and misrepresentation as constitutive of meaning? While the language

and vision of each poet is obviously distinct, these collections reveal certain affinities in the way they provide responses to such questions. Rhea Galanaki's *The Cake* follows a pregnant woman through her day as she weighs the ingredients for a cake. The cake in the process of being baked stands in for the as-yet-unborn son (the etymology of placenta derives from the ancient Greek *πλακούς*, "a flat cake"), and suggests that any act of definition that represents something intact and finished is flawed. As one poem puts it: "The definition's clothing is the same as its wording and both are torn to shreds" (53). The impossibility of a word representing a definition, of a cake symbolizing a child, produces the endless deferral and fraying that is the text the reader holds in her hands. Galanaki calls this kind of language feminine. Unlike masculine language, it does not "close like a lake," but instead "wells up" like a spring (77), constantly in motion, making and unmaking itself.

Mastoraki's *Tales of the Deep* also suggests that women's writing is different, less static than the established male mode of writing. In one devastating poem she reveals the violence men's euphemisms conceal:

"My fair ones!" they would call them as they cornered them.
Later they turned them into songs. Exemplary ladies. With
bruised necks. Crumpled petticoats. And on their linen pan-
talets, a stain of blood, a dark leaf, spreading.

Let that be what is left of ancient longings. And of ancient
loves. (89)

While the masculine language of seductive banter and bragging songs entraps, feminine language appears to be more like the spreading blood, without distinct boundaries. Over the course of Mastoraki's collection, the bruises, stains, and cracks become the figures of a new language that, like a mir-

ror in a funhouse, deforms and exaggerates rather than imitates clearly. In another poem even a reflection in still water registers a dismembered body and text: "the domes covered over with flying corpses, dislocated bones, and awful fractures, postures of extreme agony . . ." (123).

Laina's collection also insists on rehearsing in language the effect of being misunderstood and misrepresented. *Hers* starts, for example, with the poem "Fresco," which parodies a masculine archaeological report for attempting to salvage the image of a woman, for trying to make her whole again.

The beginning of the thighs still remains
a dull blue
to the left a section of foot unadorned
and a section from the hem of the dress. (147)

The poem continues in this descriptive vein. The final line, though, is set off typographically and initiates a different, less technical, more conversational tone, one that characterizes the rest of the collection: "The ground of love is missing" (147). The implied archaeologist is looking for the wrong thing. Even if he were to succeed in putting the woman back together again, something else would still be missing. The protagonist of the poems, Maria—the author's name, but also the most common Greek name for women—then proceeds to sit down in front of a mirror and try to find a place of her own, "hers," as the collection's title suggests, where she can be fragmented but not lacking, where she can live as one poem puts it, "without elbows / or knees" (227).

Each of the three collections included in this anthology works out the myriad ways we are misunderstood and misrepresented by others and ourselves. Like recent American language poetry by women that draws on the work of Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein, these series of interwoven poems transform hermeticism into a feminine survival strategy

for recognizing how meaning is lost, disfigured, or denied. They put off resolution indefinitely by making that which is missing an integral part of their content and form. Their rehearsal of misunderstanding challenges authorship, authority, and authoritativeness by suggesting that control over others and ourselves is an illusion. At the very moment of consolidation, of checking one's reflection in still water or in a mirror, the body is found in pieces. Nothing is what it purports to be. Representation is fundamentally misrepresentation.

An Autobiography of Translation

Having placed these women poets and their poetics in the political and literary context of contemporary Greece, let me turn to the implications of their project for translation, and in particular for my translation of their poetry. A first question suggests itself: If the original is not intact, a "whole," but makes what is missing a part of its structural content, how does this ellipsis affect the translator's usual goal of reconstruction? A second question follows: How might this poetry suggest a translation practice that acknowledges its own distortion, fragmentation, exaggeration, attenuation, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding? The questions are provocative in theory, but what about in practice? To illustrate the rehearsal of misunderstanding that translation also involves, let me offer an autobiography of my translation of Mastoraki's *Tales of the Deep*.

In working with Mastoraki's text, as well as Galanaki's and Laina's, I was impressed by this poetry's visual impact. In the Greek literary context where the oral tradition of the folksong is so prized, these collections were all about physical, visually present, written texts, particularly from Byzan-

tium on. Mastoraki's *Tales of the Deep*, for example, progressively privileges the written over the oral, moving from the performative language of folktales, stage directions, and spells to a metatextual meditation on narrative and irreparable manuscripts. This progression from orality to textuality is supported formally by techniques akin to collage and montage. The poet pastes more and more bits of different texts—lines from Greece's national poet Dionysios Solomos, translations of Victorian idylls, Jules Verne's adventure tales, Byzantine chronicles—in closer and closer proximity so that in the second half of *Tales of the Deep*, poems become dense, even palimpsestic, with words and images piled one on top of the other. Repeated references, for example, to walls and wounds visually connect unrelated scenes cinematographically, functioning much the way meter and rhyme might in more traditional poetry.

In the beginning, my translation, not altogether consciously, foregrounded the visual impact of Mastoraki's poems. I made sure repeated words in Greek were translated consistently, even if two different words might have worked better in English. My purpose was to show how words function for Mastoraki as images, reproducing different historical moments through the look of their spelling, accents, and breathing marks. (Her insistence on the polytonic system of accents over the now more accepted monotonic system reflects this.) I tried to create the peculiarly visual appeal of Mastoraki's use of so many different linguistic registers by including archaic, quaint phrases such as "ablaze" and "brazzera," emphasizing how certain words or phrases recall the language of other times. I made choices based on my critical preoccupation with the writerliness of these texts. Finally, to give the reader the full cumulative effect, I decided not to publish these poems separately in journals, but to keep them together as a long narrative series.

Eventually I sent a draft to Mastoraki to read. As she herself is one of Greece's foremost literary translators, I was particularly interested in her comments. Over the years I had been in touch with the poets whose work I planned to include in the anthology. We had met and discussed certain difficult passages early on, but I had not shown them how my translations had evolved along with my critical analysis of their poetry. When it came time to request permission to publish parts of their texts in my study of Greek poetry under and after the dictatorship, I also sent my translations. The letter I received from Mastoraki was frighteningly like the letter that was never delivered in her *Tales of the Deep*, the missing missive: she was not going to authorize my translation because it was full of misunderstandings. The final poem of *Tales of the Deep*, which warns the reader to beware the dismembered corpse buried in the writer's meaning, suddenly seemed oddly prophetic. The border between life and literature became blurred.

While her poetry resisted closure by deferring the arrival of the letter, by inverting murderer and murdered, writer and reader, the author was understandably less willing to relinquish authority when the issue was the translation of her poetry. Though my first response was to ask how she, who had invited me into the text's multiple meanings, could turn and attempt to restrict its meaning, I then thought about the way she had criticized me: buried in the logic of her letter were important lessons about the politics of translation.

Over the years as a student and translator of this Greek cultural scene I had gained a certain status, a certain authority: I had published in scholarly journals; I had a job at a university. Around the same time that Mastoraki's letter was written, my work on her poetry was cited in a Greek Sunday newspaper. I saw my name in English in the midst of Greek print and recognized myself for the first time as the foreigner

in that centuries-old game in which one looks for approval to an outsider. This is a game that has a particular painful history in Greece where no generation has been unscathed by foreign intervention (American, British, French, German, Turkish). On the one hand the mention was flattering; on the other, it was disconcerting. I did not want to admit I was the foreigner my name inscribed me to be. I was attached to my adopted Greek identity—all those years of being told “είσαι δικιά μας” (you are one of us) and “μιλάς καλύτερα από μας” (you speak better than we do). I hadn't understood how my own authority with regard to Greek culture relied on both my status as a foreigner and on my adopted Greek identity, both on being an outsider and on being an insider.

Mastoraki's mode of questioning my authority rewrote these positions. First she uncovered the imperialist overtones of my authority as a foreigner, by asserting that as a foreigner I did not understand Greek and never truly could. Then she used my familiarity with Greece, my status as an insider, to discipline me. She read into my own definition of myself as foreign authority and as adopted daughter the cultural legacy of both these positions. Mastoraki's letter made me realize that if I claimed to be both outsider and insider, I had to recognize my complicity in the patriotic and patriarchal narratives that say that foreigners must be deferred to and that daughters must be disciplined. This realization did not render my translation worthless; it simply applied pressure, a pressure that made me accountable as an author and as an authority for my authoritativeness even when I most wanted to cede it. As Mastoraki suggests in *Tales of the Deep*, one always identifies the corpse hidden in the cellar, just as the endless undecidability of meaning is being flaunted. The lesson being perhaps not *only* to go back and write the *Tales* ourselves, but also to accept that as translators we are always also murderers, thieves, distorters, and

mutilaters, to find ways to acknowledge the parts of our narratives that disable us, as well as those that enable us.

When I arrived in Greece to work on the translation with Mastoraki it turned out there were very few linguistic mistakes. My knowledge of Greek was not the issue. Her real criticism of my translation was my lack of attention to the rhythm. It seems that my concern for the visual impact of her poetry, its textuality, had meant that I had neglected this more traditionally lauded ingredient of Greek poetry. I had taken the unauthoritativeness of her poetry to an extreme. I had concentrated on her visual poetics at the expense of the orality of her text. By fixating on what was novel about her poetics, I had eliminated the struggle between orality and visuality. She explained how the poems relied on an oral and visual contradiction, the gentle rhythmic lilt contrasting with the cruel, visual images of rape, abduction, and drowning.

Collaboration turned out to be crucial for destabilizing authorship and authority. Seated across from each other in various *tavernas* and *kafeneions* neither of us could take full control. She would hammer the rhythm of each poem into my head until I found an appropriate equivalent in English and then I would turn and say “but now this word, this image, this gesture is lost, what do we do?” We were able to keep each other aware of when either of us tried too hard to push our critical agendas: Mastoraki’s view was that her text was a part of the Greek literary canon and oral tradition, while I wanted to show its feminist break with that tradition. Collaboration, whether with the author, another poet, another critic, or with oneself over time, is a way of owning up to how translation depends as much on misunderstanding as it does on understanding.

The autobiography I have just elaborated in some way outlines a less authoritative approach to translation. Autobiog-

raphy provides a mode for making explicit one’s reasons for representing another language and culture, for speaking for someone else. Contextualized, authority becomes less definitive and the need for different perspectives becomes more evident. But this autobiographical mode also has certain drawbacks, especially in the context of the kind of poetry I am introducing. Autobiography in its many different generic permutations—memoirs, confession, personal criticism—most often assumes that life can be represented in a narrative sequence and that the person writing is the sum of all that has been recounted. Autobiography inevitably offers relief: “Oh, that’s the reason she did that.” “Oh, I understand now.” The autobiography here is no exception. Even though I have tried to decenter it by calling it an autobiography of translation, not of me personally, my account, nevertheless, relies on the resolution autobiography promises. Fundamentally the autobiography of translation can only go so far in destabilizing the translator’s authority.

The translations, however, as poetry, offer other modes for thinking about issues of authority and authoritativeness. As we have seen, both the message and the medium of these collections undermine the feasibility of any resolution or clearly identifiable subject. Rather than insisting on clarification and self-knowledge, this poetry rehearses the misunderstandings that impede such projects. The writing self, instead of being the origin of meaning, is the scene of a violent dissolution. As a line from Mastoraki’s *Tales of the Deep* illustrates: “so they resemble you, torn to shreds, and you them, again, in pieces” (91). Or as Laina’s collection *Hers* concludes “And me, what do I know? What do I know?” (285). This poetry asks, What kind of an autobiography is possible if the “auto” (self) is always on the move, adopting different stances, plural and in pieces?

In each of the three translations that follow, the rehearsal

of misunderstanding becomes a critique of the resolution and stable subject-position my autobiography of translation constructs. By ending with the poetry itself, I can leave the letter undelivered and prompt you to go back to the beginning and write the tales yourselves, thus offering the possibility of new readings and translations, rather than authorizing mine.

The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding