

Quarterly Conversation- Issue 23

“I run with the future ahead of me and the cops behind me”: A roundtable on Margarita Karapanou

Essay by Hilary Plum — Published on March 7, 2011

The Books

[Kassandra and the Wolf](#) by Margarita Karapanou (trans N.C. Germanacos). Clockroot Books. 130pp, \$15.00

[The Sleepwalker](#) by Margarita Karapanou (trans Karen Emmerich). Clockroot Books. 288pp, \$16.00

[Rien Ne Va Plus](#) by Margarita Karapanou (trans Karen Emmerich). Clockroot Books. 184pp, \$15.00

The Participants

Hilary Plum, moderator

Angela Dimitrakaki is a writer of fiction and lecturer in contemporary art history at the University of Edinburgh. Her literary output includes the novels *Antarktiki* (1997), *Antisea* (2002), *The Manifesto of Defeat* (2006), *Inside A Girl Like You* (2009), the collection of short stories *Nosebleed* (1999), and the novella “Four Testimonies about the Exhumation of River Errinyos,” translated into French and German. She has been included in many anthologies of modern Greek fiction and is a frequent contributor to the national press in her native Greece.

Karen Emmerich’s recent translations include Margarita Karapanou’s *The Sleepwalker* and *Rien ne va plus*, Ersi Sotiropoulos’s *Landscape with Dog and Other Stories*, Amanda Michalopoulou’s *I’d Like*, and Miltos Sachtouris’s *Poems (1945-1971)*, which was nominated for a National Book Critics Circle Award in 2006. She has aPh.D. from Columbia’s Department of English and Comparative Literature, as well as degrees from Princeton and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki.

Nick Germanacos has translated leading Greek poets and prose writers and written his own poetry; his translations include Margarita Karapanou’s *Kassandra and the Wolf*. For thirty-three years, in collaboration with his wife, the writer Anne Germanacos, he ran a school he founded for American students on the islands of Kalymnos and Crete. He now shares his time between his home in Crete, where he farms, reads, and writes, and San Francisco, his wife’s home town.

Amanda Michalopoulou has published six novels, two short story collections, and many children books. She has received the Revmata Award for her story “Life is Colorful Out There” (1994) and the Diavazo Best Novel Award for her first novel, *Wishbone Memories* (1996). The American translation of her book *I’d Like* by Karen Emmerich (Dalkey Archive Press, 2008) won the NEA’s International Literature Prize and was long-listed for the Best Translated Book Award. Her novels, stories, and essays have been translated into nine languages.

Karen Van Dyck is the Kimon A. Doukas Chair of Modern Greek Literature and the director of the Program in Hellenic Studies at Columbia University in New York. She teaches courses on Modern Greek and Greek diaspora literature, gender studies and translation theory. Her publications include *Kassandra and the Censors* (Cornell, 1998; Greek translation, Agra, 2002), *The Rehearsal of Misunderstanding* (Wesleyan, 1998), *A Century of Greek Poetry: 1900–2000* (Cosmos, 2004), *The Scattered Papers of Penelope: New and Selected Poems* by Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke (Anvil, 2008; Graywolf, 2009), and *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present* (Norton, 2009).

1. Let’s begin at the beginning, by discussing about how you were introduced to Margarita Karapanou and her work (perhaps those are two distinct moments—meeting her work, and meeting her?). I wonder about any distinct first impressions and whether her work was presented to you or perceived by you in ways that have changed or developed.

Nick Germanacos: I first met Margarita’s mother, Margarita Liberaki, who had written perhaps the most influential novel by a Greek woman up to that time, *The Straw Hats*. I was living in Athens, 1971, in the middle of the dreadful and catastrophic military dictatorship (1967–1974). I lived by teaching and translating Modern Greek poetry, but also select prose, and was thus much sought after in the small world of writers in Athens, who were keen to see their work published in English.

Margarita lived in the shadow of her beautiful, brilliant, and talented mother, whose home was gathering place for writers, filmmakers, painters, and critics. Margarita K. then taught at a private kindergarten (she always had an uncanny ability to attract children to her) but was distinctly unnoticeable and perceptibly unhappy.

When Margarita L. went to Paris (both mother and daughter had apartments in the Latin Quarter) Margarita K. and I discovered we had much in common. She, too, then left for Paris to join her mother, and on her return shyly showed me a large notebook in which, in her characteristic childlike scrawl, were a dozen or so pieces of writing, some just one paragraph or two long, others a little longer. I was stunned by their power as well as their unique form. I told her they were brilliant and that if she continued to write more, they could be turned into a book. She was incredulous at first, but was eventually convinced, and applied herself to the task. I undertook to translate each one after she wrote it, and would do my best to find a publisher in the US. Any consideration of publishing them in Greece was out of the question a) because they would have to be approved by the stupid, prurient military censor, and b) because writers in Greece had determined, following the

example of Nobel Laureate George Seferis, not to publish their work in Greece while the country remained subjugated by the military junta.

Thus began our two-year collaboration on what became *Kassandra and the Wolf*. I myself had suggested the name Kassandra for the child-heroine, which she readily agreed to adopt, but she rejected my suggestion of a title—*The Hour of the Wolf*—although the phrase does come up, trenchantly, in one of the vignettes. Of course, in our discussions during the process of her writing, her opinion (when we disagreed) prevailed.

I showed the translated vignettes to the first great translator of Modern Greek poetry, Kimon Friar, who was deeply impressed. He in turn gave me the name of his prestigious New York literary agent, to whom I sent about twenty completed pieces. To our astonishment, we were accepted. A few months later we received a contract and a considerable (for the time and circumstances) advance from Harcourt Brace.

But at that point Margarita started experiencing problems with completing the book—but that is another story.

Karen Emmerich: I actually never met Karapanou, though we did speak on the phone a few times after Clockroot decided to publish *Rien ne va plus* and *The Sleepwalker*. There was one failed meeting, when I'd recently graduated from college. I'd been working on translating *Rien*, and was in Athens for the summer. I'd already had correspondence with Karapanou by mail, and a friend had arranged for me to go and visit her at her apartment; I remember being terribly nervous, getting there ridiculously early and having to walk around the neighborhood about fifteen times. The book meant so much to me, I'd been living with it and in it for ages—and perhaps because her work always seems to blur the line between fiction and reality, it was really sort of terrifying, the prospect of meeting the person from whom it had all originated.

In the end, Karapanou wasn't home, or didn't answer when I buzzed. I don't know if she simply forgot the appointment, or didn't feel like seeing me—but as disappointed as I was, I was also flooded with a sense of relief. *Rien* felt so close to me I sort of didn't want to have to share it with the person whose book it *really* was. I didn't want my experience of it to be displaced or minimized. Is that an okay thing for a translator to say?

My relationship to her work has probably matured over the years; certainly I've lost that ability to have a single book take over my life in that way. And when I started reading *Rien*, my Greek was really not very good. It was one of the first books I read in Greek, and I think it was recommended to me mostly because of the relative simplicity of its language. Also, it's a novel in tiny little chunks, and it was something I could manage: a section a day, with a dictionary by my side. After *Rien* I read all the rest of Karapanou's books, and by the time I got to *Sleepwalker* my relationship to the language was quite different. And of course it's been a decade since then, and I've lived in Greece, gotten degrees, broadened my knowledge base in a way that allows me to appreciate Karapanou's quite central role in the literary life of her time. I still have this very strong

personal attachment to the books, but there's also a more nuanced intellectual understanding of what Karapanou did for Greek literature.

Amanda Michalopoulou: I never met Margarita Karapanou in person. Just once, by coincidence, I saw her with her mother and their famous dogs at Kolonaki Square. She looked like a little girl, fragile, absent-minded and beautiful. Once my husband went to her place to make a portrait of her (he is a photographer). She inscribed a book of hers to both of us and this is a precious copy for me. I met so many writers in my life but I always hesitated to meet her because her presence, through the books, was so precious to me.

I was 19 years old, a student of French literature, when I read *The Sleepwalker*. I realized then that books can trap you in a different kind of reality, their own, which can be slower, stranger, more important than the reality we experience. This was a revelation for me. The other revelation was that people in novels like hers talk about the important things in life without statements, they just have casual dialogs that appear normal on the page and yet are basic truths that make you feel a bit dizzy, like you had a lot of wine. This feeling has never changed. Whenever I go back to *Kassandra*, for instance, one of my favorite books, I meet the same surreal figure, this little girl, with her extravagant friends who talk like we talk in dreams. And then I am reassured that another reality is possible.

Karen Van Dyck: I first met Karapanou through her writing in translation on the island of Kalymnos where Nick and Anne [Germanacos] ran their study abroad program for American high school students. But unlike most of my fellow students who spent a semester in Greece and then went on to other things I got stuck. I returned to America and set about studying Greek intensively—Ancient, Modern, whatever I could get my hands on. The first novel I read in Greek was Karapanou's. I had been charged with coming up with some Modern Greek texts in a course I was TAing on Women in Antiquity at Wesleyan. Her Greek was so easy to read, almost like it was written in English. I was blown away.

About the same time a painter friend of mine named James who lived on the same street asked me if I knew her. He had found *Kassandra and the Wolf* in the Middletown Public Library and wanted to contact the author. He wanted to paint her portrait. Okay, he admitted, he was in love. I gave him her address and this precipitated my next meeting with Karapanou, but this time in person. After a few months of their letters she arrived with her lap dog wearing a straw hat ready to meet the painter. I remember the straw hat not only because of her mother Margarita Liberaki's novel *The Straw Hats*, but because Karapanou seemed so caught up in the pointillist shadow it made on the sidewalk as we walked from my house to James's. She seemed as abstract in person as the little girl in her novel. As if the inside world was the outside and vice versa.

The next few weeks were difficult to say the least. Neither of the letter writers had been very honest and so each was quite horrified with what they found. James thought Margarita was fat and refused to paint her. Margarita found James petty and spent more time next door at the halfway house for male delinquents playing cards and eating

chocolate. Fairly soon, I remember, Karapanou was back in Athens. Much transpired that I know nothing about, but from that first experience I did learn that for Karapanou life and literature are the same thing. Both are the stuff that make days follow one another, one after the next. Neither has the upper hand.

I fell out of touch with James and only heard of Margarita's doings through Nick, but I could see from her novels that James continued to be a presence in her life. He was the painter Mark in Hydra in her novel *The Sleepwalker*, the one who couldn't finish the portrait. There is also the episode in *Rien ne va plus* when the narrator comes to meet a painter in Connecticut, with whom she's exchanged letters, that then ends in a catastrophic flood.

Angela Dimitrakaki: When I was first contacted about participating in this roundtable, I included in my email response a sentence which I finally deleted before clicking on "send." It read: "Not having met Margarita Karapanou, the impossibility of meeting her in the future, is one of the great frustrations of my life." The sentence sounded pompous and hyperbolic to me. How can not-meeting a person be one of life's great frustrations in a global historical moment where devastating, collective frustrations abound? How does this absence of a face-to-face encounter become significant in my life as a writer? But perhaps I have met her to the extent I should have, through her novels. After all, these novels are what she chose to make public of herself—or, conversely, what the world wanted to make public of her, of this one human being. And I'm so happy she is not experiencing the consolidation of the Facebook age. That would have been tragic—as it is for many writers today who undermine their own writing by entering this machine of trivializing the very concept of identity. And maybe I feel the need to close my eyes as I read descriptions of meetings with Karapanou that bring forth aspects of her identity that her own writing sought to destroy. She should have that right. She was a bourgeois woman but as a novelist she trashed the pretensions of her own class by turning them into a permanent, internalized conflict for many of her characters.

2. Let's talk now about the influence of Karapanou on your own work, whether literary or critical. I'd be interested to hear thoughts on both personal and public influence—how her work has influenced your own, and also a sense of her influence within Greek literature (or beyond) generally.

Nick Germanacos: No, Margarita did not have any influence on my writing. *Kassandra and the Wolf* is sui generis, the style, the composition, the psychology of it—the brilliant insight and perversity of it—are unique in my view, inimitable. It was, she and I liked to joke, an *Alice in Wonderland* as retold by Georges Bataille and Jean Genet (both writers she greatly admired—and knew in person through her mother). So far as I am aware, she has had no influence (as yet, at least) on other Greek writers. This is partly due to a) her unique style and point of view, her eye, b) to a congenital envy that pervades the small and incestuous literary circle of Athens, and c) the insistence of Greek writers during the seven years of the junta and in the years following it on politicized if not political writing. Margarita had no interest whatsoever in writing like that.

The fact that on her first attempt she had published a book in the US, which then went on to publication in France and other countries, excited the resentment of most of her peers and critics. Right up until her miserable death three years ago, her work was recognized by few in Greece. Even after she gave a groundbreaking, heartbreaking interview on national TV three years before her death, during which she spoke about her writing, her relationship with her mother, and sensationally, about her struggle with lifelong, life-threatening mental illness—something that no one in Greece had ever had the courage to discuss in public—her peers and critics remained cool to her.

This interview, I believe, stands as one of her major achievements.

She herself, I believe, was unable to repeat the feat she performed in *Kassandra and the Wolf*. Perhaps the only work that approaches it in intensity, consistency, and readability is her as yet un-translated late work, *The Mother*. But this, again, is another story.

Amanda Michalopoulou: There are writers who make you want to go back into writing. Karapanou makes you want to go back into living your life. She also belongs to this rare community of writers who work beyond influence; they are on their own. When I was in my twenties I tried to imitate my favorite writers, but with Karapanou it never worked. Her voice was so unique and what I wished for was just to listen to her voice. Her atmosphere influenced some of my stories but at that young age I always felt that I failed to create an atmosphere as extraordinary and magical as hers. As she doesn't belong to a group of writers, her influence within Greek literature is difficult to be measured. I am afraid Greek literature looks always for ethnic characteristics, for more "Greekness" and Karapanou goes beyond Greekness. She is not at all interested in that stuff. Her Hydra is primarily a psychological landscape.

Karen Emmerich: Karapanou really was central to her generation, and to subsequent ones. The best of her books have become modern classics. Something that often strikes me in talking about her with people in Greece is that her work—and particularly the early novels—seems to resonate equally strongly with prose writers and with poets. Perhaps this has something to do with the odd structure of many of the books. They don't read like the kind of novels you're used to. Stories get told in bits and pieces, little snippets of narrative that are strung together in ways that sometimes clash or conflict. She also doesn't pick one genre and stick to it: she can go from satire to romance to B-movie horror flick in the blink of an eye. And the books themselves seem totally aware of the possibilities of this kind of bricolage. It's like the narrator in *Rien* renting piles and piles of videos and watching them all in a row, until she can no longer tell the difference between porn and horror and romance—or like the mountains of garbage piling up at the end of *Sleepwalker*. As one character asks, "How could this piece of fruit and this piece of meat, so distinct at home in our kitchen, take on another dimension as soon as they were both called trash, becoming parts of an indissoluble mass?"

That's a long way of saying that Karapanou is inventive, both in her stories and in her structure, in ways that can really open other writers' eyes. And of course she breaks every

taboo in the book, one by one. She wrote things women just didn't write, and she doesn't do it just to do it, either.

Angela Dimitrakaki: I beg to disagree with views suggesting that Karapanou has not been influential in the Greek literary scene. In my case, things are simple. I would have not become a writer had I not read her books at an early age. She is one of two writers I can say this about, the other being Petros Tatsopoulos in his early novels. They are my mother and father—the writers to whom I could say “I specifically try not to write like you but I know this will be a lifelong struggle.” I have no idea how influence can be detected and measured, or whether it should, but as I understand it, it's got nothing to do with stylistic or even thematic affinities. If anything, influence operates on a psychological and ideological level and should be seen as a journey that a writer can join. This journey is like a pilgrimage that you don't know you have embarked on. Because if you know you have, if you know exactly *how* you realize the journey, you're a bad writer. As for Karapanou, she liberated a whole generation of writers who don't feel compelled to write about “that stuff,” whatever counts as quintessential Greekness (a concept I abhor on the political level), despite pressure from the international literary scene on all Greek writers to write and sell an identity of cultural difference that can be marketed as such. Karapanou did not play that game. Maybe she would today, as the pressure is mounting and writers are rewarded for engaging in the promotion of literary tourism. And she also liberated a generation of women writers. This is indeed the most complex aspect of her influence. As a feminist theorist and avid reader, I am familiar with all hues of so-called *écriture féminine*, a term massively misunderstood in Greece. Karapanou invented her own transmutation of that way of writing and I hope the publication of her works in English will introduce her to the global alternative canon where she belongs.

Karen Van Dyck: I returned to Karapanou's work when I began writing my dissertation on Greek literature during and after the dictatorship (1967–1974). The book that eventually came out of that research had the title *Kassandra and the Censors* and took as its central metaphor Karapanou's inside-out world in which censorship and self-censorship borrow from each other and give each other their modus operandi. That first novel I read in Greek turned out to have a profound effect on how I understood Greek writing and women's writing more generally. With regard to Karapanou's influence on other writers, I see more of a kinship than an influence—her way of turning public and private inside out and imagining a sexual politics that is also a poetics. Her way of dismantling the order of things and putting it back together in a way that is eerily familiar, but also fantastically new. All this is very apparent in the work of women poets of her generation like Jenny Mastoraki, Maria Laina, and Rhea Galanaki.

More recently her work has become important for younger writers for how it works out the dominance of English. Here I think her novels have influenced Greek fiction considerably. Karapanou is hysterically irreverent about any body or thing that is in power. The same goes for English. All sorts of name brands and other English words show up in her dog book, *Lee and Lou*, as well as in her interviews with Fotini

Tsalikoglou. She talks back to the global supremacy of English by cannibalizing the language of capitalism and using it to completely other ends.

Nick Germanacos: I stand corrected, if younger writers like Angela and Amanda feel they have been influenced by Margarita. However, I wonder wherein exactly this influence on the work of younger writers is manifested. Are we speaking about “influence” or did Margarita liberate other Greek writers (women it would appear in particular) by dealing with subjects or by delving in dark areas of the soul, where other Greek writers feared to tread, especially in dealing with the seamier underside of sex? (I would note that Kostas Taktis, a close friend of her mother’s, Margarita K.’s, and mine, and Ilias Petropoulos, also helped to break down these taboos.) In any event, I would be happy to read Amanda’s and Angela’s work and assess exactly how Margarita K. influenced/liberated them.

3. Karapanou was first published in English in 1974, with Nick Germanacos’s translation of *Kassandra and the Wolf*. Eventually *Kassandra* went out of print, and Karapanou’s next appearance in English was in 2009, with a reprint of *Kassandra* and a translation (by Karen Emmerich) of her third novel, *Rien ne va plus*. In fall 2010 her second novel, *The Sleepwalker*, appeared in English for the first time (also in Karen Emmerich’s translation).

Can you talk about how you see Karapanou “in English,” specifically against the background of American literature? Would you say that her place (or places) in English, has changed from the ’70s till now? Are there English-language writers with whom you think she shares a particular kinship? And please feel free also to talk about how different features of her work may come to the fore or fall into shadow as her books move from Greek to English.

Karen Van Dyck: I first understood the depth of Karapanou’s knowledge of English when I spent a week in Hydra with both her and her mother going over my translation of her mother’s novel *The Straw Hats* (which eventually came out under the English title *Three Summers* in 1995). Karapanou by this point was suffering much more obviously from the manic depression that had plagued her all her life. The drugs she was taking made her bloated and listless. I remember she would lie on the couch reading murder mysteries in the breezy open room overlooking the port while Liberaki and I argued over the meaning of words. But what repeatedly saved my translation were not so much these discussions, but the trenchant one-liners that Karapanou would interject every once and awhile with just the right American translation for the word we were hunting for. I emphasize American because if Karapanou wrote in English she would be an American writer not an English writer. Her short staccato sentences and the visual fireworks they set off are post Hemingway, pre Kurt Cobain.

Angela Dimitrakaki: I would say Karapanou has an affinity with all authors in the US and Europe who have engaged with maternal subjectivity and its discontents. I wouldn’t be able to speak about other literary scenes because maternal subjectivity is not an immutable, transhistorical universal but a social position. And Karapanou engages this as

a Western writer, which also has to do with her cosmopolitan class. Nevertheless an affinity is not translatable into obvious resemblance. But Karapanou has created formidable male characters and I know of no other writer who has treated masculinity in this particular way. Her writing is messy, it has always seemed to me that she writes in a way I would characterize as “out of control.” Even if writing draft upon draft, this quality is never lost. How she managed to do this and sustain a novel’s plot is a mystery to me. Possibly she was always writing against something—her mother, her class, “Greekness,” dreams, the idea of God, school, consumerism, islands, and so on. So, as far as I can see, she’s unique when it comes to how she negotiated her themes. *Kassandra and the Wolf* offers, for instance, a unique portrayal of girlhood as a state of being. Karapanou turned this into a political issue in the subtlest possible way. Not a mean achievement.

Nick Germanacos: In the English-speaking world Karapanou has had no impact whatever, as Anne Germanacos, who knows contemporary American fiction better than anyone else I know, assures me. Though far less conversant than Anne with contemporary American fiction, I would agree with her for two empirical reasons: First, *Kassandra* was remaindered after some eighteen months. It received, if I recall, one review, a highly positive endorsement from Jerome Charyn. It sold hardly any copies except to our students who were required to study it for Anne’s course—and subsequently taught by our students to their students in Modern Greek Studies programs in a handful of US universities. (I am delighted to hear that Hilary is now teaching it to her creative writing students in Massachusetts.)

Until Karen (one of our students) had the courage to translate the other two novels, and then the enterprise to present them together with *Kassandra* to Hilary and Pamela at Clockroot, Karapanou was unknown, therefore, except to a tiny, closed circle of cognoscenti in the US. I cannot praise Hilary, Pamela and Clockroot more for *their* enterprise and courage in trying to bring these books to the attention of a broader English-speaking public. What impact or influence Karapanou may now have in the US remains to be seen. In the UK her work is not known at all.

I prefer to use more modest terms than “classic” in referring to *Kassandra*—it is a tour de force or simply sui generis. I did not like Karapanou’s subsequent novels, which I thought forced, uneven, confused, “messy” in every sense. Karapanou knew this or rather sensed it. I never told her outright that I did not like them, but she knew me well enough to understand that this was the reason I turned down her repeated invitations to translate them. She would say, “I know you think *Kassandra* is superior, but this one is a good book, too.” Her insistence that the subsequent books were good kept coming up every time we met until she died. I kept fending her off with, “I am far too busy with my students” (which was true), or, “I have stopped translating,” also true. But I knew she knew that I did not like them, especially when, towards the end of her life, I called her to tell her how much I had liked *Mummy/The Mother*. She was beside herself with pleasure and asked me to translate it. I told her very truthfully that I did not have the time but in any event, I said, she now had other worthy translators who would snap it up.

Angela Dimitrakiki: In my opinion, the suggestion that Karapanou has had no influence on Anglophone readers is problematic on two accounts. First, I am wondering how such an absence of influence can be detected. Secondly, I feel that Karapanou is here implicitly credited with a more general “failure”—that might be attributed collectively to the Greek literary scene. In other words, a “failure” that really belongs to a national body of literature and emanates from the complex positioning of this body of literature in a global geopolitics. On what grounds might Karapanou be seen to carry the weight of that failure?

There are simply no writers writing in Greek or artists producing in Greece who have influenced anyone anywhere, if we are willing to think this way—it’s not just Karapanou. No one I have ever met in my many travels ever knew of Greek writers or artists (actually writing in Greek or based in Greece), unless they had a specialized interest in the Greek literary scene. They are far more likely to know artists and writers who represent proper and more exotic “otherness”—from Eastern Europe to Asia, Africa and Latin America. I suspect that the “crisis and riot situation” in Greece since 2008 will change this in due course—Greece’s visibility is already increasing in the radical enclaves of the art world, though the Greek literary scene (especially its critics and institutions) tend to be so conservative that they may well thwart whatever prospects original literary efforts have of getting to circulate out there. The situation so far reminds me of the question posed in the early 1970s by Linda Nochlin, the American art historian who kickstarted feminist art history by asking “why have there been no great women artists?” The answer, which transformed art, was that the criteria used to assess greatness, and influence, expressed particular interests and invariably led to women’s exclusion from any kind of “canon.” It’s not a matter of a conspiracy in the case of Greek writers either. Rather, it has to do with that old thing described by Gramsci: hegemony and how it is won, and what kind of intellectual zeitgeist it shapes, how it molds sensibilities, tastes, priorities, values—and not least, expectations. What has been expected from the Greek literary scene so far is to provide evidence of Greek folklore in various guises. How fortunate for Tsiolkas and Eugenides that their families migrated away from a cultural space identified with such expectations . . .

4. Can you talk a little about Karapanou’s oeuvre—she has six novels in Greek, now three in English. (Additionally, there is the book of dialogues with the psychologist and writer Fotini Tsalikoglou, *Maybe?* [Kastaniotis, 2008], as has been mentioned.)

I’d be interested to hear thoughts on the conversations between her novels, differences between them, themes or stylistic elements developed or revisited over time.

Amanda Michalopoulou: Karapanou, in my opinion, is always interested in the same themes, like any serious artist who is haunted by some issues and revisiting or changing perspectives towards the basic elements of her art and life. In her books it’s always about the absolute need or longing of love, death, depression, literature and art in general, psychoanalysis and dreams, dogs, nightmares of childhood and enormous mother figures that repress the narrator. And all this happens in her unique world, compiled by the books

she has read, the music she has listened to, the films she has watched, and even fashion (perfumes, clothes, lipstick, and shoes).

For me, the reader, it's always like going home with the female narrator and watching the strange and sometimes disgusting things that people do when no one is watching. But the themes, no, they never change, they just obtain a different importance and clarity in every book. In *Yes*, for instance, the manic depression is very directly approached (she talks there about lithium, Stedon, hospitalization). In *Lee and Lou* the dogs are speaking but, again, about her favorite subjects. In *Mommy* it's the oppressive mother figure that impregnates it all.

In her interviews with Fotini Tsalikoglou we find out things we already know or assume about her fixed ideas and her writing. Much more important to me are her diaries, which came out in 2008 from Okeanida (*Life Is Wildly Improbable: Diaries 1959-1979*). This is important reading because her voice is so recognizable; even when she is thirteen and writes a typical teen diary her voice is very distinct and we can see how her writing will develop. Everything is there already, in fragments: difficult love affairs, her readings of Proust, Flaubert, Henry James, her mother, her grandmother, her psychogeography torn between Kolonaki and Paris. For someone who really wants to go deeper and try to understand the person behind the writer I also suggest reading the diaries of her mother, Margarita Liberaki, annotated by Fotini Tsalikoglou, which also included many family photos. It's a book called *You Don't Love Me. You Love Me* (Kastaniotis, 2008).

Angela Dimitrakaki: I agree with Amanda on Karapanou being a writer who was haunted, if not by themes, then by issues and perspectives. She has her own horizon that she's always trying to reach. But the horizon remains just as distant. I would summarize her oeuvre as an effort to cover a distance destined never to be crossed. Maybe it is the distance between what psychoanalysis names "the unconscious" and consciousness—we have been told that should this distance be covered, our sense of reality would collapse in an ugly way. It would amount to madness. Julia Kristeva has written specifically about the gendered aspect of this process in her account of avant-garde work. I am hostile to the psychoanalytic scenario that sees avant-garde women writers—and Karapanou is certainly one—as susceptible to madness and self-destruction if they manage to cross the distance that returns to you to the origins of language, to the undifferentiated space with the other (that is, the mother). Then again it so happens that people can live out cultural myths, such as those offered by psychoanalysis. I have not read Karapanou's diaries, I resist the temptation. I do not consider them part of her literary oeuvre, which I have no intention of identifying with the person. Her novels are her oeuvre, and they amount to a paradoxical fusion of collective cultural melancholy and a personal sense of humor. This is what makes them so readable, unlike the works of other authors of equal originality. The originality of her oeuvre emanates from her sense of irreverence towards given values. I've always seen her work as enacting time and again an everyday rebellion. There is a strand of anarchic thinking in her writing that is even more relevant today.

Karen Van Dyck: For me the works that have really made me able to think differently are *Kassandra and the Wolf* and *Mama*. These are the books that are mythic in the ancient

sense of the word. They take what is most personal and make it public in a way that transcends history, but also remakes the very same history (and here it helps that in Greek the word for story and history are the same). *Rien ne va plus* and *The Sleepwalker* certainly help me understand things that I have already understood from *Kassandra* and *Mama*, but they don't set out new ideas for me. For example, what I learn from *Kassandra* is that literature and reality are extensions of each other. *Rien* and *The Sleepwalker* also have the same weird way of living out real life in writing so that we don't know which came first, the life or the writing. But in these novels it comes more as an echo than an original idea.

My own experiences with Karapanou confirm this eerie lack of a boundary between art and life. I remember hearing Karapanou and Liberaki arguing about what really happened between the philosopher and the child at the party in *Kassandra* as we walked to the beach one afternoon after a long morning of translation. I could hear that Karapanou thought the molestation scene in *Kassandra* was real and involved a lover of her mother's and that Liberaki didn't agree. The conversation on the rocky path above the Saronic was as much literature as the passage about the same event that I knew so well from the book. This working out of literature in life happened again with *The Sleepwalker* when I realized Mark was my friend James or again in *Rien* when the heroine goes to Connecticut. Another time a friend told me the long story of his friend the vet who fell in love with Karapanou and how he committed suicide. A year later I read it all in *Rien*. But it is *Kassandra* that makes this strange lack of a division possible and gives it its mythic authority.

Yes has also taught me a great deal, but it is more a comment on her writing and its relation to manic depression and schizophrenia than a novel in its own right. It functions for me the way Seferis's journals do. It explains her project. *Yes* is her affirmative answer to the life she was destined to live between the almost real and real.

5. Karapanou translated *The Sleepwalker* into French herself, and her translation received France's premier prize for novels in translation in 1988. If we move beyond Greek and English into world literature, what conversations do you see Karapanou's work participating in? With what writers and literatures?

Or: another approach to this question might be through multilinguality in Karapanou's work. Karen Emmerich's translator's note to *The Sleepwalker* discusses how throughout the novel there are phrases and sentences in languages other than Greek; many of the characters in the novel are foreign, and "many speakers and writers of Greek are multilingual." Karen describes "Karapanou's astonishing yet rarely estranging mishmash of languages—English, French, German, Ancient, Biblical, and Byzantine Greek, the halting Greek of ex-pats and tourists, and of course the starkly beautiful Greek of her own prose." So perhaps there's much to be said about movement between languages and literatures within the novels themselves?

Karen Van Dyck: For me Karapanou is one of Greece's best contemporary examples of the multilingual core at the heart of Greek literature, whether we are talking of the Italian Greek of Kornaros, Solomos and Kalvos, the French Greek of Psycharis or the English Greek of Cavafy. Her novels are punctuated not only by English words, but the sing-songy conversational cadence of her prose, like Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke's poetry, seems to owe something to the strict word order of English, especially American English.

Amanda Michalopoulou: Karapanou moves around languages with ease like a real cosmopolitan. She could speak many languages and she liked to quote from the sources. Again this is something that Greeks don't like so much and misunderstand as showing off. For Karapanou it was just a testament to her easy moving between civilizations, books, different linguistic stimuli.

Angela Dimitrakaki: Amanda is right to charge the Greek literary scene with misunderstanding the use of other languages in the work of some Greek authors. But what can I say about this, as I am doing it consistently in my work, from the very first novel. I cannot imagine writing in a different way, though I understand those who do. In the end it is what you write about, and how you write about it, that should decide what the literary text needs to encompass. Karapanou made no compromise on that level. But I would be hesitant in ascribing this to cosmopolitanism. Karapanou is a contemporary writer in the strong sense. She is aware that she writes in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when the mass media cross languages and cultures and when the same cars and perfumes are sold all over the world. Also, an era where Greeks, like people of other nations, have to travel a lot: to find work or to do their work. This is a cross-class condition of contemporary capitalism, equally affecting an impoverished economic immigrant and a business traveler. I am far from equating the two. What I'm saying is that works of art in the age of global capital (and postmodernism, when Karapanou wrote her first masterpieces, was the entry point to this age) tend to assume what French critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud called in 2009 "the journey-form." These works *embody* cross-cultural exchange, it doesn't come through translation. This applies equally to literature, music, and the visual arts. Works that make manifest their journey-form, in whichever way, are the truly contemporary records of our historical moment, and language can also be the site where the journey-form is realized. Possibly it is the primary site. Literary scenes that don't grasp this exist in a state of self-inflicted marginalization—and Greece is an adequate example. Undermining this condition of contemporary life is of course possible, and as far as I am concerned also desirable, but such resistance cannot be regressive, a retreat to insular and "pure" linguistic idioms. That's just nostalgia, not active struggle—in case one wishes to join in the struggle, and many writers don't. So, Karapanou in my view worked with, and through, the difficulty and risks of the exchange that defined the spirit of her times. The irony in her use of "other" languages is perceptible and one of the most exciting aspects of her texts. It doesn't matter if some things, or rather sensations, are untranslatable. After all, if someone is so keen to experience the feeling of a foreign word dropped in a Greek text, they can always learn Greek. Why not?

Karen Emmerich: My vote is definitely for everyone to learn Greek, even if it would put me out of a job. But seriously, I'm loving this exchange; after years of reading Karapanou closely, I am continually amazed and just how rich these books are, how many new—and sometimes contradictory—readings you can tease out of what she presents. It's a reading and re-reading that *Rien ne va plus* itself performs, of course, with its two versions of a single marriage, each told from the point of view of the wife. For readers who aren't familiar with the books, and who might find this conversation dauntingly abstract, I'd just like to offer a few specific instances of the kind of embodiment of cross-cultural exchange Angela is talking about. It's definitely apparent in *Rien*, from the title to the main character's obsession with different brands of face creams and cigarettes. But this is really the backbone of *Sleepwalker*: the novel takes place on a Greek island (perhaps a thinly disguised Hydra, actual home to such international figures as Leonard Cohen and Brice Marden) overrun with foreign writers, artists, and musicians, not to mention the tourists who pour off the cruise ships each morning to consume this island, to shop and snap photographs of cats and quaint old men with donkeys. The book is in some sense about what this does to a place and its language: characters speak a patois of broken Greek and broken English with handfuls of French, Spanish, and German thrown in, while the police chief cares more about making his station look like the one on *Hill Street Blues* than solving the rash of murders that has broken out on the island. Of course even this is terribly reductive, but I think you can understand the book as a testing ground for the crazy things that can happen when languages and cultures collide and intertwine, when stories or images of a place or a self circulate, and particularly when they circulate for profit. It's really a damning condemnation of tourism, in a way, including literary tourism.

Nick Germanacos: Karapanou had hardly any formal education and she was scarcely an autodidact. She had been "taught" by governesses, tutors, with intermittent forays into more formal schooling. Her knowledge of English came from her governesses and of French from her mother and their sojourns in their Paris apartments. She knew no German or any other language. Her knowledge of Greek was limited to tenth-grade demotic—she had never studied Ancient Greek and her understanding of biblical Greek was minimal. She understood enough katharevousa to be able to occasionally read the censored newspapers of the junta years. If she laced her demotic prose with ancient or biblical or katharevousa vocabulary and locutions, it is no more than most literate Greeks do in ordinary conversation—and the intent is usually self-mocking or satirical. Karapanou picked up these words and locutions either from listening carefully to the speech of others (she was an excellent listener and mimicker of people's manners and mannerisms) or from her casual perusal of the daily press or her avid viewing of TV and videos.

Karapanou's Greek never developed from the *faux-naïf* Greek/Voice of the child-heroine of *Kassandra*. This is one of the principal reasons why the subsequent novels fail, in my view: they attempt to plumb the darkest depths and the seamiest recesses of the *adult* psyche in the voice of a *faux-naïf* and that just falls flat. Karapanou wrote *Kassandra* (at least the first eighteen or so pieces) from the gut, so to speak. It was her real voice, her spontaneous child-like (yet psychologically sophisticated and razor-smart) voice. The

“literary sophistication” some discern in her is that of someone who listened carefully at literary salons and dinner parties and could pick up whatever she needed to incorporate into her own voice. Karapanou was not a reader. In any language. Not even in Greek. I can attest that she hardly knew English or American literature (she had read a handful of individual works, usually short ones, by a handful of authors who by happenstance had caught her attention and with whom she felt instinctive affinity), and she rarely read newspapers (except occasionally during the junta years). But, as I said she had a marvelous capacity for picking up—information, ideas, trends, ambiguities, flaws in people—their pretensions and hypocrisies and their dissimulation. If her prose (like her conversation) was peppered with *gallikoures*, *anglikoures* (frenchisms, englishisms) and Ancient or Biblical Greek it was done entirely with either self-mocking or satirical intent. Anyone frequenting the salons or posh cafes of Kolonaki Square could hear absurdly pretentious—often hilariously daft—snippets of conversation, which Karapanou loved repeating to our mutual delectation, and often copied down. Her satire (just like all her work) had no “ideological” or “political” intent—her mocking of her peers and peer-class is entirely personal, visceral. She had an instinctive radar (a child’s radar?) that could pick up all the absurdity of bourgeois Athenian life: which included of course not merely the social idiocies of her “upper” class but also the artistic, literary, and intellectual pretensions of the tiny circle of cultural illuminati, self-absorbed, mediocre, provincial, envious, and above all, frantic to be translated and recognized outside Greece. Karapanou was a cosmopolitan and knew it and reveled in it; she was a fearless ingenue—and was smart enough to know it and exploit it for all it was worth.

Yes, she was a subverter of her own upper class and its manners—yet ideology and politics, social revolution or literary innovation were never her intent, conscious or unconscious. She simply relished the limited life her mental misfortunes allowed her, lived in it, never ventured beyond it, geographically or psychologically, nor had any interest in doing so. She was content to live day by day, laugh as much as she could at herself as well as the wacky world outside the walls of her apartment, and hope that she could survive till next week.

Her one brief foray into the clangorous, leveling democracy of the American marketplace both appalled and terrified her—and she never wanted to hear of ever returning to the US. Why should she want to leave the geographical, cultural, and psychological environs of Kolonaki Square and the Quartier Latin? They provided her with both the material for what she wanted to transmute and transpose into her writing—and the security which was indispensable for her to enable her to navigate the appalling purgatory of her own psyche.

6. The question of reception seems perhaps a particularly rich and even controversial one with Karapanou’s work. I’m thinking, for instance, of the diverse responses to *Kassandra and the Wolf* and its sexual element (having just taught this in an undergraduate creative writing class, so seeing a rough sample of the possible responses); and then also of what context may be lost from Greek to English-language readers. Could you talk some about the diverse receptions of Karapanou’s work both in Greek and in translation?

Amanda Michalopoulou: I'm afraid I don't know a lot about the reception of this book. It is in fashion now in Greece, at extremely conservative environments, to walk in at shows and destroy works of art that are attacking religion or to crucify books and writers that talk about God and sex in unpredictable ways. I am thinking about Ersi Sotiropoulos's novel [*Zigzag through the Bitter Orange Trees*, (2000; English translation, 2007)—ed.], for instance. If these people had read *The Sleepwalker* (let's remember this scene when the hero pisses on a hagiography) there would be now a discussion, a very silly discussion, but it would remind people of the book or introduce the book to a new audience. Because it is a modern classic, it could definitely appeal to the younger generations too.

Karen Van Dyck: For me the surprise again and again of teaching Karapanou's *Kassandra* is how puritan American students are. They really can't believe how frank the little girl is about sex, but also about her own aggressive nature. That unforgettable scene in which Kassandra cuts the arms and legs off her doll so it can fit in the box. In America we might have Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*, but we always feel the moral judgment. Its lurking there saying this isn't right. What my students can't bear about *Kassandra* is that they don't know if the book is condoning this behavior or not. I'd say Karapanou is best read as a European writer with other European novels. In Italy we find writers like Natalia Ginzburg or Barbara Alberti who have a similar way of approaching childhood. I think the suspension of disbelief the European feminist novel involves is important for my students. It helps them unhinge their assumptions before they become the hard, unexamined stuff of ideology.

Angela Dimitrakaki: I'm afraid I don't know enough about the reception of Karapanou's *Kassandra and the Wolf* in Greece or elsewhere. It is indeed a modern classic, as Amanda says. And regrettably the rest of what Amanda says is also true, though I don't see this as a defining feature of the Greek literary or visual arts scene. I cannot imagine Karapanou's bold irreverence not generating controversy wherever it is encountered. If it didn't, we'd be living in a different world. But we don't. We live in a world of overwhelming ideological and material differences and myopic, ultra-conservative and fascistic responses to critique and difference as such. Democracy is undermined on every level, not least from the vast majority of "the people." So of course we have censorship, burned books, threats to writers, murders of journalists, and in Greece, perhaps more than elsewhere, an impulse to interpret anything that challenges the real status quo as a personal threat. I don't know the situation well enough in the US. Karapanou's engagement with her issues is best captured by the phrase "I run with the future ahead of me and the cops behind me." It was mentioned to me by a friend, a literary critic for that matter, who read it in a *Torpedo* comic. The bottom line is that if someone, like Karapanou, writes this way, if someone writes in a state of persecution from an entire value regime but with such love for life, one is bound to annoy. And this should be welcome. The problem is of course that the value regime is also a mechanism of control and suppression that is in a position to make choices and regulate what reaches the public and how. The very fact that Karapanou's work is translated into English and made available to an Anglophone public is cause for celebration. There is no reason to assume

that this public, and its critics, will not respond in diverse ways to a body of work that breaks all rules.

Karen Emmerich: I think we'll have to wait and see on this one. Karapanou is a really, really exceptional writer, and lived a fascinating, if often horrifying, life. As Amanda has said elsewhere, "If she had written in English, today the whole English-speaking world would be talking about her." But of course she *didn't* write in English, and it's always incredibly difficult to drum up interest for a particular foreign writer in the US. I have no idea how those few miracles happen, the Bolaños, the Murakamis. The fact that Clockroot has now published three of her books back to back gives English-language readers a rare chance to explore her work in depth—but whether it will happen remains to be seen.